

# THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

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## Notes of Recent Exposition.

‘THE particular problems of the Christian conscience in time of war are but signal instances of the problem inherent in the Christian life,’ writes Canon F. R. BARRY in his recent book, *Faith in Dark Ages* (S.C.M. ; 2s. 6d. net). The problem of faith he deals with elsewhere, but in his second chapter, ‘Christians and Compromise,’ he faces the *ethical* problem, and he does so in a challenging and even startling fashion.

We are not in the same moral situation as in the last war. Then the Church on the whole went quite frankly nationalist. It was taken for granted that the function of Christianity in war time was to be the servant of national morale. And it is not surprising that we began to hear that ominous phrase, ‘a moratorium for Christianity.’ But in the intervening years we have pondered over that collapse, and we have begun to learn the lesson of it. What is being burnt in upon us is that the thing that is really at stake in this war is ultimate moral and religious principle, about which Christians cannot remain indifferent. We cannot contract out of our obligation. The one course that is ruled out for the Christian is merely to sit in the grandstand and look on.

Are we, then, involved in a moral contradiction such as demonstrates that Christianity is impracticable in this present evil world? Have we to choose between such ‘detachment’ as would turn Christianity into a kind of Buddhism, and such an accommodation to the world as would rob it of every claim to be religious? To accept either alternative would imply radical misunderstanding of the nature of Christianity itself.

The central fact is that Christianity is in its essential nature a revelation of God in human history. That means that both in creed and in conduct it presents a unique conception of the true relationship between what is absolute and what is relative. It is not a ‘timeless’ theory about God, but a gospel about God as revealed in Jesus under the conditions of life in Palestine in the principate of Augustus and Tiberius. The absolute is revealed in the relative. So far as belief is concerned this means that there is always and necessarily some measure of intellectual tension.

But we are concerned now with the Christian life. And the point here is that the Word has always to be made flesh, to be verified in the actual circumstances which confront us. The Christian lives in two worlds, from neither of which he can be denationalized. Man is a citizen of the eternal Kingdom, and the centre of gravity for human life is in fellowship with God and life eternal. Yet he is a product of history and a citizen of earthly cities. To both of these kingdoms we belong. The one is absolute and the other relative. And we cannot contract out of either. Moreover, it is within the citizenship of earth that Christians must fulfil the obligations of the citizenship which is in heaven.

This is the ethical problem of which conduct in war time is a special case. And it raises at once the question of compromise. Can Christians transform society without being subdued to its standards? There are some (as there always have been some) who are so alive to the challenge that they have recourse to the radical solution of seeking to withdraw from the world. The hermit did that. The

Pacifist does it to-day. He says about war, 'I refuse to have anything to do with it.' That is the working ideal of the monastic system. The Pacifist, however, cannot strip himself of being a citizen with all the involvement in the social order. He cannot contract out altogether. His ideal, which is impossible, is what Canon BARRY somewhat obscurely calls the Salt.

On the other hand, the ideal of the Leaven, which is that of the ordinary church member, is notoriously exposed to danger. We try to change the world from within, but too often the leaven has been drowned in the lump. It is fatally easy for Christians to accept the prevailing standards of their group till there is not much left that is distinctive between the Christian and his next-door neighbour who is professedly a 'man of the world.'

This is probably the real ground for the growing indifference of our own people to what is called organized religion. They complain that the churches have 'nothing to say to them.' And this means that the Church does not speak to their condition just because the traditional Christian ethic, as it is expressed in books and sermons, no longer fits the facts of the world to-day. Once it moves beyond the family and personal relationships into the world of citizenship and livelihood it seems to have lost touch with realities as they present themselves to the man in the street. Of course, the Christian teaching has influenced, and does influence, social life and industry in many ways. But it remains true that there is a clash between the established ethic of society and the law of love proclaimed in the New Testament.

This is the root of the ethical problem. And this is the point at which Canon BARRY uses the ambiguous word 'compromise.' Of course the demands of Christ are absolute, but there is a sense in which compromise is the very condition of the Christian life. In 'doing the will of God' we must act; and it is in this world, with all its limiting conditions, we must act. They define the limits of what is possible. We can do no more than what can be done, and that is seldom the 'ideal' course. It follows that there is no such thing as a 'pure'

Christian action. There are Christians acting, more or less faithfully, on the raw material which life gives them, in the job that has to be done where they are. There are Christian principles and standards and ends, but these do not define Christian conduct for us.

'What I mean,' says Canon BARRY, 'is that the things Christians do will, as often as not, necessarily fall short of what would be done in a fully Christian order; and, if we are not prepared to face that, the only alternative is a Trappist monastery.' Of course, this is open to grave misunderstanding. We must never compromise with conscience. The choice of the second best is always sinful. But equally clearly there is no 'best' course independent of actual circumstances. If we shrink from relative decisions we cannot be doing the will of God at all. Moreover, no sinful man is capable of any 'absolutely' good action. If we think we can live in this world in absolute love, honesty, and purity we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

So we face the present situation. We are involved in a war which, if the Allies are defeated, will result in the eclipse of even the possibility of Christian life in the West for generations. It is within this actual situation that the Christian has to decide on his duty. He may decide on Pacifism. But, if he does, he must remember that he is free to do so only because other fellow-Christians stand in arms between him and the Gestapo. The latter service must not be regarded by him as a lower grade of Christian loyalty. It is what Christian duty requires, as conditions are now, from the great majority.

