

## Review Article

### *A Dodekad of Heptads*

From many different areas of thinking and doing in the present generation have come ideas which challenge the traditional beliefs of religion, especially those of Christianity—and in particular Protestant Christianity. A recent book from the Ryerson Press\* examines the ideas arising from six of these areas: archaeology and modern literature, existentialism and material monism, education and political ideology. To judge by its title and subtitle, *Challenge and Response: Modern Ideas and Religion*, the book was also meant to discuss the response which religion in general—and Protestant Christianity in particular—has made to the challenge posed by these ideas. Unfortunately only two of the seven contributors have gone this far: the rest stop short at the challenge, or even ignore that. But since at least four of the contributors took their job seriously and represent our scholarly compatriots at earnest grips with problems of considerable importance, the book merits serious examination.

To begin with the failures—in order to find the cause of failure. The two editors have each contributed an essay which does not even try to come close to the challenge. In the face of the belief held by material monists that our life ends with our physical death (at least I presume that this was the origin of the essay, for otherwise I can see no reason for its inclusion), Dr. R. C. Chalmers, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy of Religion at Pine Hill Divinity Hall, Halifax, offers an essay on "Eschatology and its Cultural Relevance." Unfortunately this essay is nothing more than a sermon, on various Christian doctrines about the end of the world, that is addressed to those who are already converted. At no time does Dr. Chalmers begin to approach those who might be rationally persuaded away from material monism. The reasons for this astonishing distance are two: his use of hackneyed and obsolete technical terms, which I shall comment on later, and an evident anti-intellectualism, which can be seen, for example, in his statement that man's destiny "is determined by his character and not by his intelligence. His future depends on his faith and not his

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\**Challenge and Response: Modern Ideas and Religion*. Edited by R. C. Chalmers and John A. Irving. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1959. Pp. 130. \$3.50.

reason" (p. 109). The other editor, Mr. John A. Irving, Professor of Ethics and Social Philosophy at Victoria College, Toronto, in his essay on "Ideological Differences and World Order" tantalizingly raises the challenge to Christianity by the "resurgent Oriental religions," only to drop it immediately in order "first to analyze the . . . challenge of communism to the interests and values of the democratic community within western civilization; and second, to consider the prospects for the creation of an effective international law" (pp. 113-114). The result is as depressingly superficial as a CBC Weekend Review. After seven pages of discussion, for instance, Professor Irving is able to arrive only at these "two major conclusions" about "the ideological interests of Democracy. First, the moral, the economic, the political, and the military aspects of these interests are interwoven themes: one interest cannot be considered apart from another. Second, the affairs of the whole world are interdependent . . ." (p. 124)

Three other contributors have written essays which, although containing much interesting and valuable information, all stop short of providing any response to the challenge presented by the ideas they are concerned with. In his essay "Archaeology and Biblical Studies", for instance, Dr. Ronald J. Williams, Professor of Near Eastern Studies at University College, Toronto, provides a convenient summary of archaeological discoveries made in the Near East within the last seventy years or so, and then pertinently centres on the Dead Sea Scrolls and the less well-known codices found in Egypt near the site of Chenoboskion. These latter, he concludes (without much discussion), "indicate that the early Church and Christian literature probably owed less to Gnosticism than many scholars had previously believed" (p. 22). The Dead Sea Scrolls do more: they serve to place biblical literature—considered as a body of literary forms, themes, and motifs—"in its true setting in the perspective of the ancient Near East," and they also have renewed scholarly respect for the validity of the biblical text as well as the traditions recorded in it. They do not, of course, "prove the 'truth' of the Bible, for this [they] cannot do. The ultimate truth of the Scripture lies on a different plane of reality which is not subject to historical or archaeological testing" (p. 22). And there he lets the matter stand. But the suggestion has often been put forward that Christianity evolved, gradually and naturalistically, from a crude and almost pagan belief and that therefore our present Christian beliefs possess no more validity than did their primitive and superstitious ancestors. And now the discovery, in the writings of the Essenes, of what would appear to be another link in this gradual evolution makes a discussion of such a suggestion all the more pertinent and pressing. Here is one challenge by modern ideas to religion, but Dr. Williams stops short of considering it.

