

“THE HOUSE OF UNITY.”

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THE redoubled discussion of church unity, apt for these days of project, may well be judged even outside the Christian order a sign not of folly but of reenforcement. We have recognized by other tests a quickening of the religious life. We have applauded a readiness in the Christian press and pulpit to a more evident courage. We have felt a recovery of lapsed simplicities. We have recognized a new accessibility to criticism. We have witnessed a real, if bewildered, searching of the Christian conscience for the secret sin which has delayed the world's salvation. Reaction or cowardice this may in some cases be, as the rationalists affirm, the recoil of weakness seeking support in a tottering universe, even if that support be but the projection of an inward hope. But that the core of the movement is sound, we need no better proof than the gathering conviction within the Church that only a consistent Christianity, that is, a Christianity delivered from provincialism, can stand the test of our logical and searching years.

A church, however, which wills to-day to be catholic, which wills even to survive, must consider boldly the adequacy of its creedal system. For the current attacks upon Christianity concern not alone the familiar reproaches at the scant display of its fruits, its long failure to achieve a world of justice, its alleged ineptitude in grapple with social issues. It has ceased, we are told, to speak the modern language of spiritual hope. Broadcast we meet the conviction, contemptuous or sorrowful, that the Christian Church may by an emphasis upon dogma, perhaps more apparent than real, shut out the future. The Church must recognize with more than common honesty that speculation upon the future of religion which ignores the continuation of Christian dogma even as a denatured survival.

The stimulus of heresy is nothing new, to be sure. Antichrist has always been active about the “House of Unity, Holy Church in

English." He has proved himself by our modern judgment a respectable opponent. He has been for the most part well informed, better informed too often than the defender of the faith. To-day there is the sole but significant difference in his prospects that he addresses himself not only to the great body of skepticism tacit or avowed; he speaks to the conventional churchgoer and the automatic pewholder, expecting not to shock but to be considered.

Such a stress of challenge has been inevitable as apocalyptic calamities have unrolled. One virtue at least has sprung from limitless distress—that men have dared to seek eternal values in their right proportions. Not only creeds, all fundamental principles once thought axioms are now in the ordeal. The average mind, impassive before the world's normal agony, has taken to question at the spectacle of evil rampant in a world delivered over to torment. Within or without the Church, typical thinkers of the present generation will not appear at the last day among the unblest company who—to borrow the older language of the strong psalm—"have taken their souls in vain." This is the generation which has sought the face of God.

Before so honest an inquiry there should be no misgiving. Whoso is nervous at the exposure of his truth to exterior contacts is condemned already of unbelief immeasurably more noxious than the assault of open opposition. A sincere faith should be able to offer its critics a sufferance as courteous and serene as was shown itself long ago by the unprofessing Pharisee: "If this counsel or this work be of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, ye will not be able to overthrow them, lest haply ye be found to be fighting against God." To-day, then, as surely as in St. Paul's time, whatsoever things are written are written for everybody's instruction.

The present censure is written in large assumptions. For criticism no longer condescends to attack this or that explicit dogma of this or that sporadic sect. It discredits with a sweeping negligence of ancient issues the ancient status of dogma itself. Take for instance four familiar excerpts from English publication during the war, selected at random:

"The present crisis is for the Church of England an unprecedented opportunity for either making a fresh start or for committing suicide. . . . The student calls himself a churchman. He believes in the Holy Catholic Church invisible, wherein is and shall be gathered up all we have hoped and dreamed of good. He also calls himself an English churchman. But he will never be satisfied till the Church

of England be the Church of all good men and women in England, and till all the good thoughts and deeds in England are laid at the feet of the Lord of all good life through the medium of his body the Church." (Donald Hankey.)

"It has sometimes seemed to me that the one great advantage of Western Christianity lies in the fact that nobody very seriously believes in it. . . . I cannot believe that anywhere between Suez and Singapore there exists that healthy godlessness, that lack of any real effective dependence upon any Outward Power. . . . which is so common in and around the Christian churches." (William Archer.)

"Nevermore shall we return to those who gather under the Cross. . . . Even such organization as is implied by a creed is to be avoided, for all living faith coagulates as you phrase it." (H. G. Wells.)