There are no rules in Christian living, no law. Christ revealed a new spirit in which we are to approach the moral decisions which life itself sets us. And normally, and nearly all the time, we must live with the relative and fragmentary. What is hard is not to lose sight of the eternal city, not to be dulled into acquiescence in the conventional sub-Christian standards. The disciple's acts are relative, but the Lord's claim is absolute. There are no *specified* Christian acts. But there is the

authentic fruit of the Spirit—those qualities of mind and character born in the hearts in which Christ is King. Through them the new life comes into the world and the Kingdom of God enters the plane of history.

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The problem of pain presses very acutely upon men's minds at the present day, much more acutely than, say, the problem of sin. Many have come to feel that the amount of pain and suffering in the world makes faith in a God of love and power incredible.

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Much has been written, especially from the Christian standpoint, if not to solve the problem, at least to alleviate and make it more tolerable. Of these apologetic writings a good deal is superficial and at times exasperating, while stock arguments tend to grow hackneyed.

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It is therefore a rare pleasure when one meets a book which treats the subject with real freshness and distinction of thought. And this is what we have in *The Problem of Pain*, by Mr. C. S. LEWIS, M.A. (Centenary Press; 3s. 6d. net). It is a comparatively short book but it treats its subject in a great way. The writer is engagingly frank in regard to his own feelings and experiences, and he has the gift of an interesting style. But, what is more important, he is a thinker who goes to the root of the matter and lifts the whole discussion on to a very high level indeed.

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The book has two special excellences. It begins with God and not with man. 'Man is not the centre; God does not exist for the sake of man. Man does not exist for his own sake.' Then it gives full weight to the fact of sin, without which no treatment of the problem of pain can be anything else but superficial and out of focus. Let us indicate briefly what is involved in this manner of approach to the problem.

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It is common to approach the problem from man's point of view. A picture is drawn, often in high colours, of the pain and suffering in the world, and then the question is discussed of whether it is

possible in the face of all this to reach out to a faith in God. All can see the difficulty, many would affirm the impossibility. But here we meet with a counter-problem. 'If the universe is so bad, or even half so bad, how on earth did human beings ever come to attribute it to the activity of a wise and good Creator? Men are fools, perhaps; but hardly so foolish as that. The direct inference from black to white, from evil flower to virtuous root, from senseless work to a workman infinitely wise staggers belief. The spectacle of the universe as revealed by experience can never have been the ground of religion; it must always have been something in spite of which religion, acquired from a different source, was held.' This, when one thinks of it, is perfectly obvious, for every generation of men has bitterly felt the pain and waste of human life. To mention nothing else, 'reflect for five minutes on the fact that all the great religions were first preached, and long practised, in a world without chloroform.'

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What then are the grounds of religion? If the inference from the course of events in the world to the goodness and wisdom of the Creator has never given rise to any religion, whence comes man's faith in God? 'In all developed religion we find three strands or elements, and in Christianity one more. The first of these is what Professor Otto calls the experience of the *Numinous*.' That is to say, the elemental feeling of something ghostly and uncanny behind Nature, something which awes and fascinates by its tremendous mystery. This feeling is not given in the facts of experience or derived by any argument. It is primary and innate.

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The second strand or element in religion is the sense of moral obligation, of a Law approved as good yet continually disobeyed. Here is an inexplicable thing that 'all men stand condemned, not by alien codes of ethics, but by their own, and all men therefore are conscious of guilt.' The third strand is woven when men identify these two, that is, 'when the Numinous Power to which they feel awe is made the guardian of the morality to which they feel obligation.' This conclusion is not reached by observation or by logic, but is the expression

of some primary conviction of the human soul. 'For the actual behaviour of that universe which the Numinous haunts bears no resemblance to the behaviour which morality demands of us. The one seems wasteful, ruthless, and unjust; the other enjoins upon us the opposite qualities. Nor can the identification of the two be explained as a wish-fulfilment, for it fulfils no one's wishes. We desire nothing less than to see that Law, whose naked authority is already unsupportable, armed with the incalculable claims of the Numinous.'

Here then is man's innate sense of the power and goodness of God, which has a root in his soul independent of his variable experiences and which cannot be eradicated by them. The problem of pain is still there, but it must be discussed in the light of that conviction and not by ignoring it. In approaching the problem we must understand more clearly what is implied in the omnipotence and the goodness of God. In regard to the former the main point to be observed is that 'not even Omnipotence could create a society of free souls without at the same time creating a relatively independent and "inexorable" Nature.' No doubt we could conceive a world in which God corrected or prevented every abuse of free will—made guns, for instance, into butter when they tried to shoot. 'But such a world would be one in which wrong actions were impossible, and in which, therefore, freedom of the will would be void; nay, if the principle were carried to its logical conclusion, evil thoughts would be impossible, for the cerebral matter which we use in thinking would refuse its task when we attempted to frame them.'

