

A JUSTIFICATION OF MODERN THEOLOGY.

FROM THE STANDPOINT OF A UNITARIAN.

BY HENRY WILDER FOOTE.

THE *Open Court* for November prints "A Criticism of Modern Theology" by Mr. H. F. Bell, with "An Explanation and Justification" by the Editor. I am much interested in the subject and would like to add a word to the discussion.

The writer of the "Criticism" is right so far as his remarks apply to that phase of modern theology with which he is acquainted. He is, however, evidently unaware that what he presents under that name is by no means the most fully developed form of the theology of the modern man. There are schools,—such as the Harvard Divinity School,—and many preachers, whose teachings have long since passed the negative stage of development at which his criticisms are aimed, and who are doing constructive and affirmative work. Those who have entered upon this phase of modern theology no longer hold the "illogical position" with regard "to the Bible and to Christ" which characterized the liberal thought of a generation ago. The answer of such men as to why the Bible is taken as the great book of religion is not "by reason of its witness to Christ"; they do not "continue to hold it apart from other books"; they recognize clearly and gladly that the "real Word of God" does "comprise all the great truths which courageous souls have seized upon down through the entire stream of human life." The pre-eminence of the Bible in the Christian churches which hold the more advanced theology is due to three things:

1. The recognition that the Bible is the product of a race exceptionally gifted in the expression of religious ideals, and that it offers a wonderfully complete view, in moderate compass, of the evolution of those ideals from the primitive worship of a tribal deity to a sublime and pure theism. No other body of literature of

like proportions so perfectly illustrates this development, nor contains so much still of value.

2. The Bible has more profoundly influenced our civilization than any other book, or group of books. Especially for us is this true of the English Bible, which is interwoven into the whole texture of English thought and literature, so that it is difficult to find other writings which go so deep or make so broad an appeal.

3. "The Universal Bible" which Mr. Bell demands is indeed a desideratum, but so far we have not acquired it. Some of us from time to time use extra-Biblical writings in the pulpit, but as yet no collection in the nature of a "universal Bible" has been made, at least in such form that it can be conveniently used. As a matter of fact I suspect that there is less of such material which would be really useful in the pulpit than Mr. Bell seems to think. For reading out of the pulpit the modern theologian of the progressive type knows very well and says quite frankly, that God "has not confined the revelation of Himself to any one age or to one man."

Nor does this school of thought fail to recognize that "in the church of the living God we must include all who in all ages have been led by the Spirit of God." The men of this school do not hold that "Jesus—reveals all of God that we know," but rather that our knowledge of God has come from countless sources, ancient and modern; from "Greek, Barbarian, Roman, Jew"; and of late far more from the scientist than from the theologian. They think of Jesus indeed, as the greatest of prophets, whose insight into the world of the spirit is unsurpassed, but whose authority is due to the truth of his teachings, and not to supernatural attributes; nor do they claim for Jesus those attributes, nor the worship which their possession alone would justify. But while they recognize the pure humanity of Jesus they know also that our civilization has been affected by his personality more forcibly than by any other, and they believe that his teaching is still of highest value in moulding the religious and moral thought of the world. The ideal at which the modern theologian aims is to upbuild the "faith of Jesus,"—that is the fundamental and universal element in the religious ideals which he held,—in place of the "faith in Jesus,"—that is in the supernatural Christ,—which they see inevitably passing away from the modern world. They do not make him "the sole authority in religion and morals" but they do believe that to men brought up in the Christian inheritance Gautama or Mohammed or Confucius can never make so strong an appeal nor be so vital an inspiration.

Mr. Bell's criticism of modern theology applies therefore to its

backward stages, rather than to its more developed phase which has escaped from the defensive, negative, illogical position at which he aims. This advanced phase is also, of course, subject to criticism, for it has not by any means perfected a well-rounded system of thought, but its weak points are no longer those of Mr. Bell's attack.

In your "Explanation and Justification" you defend the reticence of clergymen who do not openly acknowledge the extent of their acceptance of modern thought. While it is doubtless true that some congregations can be best led forward by this method,—which does not *necessarily* involve cowardice or hypocrisy,—it is also true that this same policy is driving hundreds of men from the churches because they feel that the preachers are not straightforward or honest. I seriously doubt whether more churches are not injured than helped by this failure on the part of ministers to speak the whole truth, and I feel sure that it is largely responsible for the disrepute of the ministry in our day.

Your preference for the "ideal Christ" rather than for "the historic Jesus" is a purely personal matter which need not be discussed, but while the ideal Christ,—a very different conception from the Jewish Messiah,—has been the center of Christian theology, it is also true that Christianity started with the historic Jesus. Furthermore the theological Christ is inextricably involved with conceptions of the universe very foreign to the modern man, so that the philosophic idea of Christ as the God-man becomes increasingly difficult to maintain, whereas the historic Jesus fits into our world of thought.

Finally, though it is quite true that Jesus held the conceptions of his age and race regarding the universe, and in particular in regard to such matters as demoniac possession, it by no means follows "that his horizon was limited by the superstitions of Galilee." As a matter of fact his teaching dealt in large measure with the relations between God and man, and between man and man, that is with matters concerning humanity in all lands and times, rather than with purely local concerns or beliefs, which he used simply to illustrate the deeper spiritual life. One might as fairly say that Socrates's horizon was limited by the superstitions of Greece. Nor do I know your authority for the statement that Jesus "made his living by exorcising devils." That many of the cures which he accomplished by the influence of a powerful personality acting upon weakened minds and wills were attributed to the casting out of devils is of course explicitly stated, but the

exercise of such healing powers was incidental to his teaching, part and parcel of that age and land, not the main object of his ministry, which was the preaching of religion, and nowhere do I know of evidence that Jesus asked or received payment for his cures. That he was received as a guest in the homes of his followers is quite beside the mark, it was the obvious thing under the conditions of life in Palestine, and to say that he made his living by his cures appears to me a curious inversion of the real situation.

Christian theology is in process of reconstruction from the foundation up, to adapt it to the modern scientific conception of the universe. The theology of the coming age will be vastly different from that of traditional Christianity, but it promises in the first place to be distinctively Christian, in that it will be based upon the teaching of Jesus,—a different thing from being Christocentric,—and in the second place to be thoroughly rationalistic, accepting truth as its only authority, and the theory of evolution as applicable to religious life as well as to the world of nature.