"Whatever else be the outcome of this business, let us at least recognize the truth: it is the death of dogmatic Christianity. Yes, dogmatic Christianity was dying before this war began. When it is over, or as soon as men's reason comes back to them, it will be dead. . . . Let us will that it be the birth of a God within us and an ethic Christianity which men really practise." (John Galsworthy.)

The above quotations carry each the sanction of a distinguished name. Donald Hankey indeed voices perfectly the common Anglican ideal, but with a bold reserve implicit in the context. William Archer's squib, to be respected and not disregarded, may nevertheless be discounted for the present purpose. Such as he will populate no future church. They ignore the witness of mystic experience: they have not so much as heard whether the Holy Ghost was given. The other two cuttings are representative of a contemporary tone both in point of assault and scope of assumption. Mr. H. G. Wells, expressing himself after what flourish his nature wills, has been, as we have all recognized, possessed of an apostolic earnestness, come in his own opinion not to destroy but to fulfil, provided not with a philippic but with a gospel. Mr. Galsworthy has been used to lend his utterance the authority of a poignant genius sensitive to experience. In both we read the current distrust of dogma taken for granted in the lay press on both sides of the Atlantic.

In vain the churches, one and all, deny such emphasis. There are the denominations less rigorous and more indulgent, who have grown to ignore though seldom to repudiate the lines of sectarian cleavage. There are the liberal congregations, increasingly numerous, who have reduced their entrance requirements to the minimum of creedal test. There is the still infrequent but significant appear-

ance of the non-sectarian church, which must tend to appear, unless church policy alters, a separate and non-Christian growth.

Even the conservative, jealous in the guardianship of creedal tradition, reject the reproach that it is static or exclusive. Such misconception, they say, and often with truth, comes frequently from unwillingness or inability to realize the life within the dogmatic system. For the creeds they allow a tolerated diversity of interpretation. Creeds, Protestants are coming to confess to be, not final statements of revelation but tentative adumbrations of truth; a church's mission, not to present a platform but to offer approach to spiritual experience. To such experience, dogmatists declare, a dogma is no dead survival but a symbol of life. The letter, as all agree, was made for the spirit's sake, not the spirit for the letter.

The fact remains, however, that for the large majority of the Christian world the primary requirement for church initiation is not hunger for the bread of life, but direct assent, however qualified by personal translation, to the historical creeds or to some modification of them. So far at least the churches deliberately allow, for reasons however valid in their own belief, the apprehension of the undogmatic world that their truth is crystallized, no longer fluid to the stream of ages, that they protect as their supreme treasure still another though strangely diversified deposit of faith.

The demand therefore grows frankly vocal to-day that the Christian Church, if it wills to become the church of all and the church of the future, be "open free" without test or barrier of belief. There need be no immediate question of abandoning the creeds. Such abandonment would be for a noble body of believers to withhold the essential act of faith. The tentative specifications, furthermore, already offered for the future creed of the united churches, though auspicious of good intent, are, to say the least, premature. The churches can, however, during our crucial years of transition, abate their rigors—allow to their full fellowship, and receive at their sacraments, with a hospitality still rare even in these tolerant days, any soul whatsoever in need or desire of a corporate religion. Telling sanctions for so unguarded a freedom are frequent nowadays even from the inner zone of orthodoxy.

Such relaxation of polity would appear to many a devout spirit submission to an inferior standard, a fresh and final denial of its master. Let the possibility nevertheless be discussed with candor if the churches consider with sincerity the vision of ultimate union. The church of the past, at least in fact of reconstructive attack, has failed more often through caution than through liberality. The

schism of Christendom had perhaps never befallen if the rigid world of the sixteenth century could have held the illumined judgment of Erasmus toward anxious guardians of tradition: "Why should they try to narrow what Christ intended to be broad?"