As for the goodness of God, it is often most unworthily conceived as mere easy-going kindness. Many want, in fact, 'not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven, a senile benevolence who, as they say, "liked to see young people enjoying themselves," and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, "a good time was had by all".' But it is only for people for whom we care nothing that we would wish happiness on any terms. With those whom we truly love we are more exacting and would sooner see them suffer much than

be happy in degrading and estranging ways. Such is 'the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist's love for his work and despotic as a man's love for a dog, provident and venerable as a father's love for a child, jealous, inexorable, and exacting as love between husband and wife.'

The question then is what will result from the impact of this holy Love upon a world of sinful men? Full account must be taken of the fact of sin if the remedial and redemptive mission of pain is to be understood. 'A recovery of the old sense of sin is essential to Christianity. . . . When men attempt to be Christians without this preliminary consciousness of sin, the result is almost bound to be a certain resentment against God as to one who is always making impossible demands and always inexplicably angry. . . . When we merely say that we are bad, the "wrath" of God seems a barbarous doctrine; as soon as we *perceive* our badness, it appears inevitable, a mere corollary from God's goodness. . . . We actually are, at present, creatures whose character must be, in some respects, a horror to God, as it is, when we really see it, a horror to ourselves. This I believe to be a fact; and I notice that the holier a man is, the more fully he is aware of that fact.'

It is only from this standpoint that the problem of pain can be rightly approached and profitably discussed. On this Mr. LEWIS has much to say that is wise, sympathetic, and profoundly true. 'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. A bad man, happy, is a man without the least inkling that his actions do not "answer," that they are not in accord with the laws of the universe.' 'All arguments in justification of suffering provoke bitter resentment against the author. You would like to know how I behave when I am experiencing pain, not writing books about it. You need not guess, for I will tell you—I am a great coward. But what is that to the purpose? When I think of pain . . . it "quite o'er crows my spirit." If I knew any way of escape I would crawl through sewers to find it. . . . I am not arguing that pain is not painful. Pain hurts. That is what the word

means. I am only trying to show that the old Christian doctrine of being made "perfect through suffering" is not incredible. To prove it palatable is beyond my design.'

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Dr. S. C. CARPENTER, Dean of Exeter, has published a volume entitled *Faith in Time of War* (Eyre & Spottiswoode; 6s. net). Its compilation was only a matter of weeks, and it is not surprising that it shows a certain looseness of structure; but it contains much useful exposition and many topical allusions.

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The first part of the book consists chiefly of an account of faith: among the Hebrews, in the Gospels, in the Apostolic age, and through the centuries. In the last instance the treatment is to take a few 'snapshots' here and there in illustration of the range and power of faith. From the nineteenth century two patterns of faith are chosen, Frederick Denison Maurice and Mrs. Josephine Butler. Where there are so many to choose from, the choice inevitably appears arbitrary.

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The second part of the book gives reasons for faith, considers the marks of faith in action, treats of faith as an antidote to fear, and ends with a chapter, of which we now proceed to give a summary, on 'The Vision of Faith.'

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What hopes, it is asked, may be entertained by Christian people of being able to recognize and understand phenomena to-day, and to foresee truly the events of the future? If we are to answer this question, there are said to be four points which it seems essential to keep in view.

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The first is that Christian faith involves believing that the Body of Christ is in the world to-day, entrusted with, and actually performing, the work of Christ; which is the work of gathering disciples, teaching, forgiving, feeding them, and equipping them for their Christian warfare in the world. But it should be remembered that the Church, like

other institutions, has an immense amount of organization, furniture, and custom which is purely human. If the Church of England has no authority to produce another Bible, another Creed, another Ministry, and other Sacraments, all else—including the Book of Common Prayer—can be changed if necessary. And the present embodiment of the Church might be turned into something very much better.

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The second thing which is seen by the vision of faith is that large masses of existing spiritual forces, at present unattached, uninstructed, un-inspired, and unhelpful, will be mobilized. In particular, the experience of the war will make those who control education determined that the ruling aim shall be to develop the Christian character. And why should they not take hints from the less sinister side of experiments elsewhere? They should launch out into the deep and let down their nets.

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The third element in the vision is not clearly indicated in the chapter, but it is suggested by the vision that came to the 'prophet's servant' of 'chariots and horses of fire, round about Elisha.' It should be an encouragement of faith—so we seem to be told—that the work of utilizing the splendid material awaiting the discipline of Christian education will not depend on the existing Church organization alone, or even upon the Christian forces manifestly operative in the community, but upon the presence of the living Christ Himself. With Francis Thompson we should see Christ walking on the water, 'not of Gennesareth, but Thames.'

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The last element in the vision of faith is freedom, which comes from above, and which respects the differences in human nature. In present-day Germany we see the violation on a large scale of this sacred principle. The secret of freedom is none other than Christ, who is the Word made flesh, and whose is a universal quality which can reach every individual. If we know the Truth, the Truth shall make us free.