"The Challenge of Existentialism", by Dr. James S. Thomson, former Moderator of the General Council of the United Church of Canada, gives early promise of confronting the challenge squarely. Many modern ideas, Dr. Thomson recognizes, have called into question the very existence of God and demanded that it be proved. Christian exist-

entialism, à la Tillich, answers that God does not *exist*, he *is*—and explains the difference thus: “The ‘existence’ of God presupposes that He is a substance or being among other existants. He is to be sought out as a problematic existence added on as an extra to other existences or, at best, as a determinative factor to be detached for separate study. The work of the theologian is often considered to be like that of a biologist engaged in the pursuit of ‘life.’ But the biologist does not think of ‘life’ as some essence to be distilled from its manifestations or isolated in a test-tube as a bare ‘existence,’ . . . [as a] separate abstract existence apart from its self-revelation. Similarly with God, we are not likely to find Him by the pursuit of either His ‘essence’ or His ‘existence’ apart from all other existence” (pp. 81-82). In other words: “Nobody can live without God any more than he can continue to live without breathing the oxygen of the atmosphere. The alternative of theism or atheism is, therefore, . . . academic. However, the analogy between God as the Power of Being and oxygen as the life-sustaining energy of physical existence must not be stressed too far. No man can really *be* an atheist any more than he can *be* a ‘non-oxygenist,’ but he can act as if there were no God” (p. 83). Dr. Thomson concludes: “It may be said, then, that God is not so much known as lived. The Being of God must be a vital decision rather than a rational apprehension” (p. 83).

Dr. Thomson has evidently enlisted the aid of “Christian existentialism” in meeting the challenge of those who demand that the existence of God be proved. But in doing so he has created two new problems or challenges. How, for instance, is it any less of an undemonstrable and therefore questionable assumption to say that God is the Power of Being than it is to say that he is a separate determinative factor? This question Dr. Thomson does not consider. And there is an even more pertinent question which he does not answer: is “Christian existentialism” really Christian, or in adopting the existentialist position have Christians allowed a Trojan horse to enter their walls? Where, specifically, in the nebulous concept of God as the Power of Being do certain basic Christian doctrines fit in? What of the Incarnation? the Deity of Jesus? the Redemption? the Resurrection? Dr. Thomson proceeds for eight pages to talk about these doctrines, but as far as I can perceive—after repeated re-readings—he does not accommodate them to existentialism, or it to them. He approaches no closer to this central existential challenge—that of de-Christianizing (or at least fundamentally modifying) Christianity—but instead veers off and runs parallel to it, sending out vapour trails of philosophical jargon.

Third of the incomplete responses, and the most curious of all the essays in the book, is the one entitled “Thoughts on Education”, by Dr. Watson Kirkconnell, President of Acadia University, Wolfville. The author first outlines three of our major educational traditions: “the Christian-classical, the liberal-scientific, and the technological-proletarian”, the last of which he stigmatizes as “social engineering” (pp. 51, 53). He then briefly traces changes in educational philosophy in the past forty years, noting especially the “so-called ‘life-adjustment’ theory of education” and the proposal, by President Truman’s

Commission on Higher Education, "to water down university courses so that the life-adjusted gentry would be able to graduate without any intellectual exertion whatever" (pp. 56-57). In contrast he notes the Russian determination to prepare hard-working students "for world supremacy in science, culture *and* industry" (pp. 59-60). He then joins forces with Dr. Hilda Neatby in attacking those Canadian educationists who would implement the American aims. As a result of their concentration on teaching methods and their devaluation of the content taught, "the situation in some of the disciplines in some of the Provinces is little short of catastrophic", and the quality of many Nova Scotian teachers is "palaeozoic" (p. 65). Without warning, Dr. Kirkconnell then attacks the professional association of Canadian university teachers, inveighs against global Communists, and proceeds to equate with the latter all "scientific humanists, or proletarian scientists, who in their quest of absolute rationalism have thrown religion and moral philosophy down the drain. . . . They are ready to condition mankind, to 'liquidate' their opponents, to breed new varieties of human being. Such theorists in England and America are spiritual brothers of the Soviet planners who murdered five million peasants to achieve the collective farm or liquidated twenty-five million citizens in Siberia in their thirty-year conquest of religion and the industrial system" (p. 70). Finally he rounds on the pertinent question: in view of these forces at work in education, what should be the response of religion? "If Christianity is to have any share in a university future, that participation will probably come through a creative minority in the secular mass. In this, it must not operate as a conspirational cell, nor as a pressure group, but as a witness to certain spiritual values. This is no easy task . . . . Christian professors who are conscious of a mission must first earn a right to consideration by strenuous intellectual effort and spiritual devotion. Their own convictions must be explored, tested and clarified, lest they be put to ignominious flight at the first exchange of argument. For the Protestant scholar, this is a strenuous business. He must settle with the philosophers, the theologians and the Biblical critics, and by facing up to their latest evidence arrive at a worthy philosophy of religion" (p. 71). The problem is thus defined. How is it to be solved? Dr. Kirkconnell offers only one sentence, his last: As it is, there are verities inherent in the Church Universal by means of which [the Protestant thinker] and his scientific colleagues may hope to build an enduring causeway across the Chaos and Terror of our time" (p. 72).