A church of the future, we all admit, must be built against far horizons. It must approach its ultimate catholicity with an understanding generous and alert for the diverse messages which fill the air of the present. Churches of the present therefore must never sun themselves in the pride of a specious or partial tolerance, each secretly persuaded that it is destined to be the center of a coming patchwork. The future will achieve, we hope, not a mere combination of sects but deliverance from sectarianism. It must embrace not only the body of church-members who enjoy privilege within the fold, but the far more considerable body not eligible for association. It cannot count upon the nicest adjustments of the most finely balanced compromise. A patchwork of all existing communions would make but a sorry sight at the Day of Judgment. A patchwork meanwhile will never suffice for the spiritual reenforcement of a world reborn, however vaguely marked be the pattern of its stitch. Concessions of ceremonial, concessions of ordination, concessions of administration, concessions of minor doctrine, may make a composite but never a catholic church. The church of the future will never grow out of a perpetuation of the historic mistake incident to ecclesiastical polity. It must not condemn to narrowness what by necessity of nature must be broad. It exists to repeat the bidding of its master who called to his companionship all who labor heavily.

The church of the future, we may hope, rich in abundance from the eternal fountains, may venture to discard both caution and economy in her hospitalities. She will trust like the eternal mother in the souls of all her children till the souls begin by virtue of that trust to "come into being and to take a certain shape." Unreserved in grace, she will abide the return of the prodigal and the stubborn. Replenished in pity, she will serve better, if she may, the blind who will not see, the hungry who hunger not enough, the seekers for righteousness who seek not with all their hearts. Gentlest like her master for the "poor in spirit," she will in those far-away, lenient days, minister with special welcome to the half-strangers within her gates, who, uncomforted by the persuasion of religious experience, seek the more eagerly from the Church the Christian habit, a support to follow without vision the hearsay of divine commandment. The church of the future should shut out to loneli-

ness not one soul which desires companionship, remembering the warning of her saints: "Take to thyself faithful companions, that in going up the mount thou mayest use their counsel and be supported by their aid—because woe to him that is alone! If he fall, he shall not have one to help him up. But if one fall beside another, by another he shall be saved." At least until such abundant grace has been offered by all communions, the Church sorrows without logic that "the world" rejects its Christ, lest haply the Church be found in the name of Christ to be rejecting the world. Premature as well is the elegiac consolation which the Church sometimes allows herself—that she keeps alive in a neglectful world a secret flame in a secret shrine. To cherish a flame in a secret shrine is only a less disobedience than to put a candle under a bushel. In the coming years of test the Church must be the light of the world or die.

Any body of Christians, however cautious, acts with evasion unworthy of its message if it turns away any religious impulse which cannot commit itself to the historicity of a selected doctrine. If there is value in the corporate life of a religious body, the Christian Church, still the accepted exponent of Western religion, must provide that life. It claims besides a capacity able to include the entire reach of religious aspiration. It should embrace without scruple whatever worship, genuine though less explicit, desires or accepts such alliance.

By so bold a latitude Christians may use their supreme chance in the tremendous years ahead, may prove perhaps the universality of their faith, its sufficiency for the future gospel. For the proclaimed substitute, the expected religion of the future, has not yet arrived, despite the flutter of contemporary prophecy. As usual and more plentiful than usual, there are the religions adequate for the righteous; but as usual the righteous is less than another in need of a prophet. For the patriot who has forgotten his soul in his country's behalf the "religion of nationalism" may suffice, partial ideal though it must one day prove in an infinite universe. For the serviceable and humane of mind may suffice the apotheosis of humanity, the religion of service. For the virile of will and potent in hope may suffice the "Invisible King," indomitable spirit of immortal youth which feels no need for the Ancient of Days. Here has been no new doctrine since Anglo-Saxon times: "Wyrd often helps a man not marked for death if his courage is good." But among Christians survives a saying, still held in some sense true and likely of more men to be received with gladness—that a supreme

religious genius, a certain Jesus, once came into the world to save sinners.

The status of creeds is a problem most intense, among Protestants, to the church of Anglican tradition. For this widely dispersed order as for the Romanist, the historical formulas are an integral part of a fixed system. Radical departures besides have proved intrinsically unnatural to its development. It desires to serve the future for the very reason that it has respected the past. Within its rubric, with however imperfect a consistency, it has preserved for the Protestant world the clustered heritage of immemorial prayer, the incremental religious expression of all the Christian ages. With instinctive comprehension it has kept for the Protestant world the mystic value of the sign, through which diverse centuries can express together their Protean image of the inscrutable truth. The protection of the creeds, therefore, with their undiminished authority appears at first to the Anglican only a proper act of faith due to a cherished continuity.

