

POST-WAR RELIGION

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FOR three tragic years there has been one all-engrossing topic for consideration—the course of the great war against a ruthless Nazism. Nothing else has seemed to count, while our liberties, our faith, our lives are at stake. But as we near the close of 1942, considerations other than those of the immediate present are increasingly intruding upon our attention. We are already seriously facing post-war conditions. Premature, it may appear; for we may need a very far vision when we begin to speculate concerning the reconstruction days beyond that victory which is most assuredly coming to us. Still it is always possible that the clash of arms may cease with unexpected suddenness, compelling us into immediate action for the rehabilitation of our ruined cities and desecrated shrines and disrupted social life. Hence it is a relief to hear now and again that plans are being tentatively made to restore normal conditions in our war-scarred lands. Politicians, social-reformers, town-planners have already seen the vision of new heavens and a new earth, and are strenuously thinking ahead. But what are the churches doing in this respect?—Must they forever sleep beneath the assumption that all is well, resenting criticism and disparaging change? If so, it will be a sorry day for the churches when the war is over. Of such fatal inertia, however, we need have little fear; it is the bane of the pharisaic few, and has not really infected the masses of earnest Christian people.

To the observant mind it is only too evident that the churches are even now feeling the effects of the war. When the elemental forces of violence are let loose upon humanity, there inevitably follows an almost unconscious disparagement of cultural elements and a neglect of spiritual experiences. Even though appeals for national prayer sound out through the strident clash of armed forces, yet we soon discover that moral restraint has become alarmingly relaxed, along with a blunting of those spiritual faculties which are essential in the building of worthy manhood. Is it not a fact that we are faced not only with bitter criticism from cynical worldliness without the churches, but that within the churches there is a noticeable decline in the attendance at public worship, with a breakdown in long-established institutions of pious observance? The age-

long objection, that after all these centuries of free scope Christianity has failed to prove itself the panacea for human ills and to cope with the problems of life, is causing hesitation and unbelief to batten upon the faith of believers. And along with this hesitancy, which is creeping into our midst and creating a suspended judgment regarding the validity of the faith, there comes from all quarters an insistent demand for greater simplicity in the doctrines of the churches, with a rigid elimination of all metaphysical elements from our creeds.

While, then, the storm of war rages around us, it seems as though the four winds of heaven were let loose within the churches with such hurricane violence that the whole structure is tottering and the very foundations tremble. These are distressing aspects of contemporary religious life; but, in spite of certain despairing forecasts of defeatists within the churches, we may be very sure of this—the superstructure of the church may be endangered, indeed, yet not only is the rock-foundation unmoved, but it will stand forth in the very strength of eternity when the storm waves have swept away the gathered sands that hide its massive grandeur. Fortunately over against the pessimism of the defeatist there is the glowing optimism of those who discern a silver lining in the cloud, pointing out that precisely as Nazi bombs have cleared a way for the renovation of many a slum area, so the shaking of the churches has paved the way for rebuilding of our religious institutions. The destruction of that which is faulty and the exposure of unsuspected causes of weakness are so mixed evils. We may eventually be driven not merely to test the strength and worth of existing organizations, but to look deeper into the springs of Christian thought and life, reexamining the certainty of our orthodox creeds, the reasonableness of our systems of theology and the reliability of our spiritual experiences. If we are forced to subject to review these aspects of our faith, we shall certainly be called upon to vindicate or realign our relation to social and national life and their insistent call for efficiency in progress. The church dare not adopt an isolationist attitude. The religious life cannot flourish if it be divorced from the secular. But even if the motive of self-preservation were to fail in stirring the church to the necessity of keeping abreast of the times, there would remain the appeal of pilloried freedom and the cry of outraged humanity to stir the followers of Christ to strenuous endeavour to help the vast and needy world around it.

If, then, contemporary conditions of life are sufficient to give the churches serious concern, surely the "after-math" beyond the war must give us furiously to think. Are we to go on forever in a self-complacency which assumes a perfect satisfaction with extant conditions and a studied indifference towards external life? Can we forget that the inauguration of peace in 1918 was followed by a period of antinomian excess, during which wild and lawless innovations imperilled all cultural and religious spheres? In literature we witnessed our writers of fiction disporting themselves shamelessly by pandering to a low public taste which demanded pornographic print and devoured semi-obscene narrative with avidity? Even where the proprieties were observed, there was an unpardonable tendency to prostitute the fine arts and *belles lettres* by their subserviency to dadaism, cubism and jazz—deceiving the public into a belief that they were being fed with literature and art and music. Meantime the churches were being invaded by a contagious Deism, with its accompanying suspicion of evangelical fervour, carrying death to spiritual vitality and evoking a spurious evangelism, fettered by literalism, which proved almost as fatal to genuine and enduring religion. We are only too familiar with the ensuing sorry spectacle, the breaking forth of the inextinguishable religious passion of men seeking satisfaction, yet unfortunately expressing itself by emphasising features of the gospel too often overlooked and straightway over-emphasising them till there resulted distortions of the truth little short of untruths. Hence came the hundred mushroom growths of the church which have made our western world the laughing-stock of secular critics. Meantime, in quarters where these vagaries of belief were not rampant, amongst the ignorant and superstitious, we had the unhappy conflict between obscurantists and modernists. Undoubtedly a man's enemies can be those of his own household. But the question is whether we are to see a continuance and a recrudescence of these features in the post-war religious life.