Fortunately the remaining two contributors to *Challenge and Response* have faced the challenge squarely and have provided detailed responses. Dr. Millar MacLure, Associate Professor of English at Victoria College, Toronto, draws the title of his essay, "The Falling Man: Variations on a Theme in Modern Fiction," from a central, epitomizing paragraph: "I think sometimes of the present human situation as symbolized in the paleolithic paintings of the cave of Lascaux, where, in what poetic archaeologists call the Shaft of the Dead Man, a falling birdman, cartooned as a geometrical phallic scrawl among

naturalistically painted bulls and bison, carries the whole animal world down with him into darkness" (pp. 47-48). In other words, "We are drowned in a time too deep for diving, lost in a space too light-years broad for leaping" (p. 48). In this situation modern fiction writers have made various responses, each of which conveys a challenge to traditional Protestantism and each of which Dr. MacLure explores.

He begins by identifying four cardinal points on his "compass-card of modern fiction, opposing the theism of Mauriac to the atheism of Beckett, the detachment of Huxley to the flaming acquiescence of Lawrence. Yet these are points on a circle, for each is concerned with . . . 'liberation from personality,' from that obsession with the self which . . . each of these writers, in his way, regards as 'fallen,' as the symbol of a society which looks like a city but is really a waste land" (pp. 41-42). A few other writers respond more optimistically—or at least more creatively. Faulkner, for example, uses time and place to create a cosmos for his human individuals. His "saga of Yoknapatawpha County, Miss., is a living testimony to the creative power which makes the human view of existence valid for human beings, as opposed to the temptations to think of them as cogs, ants, sheep, atoms, accidents" (p. 42). With Faulkner, Joyce and Proust have "a sense of the prodigious in man, with all its corollaries, of a spirit capable of compounding evil for an imagined good, or achieving a virtue so disinterested that no evil can test it completely, even of being fulfilled in an animal excellence in the contemplation of which ethical considerations are suspended . . ." (p. 46). Still others, reacting against "the irrelevance of the assumptions about time, space, and deity which have been the property of western man since the fifteenth century", adopt a "rage for order." "But angry concentration on formal relations, that is on arrangements which attribute an absolute value to nothing but the immediate experience, is as much a kind of superstition as the other extreme, philistine documentation . . . of human values half-doubted but sentimentally accepted" (pp. 48-49). In neither mode is tragedy possible, and only a tragic vision can "suggest a shape in the universe that may, as it were, account for things" (p. 49). This tragic vision appears in the novels of William Golding, who finds it in the recognition of an inviolable law of nature, which, I gather, is that man must suffer in his evolutionary struggle towards becoming a more understanding being (p. 49).

This largely acquiescent response to the challenge may be compared to the response which Dr. Northrop Frye, Principal and Professor of English at Victoria College, Toronto, records in his essay "Religion and Modern Poetry." Dr. Frye begins by assuming that art works towards "the vision of a human world, culture or civilization" which is revealed by the human mind through human art. In other words, the poet reveals "the context, the meaning, the possibilities in, or the ultimate destiny of the human situation" (p. 27). What then are the content and source of this vision? Some poets, such as Wordsworth, feel that external nature provides both. Others, such as Baudelaire, find in nature only a chaotic jumble of "mysterious oracles, hints, symbols, and compelling

