

CULT OF THE OBSCURANTIST

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THE atmosphere of the religious world has rarely been favoured with clear skies and fair winds for any long interval of time; and the years of the twentieth century have had to record tempestuous seasons and minor local disturbances innumerable. Multiplication of sects, the elaboration of new creeds, the formation of communities of believers, well-nigh defy the imagination of the historian of the Church. But the warning signals have been raised again to-day, and the storm cones are flying from the hierarchical masthead. The meteorologist of the spiritual area has published in large type the statement that a wide-spread Depression is gradually extending over the modern religious world, presaging storms of unparalleled violence. And to this unsettled condition it is imperative that the observers of the spiritual weather call the attention of all pilots of the craft that sail the open seas of theological thought and ecclesiastical organization.

The extent to which minor sects have arisen and erratic doctrines have been promulgated in recent years—more especially within the American continent—is nothing short of amazing. Like mushrooms in warm weather and on damp soil, they have spread themselves throughout the religious world—and not infrequently with the deleterious effect of poisoned fungi upon the sanity and safety of believers. But it is the prevalent depression in the realm of religious thought and the approaching storm in the theological world that gives us most furiously to think; and it concerns most nearly—though not exclusively—the Protestant Churches. No one section of the great Churches of Protestantism is affected by it more than any other. But within them all there is emerging to-day a mode of religious thought and a trend of belief, a rift within the ranks of religious teachers, which is becoming increasingly emphasized under public discussion. A certain growing section of our religious teachers—men with a zeal for God, even if it is not always according to knowledge—is rearing its head amid the Churches in the spirit of the most arrant Pharisee, marked by the bitterest intolerance, claiming an inquisitorial and doctrinaire authority in theological enquiries, insisting upon narrow, antiquated, formal estimates of the Scriptures and clamping intolerable fetters upon reason, organising itself into armies of defence and aggression, establishing

colleges for the propagation of its distinctive theories of inspiration, and driving the wedge of schism ever deeper and deeper until it appears to close observers that our Protestant Churches are heading towards a process of longitudinal cleavage. Not only is this tendency noticeable in the Churches of the South, with their traditionally inveterate conservatism in belief—it has appeared within the freer Churches of the North and in the Maritime Provinces of the Dominion—it finds advocates in Montreal and Chicago, in Toronto and San Francisco, in Pittsburg and Los Angeles. It is not, however, the conservative instinct in theology that we have to fear or to desiderate. Indeed, many of those who belong to the quite liberal school of thought, and are most alarmed with the movement of which we shall speak, are at heart absolutely loyal to the more conservative dogmatic and the vital evangelical doctrines. They may often be in full sympathy with the fervent dogmatic of Karl Barth and the doctrinal position of John Calvin. The leaders of the liberal school would take their stand sincerely amongst the advocates of an evangelical and experimental faith, and they would whole-heartedly throw themselves into the breach to stem the rising tide of invasion coming from the rationalist tendencies that are flooding the Churches with an insidious Socinianism and a cloying Deism. Far from leaning towards rationalism, the liberal theologian often shares the alarm that a contemporary infatuation for external uniformity and unity is being furthered at the expense of doctrinal convictions, and that a weakening of the frontiers of belief should seem to be advisable in clearing the road to superficial uniformity. Nay, more, the determination to stand as loyal defenders of an orthodox Biblical theology may be wholly laudable, and may even be pardoned for arrogating to itself the popular title of "Fundamentalism". But, then, the term "Fundamentalism" by no means adequately expresses the tendencies which are arousing the alarm of numberless earnest and thoughtful leaders of contemporary religious life. What they most gravely fear and most emphatically denounce is the tendency of the so-called Fundamentalists to narrow the scope of intellectual enquiry within the Faith—this must be said of a certain section of the Fundamentalists, rather than of the entire body—and a readiness to identify Faith with the blind-folded groping after truth rather than with the open-eyed follower of the guiding Light. A large body of believers dissents from such an attitude, and denies the right of any men to test orthodoxy by their own personal theories of Biblical inspiration. Most emphatically they resist their authority to set up a new *Index Expurgatorius* for the theological

colleges and to condemn modern Science as atheism. They stand aghast at their claim to test the theories of the scientist by their cut and dried theories of literalness in interpreting the creation narratives of *Genesis*, and their attempt to decide upon the veracity of history by their personal reading of the Scriptures rather than by the evidence of documents and records. Thinkers must be forgiven if they evince a certain contempt for those who hide their heads beneath the sands of an inherited literalism to escape the storm of problems which assail the modern seeker after truth, and who identify revelation with a mystic and miraculous process wholly divorced from anything known in human experience and alien to the historic method. But that these tendencies exist, are wide-spread, and are vociferously advocated, is undeniable. Should we seek for them an adequately descriptive term, we could find no more apt designation than "Obscurantism".