The unrest of to-day is but a premonition of the difficulties and problems we shall have to face after 1942. New conditions may yet be created in the intervening months, but we may at least tentatively indicate certain lines of thought and activity along which valuable preparation may be made for those days, pregnant with possibilities of good and of evil, when unnumbered thousands will be returning to the occupations of civil life and peace conditions. We shall probably be called upon to furnish

new organizations, to evolve new methods of work and to set forth new statements of doctrinal belief.

The question of ecclesiastical organization will always be involved in widely divergent views and complicated by fierce passions. But, even if we concede that uniformity enforced from without is undesirable in comparison with unity attained from within, there yet remains much that can be done to secure collaboration between the great sections of Protestant church life. Co-operation we must have, if progress is to be made and the popular assent won. Moreover, there is a wide field to be surveyed amongst the smaller sections of the church. Are we to see the church perpetually devitalised and drained of its membership by the propaganda of those innumerable sectaries who have flourished like barnacles upon the hull of the ship? If we could disseminate a saner spirit in the study of the Sacred Scriptures, we should see the disappearance of the majority of those products of heated emotionalism and perverted literalism. But we are more concerned with certain larger movements which have arisen as the result of certain omissions within the doctrine and practice of the church and have developed into rival institutions. We need not indulge in animosity in this consideration. But we have all known churches drained of their membership and put out of service by the spread of Christian Science, Seventh Day Adventism, Pentecostalism and "the Oxford Group". There is something wrong in this ceaseless conflict, and there is no reason whatever why a better understanding should not be created by some kind of round-table conference. After all, there are common elements within us all. We are all animated with something of love for Christ and a real valuation of the Scriptures; and we are all eager to see the growth of the kingdom of God. The way for a better understanding is even now being made plain in the common interests that are binding us together, in resistance to the ghastly tyranny of Nazism on behalf of world-democracy, in the intimacy of army life and the universal devotion to Red Cross work. These are already breaking down the barriers of suspicion and misunderstanding; and there can be no reason why such beneficent influences should not be taken advantage of as we approach the rehabilitation beyond the war.

That we are in sight of changes is unmistakable. The Oxford Group seems to have contributed no negligible impulse in reviving religious interest during recent years, but like other Blitzkriegs it seems to have bogged down. And the

innumerable conflicting Schools of Prophecy have discredited their over-confident interpretations by hopeless discord and constant error, till intelligent readers of the Hebrew Prophets are ready to seek the more excellent way, discovering the eternal element beneath utterances intended to have contemporary significance to the first hearers. In other directions we find the same indication of a new spirit and a need for fresh channels of service. Perhaps even the splendid impulse given to spiritual life, especially on the side of mysticism, by the Keswick Movement has still a work to do within the churches where an over-reliance upon secular method militates against a life of faith. There has been a serious ebb in the popularity of the Christian Endeavour Movement—possibly indicating that it has done its work and should give place to other agencies. The weekly Prayer Meeting is practically dead as a recognised institution in the agencies of the church; yet prayer has not ceased to be vital to the life of believers and of churches. And as for the great evangelical movements and elaborately planned evangelistic campaigns which quickened religious life and won many a thousand converts under the guidance of Moody and Chapman, of Gipsy Smith and Evan Roberts—their day has passed. No one has taken the place of Billy Sunday, and John McNeil found no successor. Yet from one and all of these stalwarts of the Gospel the lesson has been inculcated that every pastor should be his own evangelist. Look where we will, we see the breaking down of the older methods and long established institutions. The call of a new age is for new methods and new interpretations; and that call will become an imperative demand after the war. Shall we be ready to meet the need?

There is no need to condemn or disparage these agencies, which have undoubtedly achieved remarkable results and bear the impress of the Spirit of God. They are outstanding features of the first forty years of the century; it is for us to produce worthy successors. New times bring with them a clarion call to the churches to bestir themselves and be ready for opportunity as well as for opposition. The very fact that the thousands of converts made year by year, with the vast addition made to church membership, are outbalanced by the lamentable number of lapses indicates that even now our agencies are insufficient to cope with extant needs. Something should be devised to retain and utilise this annual gain in young life and fresh blood. There are within our churches veritable Niagaras of unchained energy ready for service, gifted with ability, needing an outlet

to vitality which will die if condemned to stagnation. In the interests of religion—and this applies equally to Catholicism and to Protestantism—we must devise some remedy for the coming days. It is highly desirable that the whole question of organization and service should occupy the attention of church courts, presbyteries and synods and conferences, with a view to immediate preparation for the demands so soon to come upon us.