But the Anglican Church possesses in its past the precedent not only of loyalty but of compromise. At any rate, it must face the issue which it has been so eager to raise. From this church more insistently than from other Protestants has come the summons to a united Christendom, the dream of a church catholic not only in phrase but in truth. It has been ambitious to contribute of its own values toward the nucleus of the church-to-be. If it desires with a valiant logic this new and spiritual catholicism ample for the church triumphant of a world restored to progress, it may understand with a fresh significance its ancient title of "the middle way." It has thought to possess the mission for a unique mediation.

A church, too, which holds the sacramental life a principle of its essential health, should welcome as the best proof of its vitality the desire for its communion in a type of modern mind which, religious of temper, must loyally reject the historical creeds. Such minds, at present repudiated by the "House of Unity," cannot for their part feel alien from any Christian fellowship. They remember the reputed promise of Jesus, "Ask and ye shall receive; knock and it shall be opened to you." Their need and desire, identical with that of the accredited sheep, should in their idea be a sufficient plea. They too, failing to quicken their own souls, have sought upon their pilgrimage the support of faithful companions. They too have read in the liturgies of the Church the expression which the soul desires of its search for righteousness, its penitence, its recurrent hope, its insufficiency for its own salvation. For them

too, though they scruple to confess a unique and localized Incarnation, the sole support of life is the faith, difficult to sustain in solitary devotion, that the Word has been and shall be again made flesh. For them too, it may be, the sacramental life is a necessity of spiritual growth. For them in a peculiar sense perhaps more mystical than for the standard churchman, the Eucharist is a universal and immortal symbol, of a significance more ancient and comprehensive than inheres in its Christian import—type of the primordial hunger for the bread of heaven and the relief that awaits the act of entire faith. Hence perhaps might grow, if the Church could recognize its august opportunity, the central heart of a religious body for the years to be, wherein could gather that complete unnumbered multitude who must touch in some fashion the invisible symbol in search of invisible grace. This is no feast for the select and the elect; we know it if we will be quite fearless. Not alone Romanist or Anglican, not alone Christian, not alone Persian or Phrygian, not localized to any cult or mystery, is the ancient impulse of the God-seeking soul to dramatize itself in a unique sacrament, to express itself in a special metaphor: "What shall I render unto God for all that He hath rendered unto me? I will accept the cup of salvation."

By grace free without proviso the whole Christian Church may live in the younger generations to which the future belongs. For youth is forever religious and agnostic. Wistful for worship, he follows the quest of the unknown God with the thrust of imperative desire. Non-conformist always, and to-day with a multiplication of his normal independence, he knows no bondage to the most sublime tradition, he attacks ineffable mysteries with the full energy of his complete intelligence, holding that intelligence highly as the sole access to truth. For the unfelt mysteries of dogma he has the distrust of a courageous reason which has not apprehended defeat. For the old-believers and their heritage of formulas he maintains the complacency of a superior, indulgently conscious of emancipation. Reverent toward the present more easily than toward the past, he may not humble himself to the experience of the ages; for he lives in a present of multiform experience with instincts unfettered as his own. Fearless for truth, he rejects as a point of fundamental honor that compromise of the modernist and the easy-going, the acceptance of dogma with a personal interpretation. Interpretation has appeared to the literal-minded a questionable luxury since the days of *A Tale of a Tub*. Interpretation in spiritual confession would be to his mind perjury, the authentic sin against the Holy

Ghost for which no forgiveness has been found. This is the generation, let us never doubt, which has sought the face of God; but it must seek in ways self-reliant and austere, loyal to a vision real though less defined. To refuse to such youth the fellowship of a Christian communion is to choose the break between a passing and a coming generation: "And the hearts of the fathers shall be turned to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers, lest I come and smite the world with a curse." The essential curse for an ecclesiastical system ambitious to be the channel of eternal life, has long been pronounced and more than once remembered: "Ye make the word of God of none effect through your traditions."