What, then, it maybe asked, is the creed of the Obscurantist? The question is one of immediate importance, and demands a clear answer. Yet it is by no means wholly of modern import. At all periods in the Church's history there have been representatives of Obscurantism. We do not, indeed, find any trace of it within the Biblical narratives, and least of all in the attitude of the one great Master Himself. The one thing which Christ always did ask was personal confidence in Himself—the loyalty of the heart. It first made its appearance in the attitude of those who presumed to be the guardians of the "faith once for all delivered to the saints", and who in the exercise of that guardianship evolved their own theories of the sacred trust they held and elaborated their own tests of orthodoxy. They existed amongst the compilers of the historic creeds. They multiplied among the mechanical theologians of the middle ages. They flourished in the days of the Inquisition. They could be found amongst the Reformers. They have risen up again in these days of enlightenment and fervour in the faith. And the surest way to discover the essential features of Obscurantism is to examine the attitude of its devotees to the sacred Scriptures. Obscurantism approaches the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments with preconceived theories, with rigid and formal notions of what is meant by Inspiration. Their beliefs concerning the Scriptures are not based upon an examination of the Scriptures themselves, nor upon any claim found within the sacred writings. They spring from an exaggerated estimate of the letter of the sacred books, as distinct from their spirit and their content. They demand a belief in an Infallible Bible as the sole guarantee of an Infallible Christ and a Divine Revelation. They insist on a belief

in the literal inerrancy, the scientific accuracy and the historical reliability of the Scriptures. They virtually ignore the fact that within the early manuscripts by which these Scriptures have come to us there is no such thing as uniformity, and that there are no fewer than fifty-three thousand variant readings in the New Testament alone. They refuse to consider the evidences of Scripture having frequently been reedited and adapted.

They close one's eyes to the fact that the authors invariably wrote in the terms of contemporary conceptions of science and history. The fact is undeniable that the Scriptures are far from infallible when the test of literal accuracy is applied—they may be truly infallible when viewed as the record of an historical process. But the Obscurantist, having pledged himself to the maintenance of certain preconceived theories, must stick to his guns. The test of orthodoxy must, of course, be found for him in an acceptance of his personal theories of a literal accuracy, and in the adoption of a theory of inspiration that resembles the action of a spiritualist upon his passive medium more than any reasonable process. Thus he is pledged to a rigid limitation of intelligence in the faith, while Christian scholarship and critical research are practically under taboo. He will naturally counter these statements by declaring that there are scholars amongst the Obscurantists; but on examination it appears that these very scholars had come to the Scriptures they profess to explain with definite ideas of what they ought to teach. Modern Biblical criticism is a theme wholly abhorrent to them. They shudder with pious horror at the very name of "Higher Critic". With almost incredible virulence they assail the Biblical student who dares to state—and we take but one example—that the Book of Isaiah is of composite authorship—although there is overwhelming evidence of this fact, and probably they are ignorant of the fact that amongst the Reformers it was none other than John Calvin himself who stated this truth in his masterly commentary upon the writings that bear the name of Isaiah. With equal bitterness they will assail the modern teacher who dares to state that we should discriminate between the various books of Scripture as to their importance. For them they are all inspired and therefore equally of import—the book of Esther equally with the works of Isaiah, the epistle of James equally with the gospel of John,—in direct opposition to the judgment of Martin Luther. One cannot help feeling that in this they are discarding the genuine Reformation attitude, and harking back to the standpoint of the mediaeval Church. But over against an infallible Church they have set an infallible literature—thus they would often put the inter-

pretation of Scripture given by the historic catechisms in the place of the personal interpretation by the believer reached by the guiding light of the Spirit in the heart of men of faith and scholarship. See, my masters, to what a point we have come, when a monopoly of reverence is claimed by those students who approach the Bible with the mind closed against all research and the heart locked against the evidence of facts! So, then, discussion is ruled out and research forbidden in favour of human theories! While in the early days of Biblical criticism the scholar frequently erred in the direction of purely negative and destructive results, to-day all this is past. The open-minded scholar builds constructively, and it verily seems that reverence lies more with the critic than with the literalist.

But the extremists amongst the Fundamentalists have not merely felt compelled to repudiate the results of the critical study of the Bible and to impugn its loyalty to the faith. They have been led, and that quite logically, to disavow the teaching of the modern scientist and historian. The central battle between the two schools of Bible interpretation has raged round the explanations of the creative process and the origin of life. The Obscurantist holds up the evolutionary hypothesis to ridicule and designates it atheistical. And, why?—Because, forsooth, it does not accord with the literalist's reading of the narrative of *Genesis*. Hence all the findings of our eminent scientists must go by the board, all text-books in schools and colleges must be eliminated if they explain the modern scientific conceptions of the rise of man upon the earth, and all really prominent scientists must come under the ban as heretics. And all this process of damnation is due to the fact that the zealot for belief in literal inerrancy cannot stomach the idea that the early authors should write in language intelligible to their contemporaries, using the very pictorial and allegorical method in the revelation of spiritual mysteries which bears the supreme sanction of our Lord Himself and was the accepted of the early Church. No! Science is to be regarded as the enemy of the Scriptures, and the youth of our day is to be taught that the Church alone holds the key to the creative process. We hold no brief for Evolution. But a claim to enforce such an estimate of the Scriptures is at variance with the spirit of the Reformation. One feels in it the deadly breath of an age which subjected every thought to the benumbing Aristotelian doctrine and flung to the Inquisition such brilliant intellects as that of Galileo—an attitude long ago discarded by the Latin Church itself. The Inquisition might prove powerful enough to silence for the moment the fearless voice of a Galileo—its methods suffice no longer. It is the spirit of the Inquisition that has reared