The crucial question, however, which calls for consideration is that of our Creeds and our Theology. And here we must walk cautiously as upon holy ground. The subject mainly concerns our leaders of thought and teachers of truth, and lies in the hands of theologians and church courts; yet it is of increasing interest to the masses of thinking people who feel the attraction of organized religion. Dealing as it does with matters of vital importance, it is always subject to disruptive forces where conviction leads to intolerance and belief creates passion. But the popular demand for simplicity in doctrine and liberality in the acceptance of cast-iron creeds must be reckoned with. Many a theologian has been haunted with the conviction that the historic creeds are laden with metaphysical expressions, which are the legitimate expression of reason as applied to revealed truth, yet tend merely to confuse the mind of the non-professional student of religion. Very few of us really hold to the damnatory clauses of the *Athanasian Creed*, for the belief has dawned upon us out of the Gospels that the sole requisite for the experience of the fulness of divine grace is belief in the all-sufficient Christ Himself rather than the belief of articles of creeds. So we may without hesitation listen to the call for clarification and simplification of doctrine, for a more clearly reasoned and practical setting of the gospel message, for a re-statement of our articles of faith in terms of contemporary thought and life. Unless we do this, we shall alienate the masses of our keen and intelligent, our splendid young people, our graduates from the university and our business youth; and not least to be repelled will be the thousands who are returning to civil life after the rude awakenings and rough contacts of the firing line. Those millions of our heroic manhood now facing death for freedom's sake are the hope of the future in the church, and it will be a ghastly tragedy if they should turn from us unsatisfied, surrendering to the easy secularism of the age or endeavouring to meet the unsatisfied cravings of the soul by accepting a frothy religiosity and an unreasoned fanaticism.

But all things seem to indicate that the coming day will not tolerate an unthinking emotionalism, a propagandist obscurantism, a credulity that feeds upon the mystery of pyramids and gybilitism or even the wild vagaries of self-accredited prophetists; it will rather give earnest heed to reasoned appeals and spiritual conviction, expressed by the preacher who adopts the apologetic note together with the experimental.

It will probably be in the mind of every theologian that there is much need for a new teaching of philosophy in our academic schools. It is not that we arrogate to ourselves the right to dictate the type of philosophy that should be dealt out to the embryo scholar; but we have a shrewd suspicion that there is in our university halls a bias against religion. We protest against the tendency to scoff at religious experience, which is a reality deserving credit as seriously as any of the facts which give data to the scientist. Theology is still a science. The great doctrines of the church are more credible than many of the hypotheses of the scientist. The Christian evangel is more efficacious in healing the rampant disease of moral evil and invigorating the soul for healthy living than are many of the remedies of the physician for the physical frame deranged by evident ills. We desire to see teachers of philosophy who give their due value to the facts of spiritual experience. Then would we have a stronger, a more reasoned, theology in our seminaries. Our call to the academic schools in this respect is loud and urgent. We trust that the "behaviourist" and similar schools will pass away into oblivion with the lumber that will be swept away by the war. A wind from the far beyond would cleanse the mind and purify the teaching of many a scholar who claims to speak on religion with a sorry *ipse-dixit*.

The matter is even more hedged in with difficulties when we turn to re-think our creeds and re-examine our Confessions; but in the light of modern thought it is imperative to correlate our doctrines with the new conditions. The demand for this process of clarifying and simplifying comes to us from our younger theologians, from the undergraduates of our colleges, from the intelligent public. And the thing can probably be accomplished without jeopardising anything of vital import in the ancient creeds. Certain traits of narrowness may be eradicated, as we write *Amplius!* over our phraseology and jettison everything that cramps the mentality of the believer. We may already speculate as to the direction in which post-war theology will move. It is scarcely likely that there will be a

return to acceptance of external authority in religion, bowing the intellect to the dictates of the ecclesiastic. Rather we visualise the return of a strong and vigorous independence, with a more reasoned interpretation of Scripture. Liberalism has had its day. Mysticism is out of fashion, although there is likely to be recrudescence of the deep reverence, the bold experimentalism, the courageous venture of a faith such as permeates the poetry of Whittier. Certain events of recent years seem to support the belief that there may be a return to the strong doctrinal position of the broader minded Calvinist. It may be there will be an eagerness to walk in the old ways; and through it all we are persuaded that the evangel of the crucified and risen Christ will manifest its ancient power. Great changes there are sure to be; but the foundations will stand the test. We do not shrink from the coming storm. After all, the essential is that men be brought face to face with the fact of God, that they experience the regenerating influence of the Christ, and that they respond to the heavenly breath of the reviving Spirit. But it is high time that we faced squarely up to this demand for a rethinking of the faith, free from narrow prejudices and doctrinal intolerance, simply praying

*Let knowledge grow from more to more
But more of reverence in us dwell.*

Animated with such desires, we may face with confidence the post-war religion.