moods, which find echoes in the more dimly lit areas of the mind." Still others (e.g., Rilke, Housman, and one might add Hardy) "feel that man is walled off from a higher destiny by superconscious powers that he can never reach and are indifferent to him." Others again (e.g., Jeffers and Pound) see only the human and no divine at all (pp. 28-29). This confusion—or variety—of response and therefore challenge is good, because "the stronger our faith in a religion, the sharper our doubts become of our adequacy to practise or even understand its precepts. By showing us how many intellectually possible and emotionally convincing types of revelation there are, poetry helps to protect our religion from the idolatry of arrogance. Our experience of religion begins in faith and bears fruit in charity. Our experience of poetry begins, in Coleridge's phrase, in a willing suspension of disbelief, and bears fruit in a willing suspension of intolerance" (p. 30). In these words a metaphysical challenge has been met by a prompting, not to renewed belief, but to tolerance for disbelief. But Dr. Frye does not stop here: he points out that although Protestantism helped to produce such earlier poets as Blake and Coleridge, and even Shelley and Keats, in most of those modern poets who draw their vision from the Christian religion, "the religious feeling is intensely Catholic in the sense that the sacramental life initiated by the Church is the informing power of ordinary life. Protestantism has had practically no direct influence on modern poetry" (p. 34). By way of solace—and further challenge—to Protestants he remarks further: "One wonders whether poetry may not be doing its greatest service to religion by following its own bent for uninhibited imaginative speculation. Perhaps it is this vague and hopeful illusion, rather than the more precise language of the sacramental poets, that reminds us most clearly that Scripture is poetic and not doctrinal, that Jesus taught in parables and not in syllogisms, and that our spiritual vision is in a riddle" (p. 36). To the challenging suggestion posed by modern poetry, the response appears to be tantamount to saying, "Yes, you're quite right."

The eschatologist and political ideologist have capered through their exercises at a safe distance from the opposing army. The archaeologist, the Christian existentialist, and the educationist have gone marching bravely up and have come marching bravely back again. And the critics of modern poetry and fiction have joined forces with the newcomers, and seek to explain them to the others.

There is also, however, in *Challenge and Response* another kind of challenge and another kind of response. In view of the failure on the part of five of the essayists to respond to the more obvious challenge, I may be pardoned for thinking this other kind of challenge and response more important. Dr. Chalmers makes a remark in the course of his essay which may be applied to all the subjects treated in the book he helped to edit: "The teaching of eschatology sounds strange in modern ears. We are so climatized to this-worldly wisdom and terminology that we lack the creative imagination to see the spiritual truth embodied in these great pictures of the eschaton. This serves to remind us of the teaching task of the Church in our time. The Church must teach and preach,

live and pray, so as to change the secular climate of thought, and its this-worldliness, to a religious climate which has its rootage in another world" (p. 111). Obviously then churchmen must address the laity in terms they will understand, and especially must they address the sceptical laity of this modern age in terminology and with a rational clarity and calmness that will come quietly to grips with the challenge posed by modern ideas.

Unfortunately Dr. Chalmers does not himself practise what he preaches. Instead his essay is not a discussion, but an exhortation, phrased in the most hackneyed terms: "This teaching of the Last Judgment states that history is under a moral order that is not of its own devising. The events of time are not left to themselves but are seen in their true light at the Judgment, a Judgment which issues from God. All history, therefore, stands before His great white throne. And before that bar of Judgment no mistakes are made" (p. 109). Victorian Methodists would no doubt have lapped this up, but the phrasing has simply lost all its meaning for the present day.

Nor does Dr. Thomson succeed any better, for he uses as much jargon as does Dr. Chalmers. The only difference is that his jargon is derived, not from the Victorians, but from contemporary popularizers of philosophy: it is more esoteric, just as cloudy, and still as much of an obstacle to clear understanding as the other: "He was 'the Son,' but this sense of filial relationship brought him also into an at-one-ness with men. He saw us through the Father's eyes and this appointed His work as a divine action to redeem us from 'lost-ness.' It came to Him in concrete terms of his 'situation,' specifically as a mission to Israel. . . . The existential quest for Himself was no agonizing encounter with a sinful alienation from God in His own soul but with the wilful disobedience of those among whom His lot was cast and to whom he was sent. This, too, He made His own so that for Him to *be*, became actually to *be* Israel, the servant of God. Death is more than a symbol of nothingness: it is the concrete actualization of non-being. The Cross was an action of men by which they said that the Christ shall not *be*" (pp. 88-89). Now, typographical acknowledgement of the odd way in which one is using a word is no aid to understanding: we are still left wondering whether at-one-ness means something more than unity, and how a "situation" differs from a situation. And to dress the poor little word "*be*" in italics and send it forth alone is like throwing a giant's cloak over a dwarf and expecting him to do a giant's job. As for "the concrete actualization of non-being": this appears to be a self-contradiction that deprives death not only of its sting but also (for the moment) of its meaning.