its head once more, insinuating that devoted pastors and earnest preachers and skilled professors are tainted with heresy and are disloyal to the Church because they venture to discuss burning problems of the faith and to view the great questions of revealed truth with an open mind. Doubtless the Christian scholar will go on his way, convinced that the cause of truth must ultimately triumph over narrowness and prejudice; yet, if he were so disposed, he might hurl back the accusations which are levelled against himself. Wherein, he might ask, lies the intelligence of the Biblical defender who champions the literal interpretation of *Genesis* against the modern geologist by declaring that the Creator placed the fossils in the ancient rocks precisely as the cook places the plums in her cake?

But the question is "Whereunto will this thing grow?"—At present it is raising the cuckoos cry of "Heresy"! thereby doing harm to the cause of Christ. It is merely sowing doubt and distrust amongst believers, and weakening the bonds of their devotion to the Church. It is creating unfounded suspicions, which are the hardest things to counter. It is stirring up bitterness where there should be nothing but charity. And the effect has been disastrous upon the zealots for orthodoxy, in that their early sincere zeal for loyalty to the faith has been transforming them into theological crustaceans. We have had examples of a like spirit in the past. It is no new thing for religious conviction to breed religious intolerance—but it is too late in the day for the public to condone such a course. It can merely serve to widen the gap between the University and the Church. The hold of the sacred Scriptures upon our thoughtful and intelligent classes is being seriously jeopardised when whole States agitate to excise from our school books the teaching of the modern scientist, and when pastors of large congregations undertake propaganda to secure governmental interference to such an end. When this happens, then the devout Christian who believes that the Divine has been revealed within the human by wholly reasonable methods, and has been recorded in writings penned by men of open eyes, will have ground for fearing that the Obscurantists will alienate the thinking public from the truth and thus will show themselves to be the greatest enemies of the Cross of Christ. The situation is too serious to be treated with levity. Our age cannot assume an attitude of supine indifference to critical problems and scientific teaching. We no longer live in the middle of the eighteenth century. The Reformation insistence upon the

dignity and authority of the Scriptures has not been abrogated by the passage of the years; it has been clarified and enfranchised.

There is no obscurity as to the attitude of the Obscurantist. He believes in a supernatural method of inspiration and an infallible Bible as its equivalent; he emphasizes the miraculous nature in conversion of depraved humanity and the value of a mystic experience. He prides himself on his anti-modernity as to science and history. He is stereotyped in his orthodoxy, doctrinaire in his dogma, domineering in his methods. Hence he appears to many devout Christians to be paving and greasing the downward road to infidelity. Surely the position he is pledged to spells stagnation and decay. This campaign fills with dismay those Christian thinkers who have always held that Jesus of Nazareth was the most fearless of thinkers and the boldest critic of the Mosaic legislation.

Over against this lies another way. Numerous thinkers, whose loyalty to the faith and the Churches cannot be impugned, who are advocates of a critical study of the Scriptures and a reasoned interpretation of the documents of Revelation, are convinced that the Obscurantist can no longer play the Canute to the rising tide of Christian intelligence. If tests of orthodoxy are to be employed at all, it must be recognized that the gold leaves will not diverge when the Fundamentalist seeks to make them attest his sole possession of a high religious potentiality.

But let us not pursue this line of defence further. We do not desire merely to voice the rising indignation of the thoughtful classes against a movement which is so pregnant with disastrous influences. We would gladly issue an eirenicon—were it possible to avoid a fight to the finish upon so radical a matter. We would unhesitatingly admit that, if the Fundamentalist has at times been led to become an Obscurantist, the Biblical scholar has at times been led astray to adopt negative and unevangelical grounds. Neither of these extremes is justified. From both camps the cry should now be raised:—

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

The true test of orthodoxy, after all, is found in the attitude of the individual believer to the Christ. The advocates of Scriptural evangelicalism may well join hands with the leaders of Biblical scholarship in striving to bring in a better day of inward unity, when with open-eyed intelligence the thoughtful may find a congenial home within the Church, and the masses shall again be moved by a popular passion for Christ. When the storms of controversy die down and the skies of the religious world clear, we shall see the wonders of the saving Christ again.