Consistent dogmatists need feel no uneasiness at so unreserved a gospel. Minds which hold dogma dear, not through habit or stubbornness but in persuasion of their spiritual values, fear without logic or obedience if they foresee from a liberal church the lapse of essential formulas. Let the formulas reveal their own vitality. More reasonably should each dogma inherently valid be preserved and recognized anew, as better known to a more intimate comprehension, if the critics think from within rather than from without the Christian fold. Debarred from a church's communion, minds distrustful of authority are provoked to attack or tempted to indifference; within, they should judge of the doctrine with a closer sensitiveness, a surer access to its potential life. Again a legacy from the fair and liberal mind of Erasmus may serve both for encouragement and for correction, the faith not yet uniformly accepted for all our modern confidence—that the sources of truth can never suffer from being understood. If a dogma be the very word of eternal life, it will bear best witness at nearest range, will show at closest contact the proof of authentic religion, the reinforcement of temporal being from the sources of unseen power. Within the Church, at any rate, whether dogma hold or fail, should be the nearest approach to the intimate recollection of Jesus.

With the power of that personality, as we have always known, not with our interpretations, lies the future of the Christian Church. Let the Church trust to its Christ; let Jesus represent his Church; and the Cross may still remain the symbol of an expanding salvation. Still it remains as of old the call to creation's sacrifice, the death-in-life, immemorial paradox at the core of universal religion. Still it continues for minds not, like Mr. Wells and his kind, "unaccustomed to the idea that they are lambs," the symbol of a peculiar gentleness, the gentleness of the good shepherd. An example it may yet remain of a great humility, virtue not yet to be discarded, though we await

with some skepticism the material heritage of the meek. It may last for the limit of the world's travail, reminder of its central sorrow, whither the heart of man withdraws itself to renew a loyalty and to gain support. And for an age pledged to an incalculable reconstruction, the Cross may become in a fresh sense the sign and promise of unbroken will.

For as we return afresh to the Synoptic Gospels to read anew the tidings of its evangel, there emerges always more visibly to our ken the conception of an ever more manly Jesus, quite as virile, we have felt, as the Invisible King. His is a figure instinct of activity and attack. His is a message whose characteristic utterance is perhaps not a beatitude but the fearless rebuke, "Thou hypocrite!" His is a spirit bold to righteous aggression, unsparing to cut the sham of falsehood and self-interest, indomitable in hope, speaking with authority because his words have power.

So strongly conceived his Christ the Anglo-Saxon poet of long ago as a hero stout of courage, strong in assurance, mounting his cross in the face of mankind eagerly and with speed. Here was an act not primarily of submission but of achievement. Here in the vision of the "glory-tree" was the sign not of renunciation and of accepted defeat, but of a victory potent in hope. Of such victory—who knows—men still to be born may be telling when the nations become kindred in very truth and the ends of the earth remember themselves. And for a present labor, the Cross may stand confessed anew, symbol of energy supported till the end.

Provided that it stands the symbol of a true catholicism for a world which gropes toward fellowship. For a more hospitable Church, breaking with tradition, can find sure compensation in a closer approach to the spirit of its master in his more illumined moments. The Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels, however we interpret his Messiahship, was too completely the incarnation of his message—the loss of self in an entire devotion—to be a stickler for a belief among his followers in his divine incarnation. No prayer to his person was enjoined upon them, no ordeal of profession as initiation to discipleship. He would feed five thousand who had shown interest in the kingdom with no question asked. His was a policy, or rather a power, not of discrimination but of summons, ready to send out to the by-ways and hedges and force to the feast a heterogeneous crew by no means appreciative of the privilege. Hunger was blest in his sight, not for its poverty but for its promise of fulfilment. Still the final consolation of seekers after truth, rejected or not of the Christian Church, is the word of the Christian's master.

"If any man will do my will, he shall know of the doctrine." A church hesitant before the dangers of liberality will do well to remember that the great parable of Jesus is half a statement, only half a prophecy: "Other sheep have I"—not, "shall I have"—"and they shall be one fold and one shepherd." The Church at least should dread less an indiscriminate generosity than the risk of an ultimate rejection at some judgment day, if it should be proved, condemned of obscurantism, unequal to the future: "Depart from me. I know you not. For I was anhungered and ye took me not in!"