Most of the other contributors have chosen a less unreasonable style, one that evinces the typically Canadian virtues of being clear, straightforward, and utterly pedestrian. This kind of style either ignores or avoids two further challenges: the need for compression and the need for art—for something vital and pleasing. Most of the contributors are blind to the second need and have obviated the first by cutting their material instead of compressing its expression. But Dr. Frye's essay suffers from the

need to compress: he has a lot to say, but, because of the high cost of publishing and because (presumably) he was allotted a certain maximum number of pages by the editors, he has too little space to say it in. As a result, he has had to condense his expression, and in fact his style could be called "Canadian condensed." Often this condensation hurts, as in the passage quoted earlier, where he says, in effect, that art works towards a vision revealed in art—which of course makes him appear to argue in circles. Another passage illustrates the injury even better. Referring to Aristotle's principle of catharsis, he writes, "Pity and fear (i.e., the attracting and repelling emotions making for moral judgment) are relevant to art . . ." (p. 25) Here the parenthesis is stated so concisely that the uncritical reader might well not be aware that several pages of closely reasoned argument are needed to make this definition of pity and fear appear reasonable, let alone exclusive. For the whole of Dr. Frye's essay, in fact, one needs to have read many of his other writings in order to understand this one.

Of all the contributors Dr. MacLure is the only one to have met and overcome this obstacle of space and consequent compression. He has also made a valiant attempt, often successful, to make his style artistic as well. To achieve both ends he has used two methods. He has carefully chosen words that describe accurately and evocatively, as in the passage, already quoted, about the "falling birdman, cartooned as a geometrical phallic scrawl." His other method is to use imagery, the most compressed and richly evocative form of expression. Consider this passage: "In a memoir people appear larger than life, as we say, because they are parts of our dream of our past selves. They grow more and more wondrous as they recede in time, giants magically grouped about the cradle, gods presiding over our begetting" (p. 46). By enlarging from people to giants and then to gods, by receding to the cradle and then to our begetting, and by pointing the progression with his precise verbals, Dr. MacLure not only states his point, but also illustrates it—and in such a pithily metaphoric manner that one responds emotionally as well. In the one brief set of words he has been able to communicate abstractly, concretely, and emotionally.

I cannot leave the style of *Challenge and Response* on this commendatory note, however: it would not be just. Instead I would like to close with a reference to the kind of style typified in Dr. Kirkconnell's essay. Like Dr. MacLure, Dr. Kirkconnell has tried for a literary flavour, and like him has used two methods; but there the similarity ends. Admittedly Dr. Kirkconnell uses imagery too, but his imagery, unlike his colleague's, does not illustrate or strengthen: it simply adorns. Admittedly this ornament is something that the reader can easily lift off without altering the prose statement that remains; but one could still wish that the author had done his editing himself. His opening sentence, for instance—"Our own little solar system is far from the centre of that enormous revolving galactic biscuit, the Milky Way . . ." (p. 50)—would have been much more digestible without "that enormous revolving galactic biscuit." His



other method is to use big words, in an effort (one suspects) not nearly so much to compress and save space as to impress and bedazzle. For example, when referring to the contribution of Canadian scholars to biblical criticism, he writes (p. 72): "With Archbishop Carrington, the pericopae in Mark, marked in the margins of the Codex Vaticanus as a dodekad of heptads, become lectionary units in the liturgy of a primitive church, whose synagogic type of public interpretation made it a *Beth midrash* for the newer Scriptures as well." Such a sentence (and it is not the only one of its kind in the essay) gives the impression of a man who has dabbled in so many foreign languages that he has forgotten how to use English. And it is precisely the effective use of English that he and his four co-authors must learn before they can hope to respond convincingly to the challenge of modern ideas.

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