

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

VOL. XXXVI (No. 6)

JUNE, 1922

NO. 793

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A TWENTIETH CENTURY EMANCIPATOR.

BY J. V. NASH.

FOR many years I had been familiar with the name of Dr. George Burman Foster, the great Liberal religious thinker of Chicago, Baptist clergyman and Professor of the Philosophy of Religion at the world-famed University; now and again I had heard the rumbling of the distant thunder when the artillery of Protestant orthodoxy (whatever Orthodox private judgment or dissent may mean!) discharged its broadsides upon some outspoken questioning of traditionary concepts or some disturbing discovery by this daring searcher of the spiritual skies!

At last our paths met. In the summer of 1915 it happened that Professor Foster was in residence at the University and giving a course in the History of Religion. My interest in the subject of the course being naturally keen, I gladly accepted the invitation of a friend, who chanced to be registered in it, to visit the class. And so it came about that one afternoon I accompanied my friend to Professor Foster's class-room. The room rapidly filled and for some minutes we sat awaiting the great teacher's advent.

Almost as an apparition, he came. He was a large man, with something Lincolnesque in his tall, ungainly figure and the broad, stooping shoulders. For so massive a frame, he had—or so it seemed—very small feet, and touched them so lightly upon the floor that he made scarcely any sound as he walked along the corridor and entered the room. His figure was indeed an unusual one. His head would have attracted attention anywhere; it dominated and threw into the background, as it were, all else. There was a reminiscence of Cardinal Newman in that ascetic face, with its forward thrust, the prominent nose, the forehead with its crown of grey hair, the

beetling eyebrows, and the eyes with that far away look, peering one might fancy, into another world. His clothing was grey, like the locks thrown carelessly back from the sloping forehead. Grey, indeed, was the habitual tone of his external make-up: grey, the grey of eternity and infinity, it seemed naturally associated with him.

There was an air of hushed expectancy in the class-room as Professor Foster, with his curious, silent, tip-toeing tread, made his way up to the little reading desk, opened his portfolio, and sorted his lecture notes. Then he began his lecture. It was delivered in a quiet, even tone of voice, dispassionate and unperturbed; the voice of one who knew whereof he spoke, a master of his subject. In this lecture he traced briefly the history of the religious idea, showing its development in classic paganism, in Buddhism, in Zoroastrianism, and in Christianity. Though so quietly delivered, it was a remarkable lecture and made a deep impression upon me.

By a welcome coincidence, as it seemed, he brought into this particular lecture many of the Fosterisms which I had heard commented upon most frequently. For instance, he developed the famous Foster analogy between God and Uncle Sam. This had been a great rock of offense to the ultra-orthodox and naively devout, and had been severely criticised by them. His argument was, in brief, that just as the character known as Uncle Sam had been created by the imagination of the American people, as the personification of their patriotic spirit, and thus anthropomorphized their political ideal, so humanity, far back in the days of its early religious yearning, had created the spiritual personage known as God, who thus became the personification—the living symbol—of man's supreme spiritual values. The implication, of course, was that the ideals, the values, were the important considerations in both cases, and that the question of the actual, bodily existence of Uncle Sam or of God, did not in the least affect their usefulness to the group.

After having heard such a stimulating and thought-provoking lecture, I, *Oliver Twist*-like, wanted more. I visited the class a number of times that summer. In another lecture, he sketched the history of the sacred writings of India, the Vedas, showing how they had started as folk and hero tales, had been passed down from generation to generation, becoming embellished and elaborated with time, until finally the people ascribed a divine origin to them and they were held as inspired writings. The class was composed largely of mature men and women, most of the men appearing to be pastors from country towns, taking summer work at the university. At this point I recall that a member of the class—a sharp-featured, minis-

terial-looking individual, interrupted Professor Foster, and, in loud nasal twang, interrogated him thus: "Well, Dr. Foster, if that is true of the Hindu Vedas, what about the Hebrew Bible?" Smiles and significant looks passed among the class. But Professor Foster was not at all disturbed by what seemed to us to be a rather embarrassing question. With the same far away look in his eyes, he glanced up, and answered in the same quiet voice: "Oh, just the same thing, just the same thing exactly." Then he fumbled among his papers, picked up the thread of his lecture, and went on. The respect in which he was held by his students—perhaps, too, their appreciation of his fearless mental honesty—was evidenced by the fact that no one in that large class of mature men and women interrupted him to controvert his answer, deeply as it must have traversed the personal beliefs of some.

I have spoken about some of the sayings of Professor Foster which aroused criticism among the ultra-conservative. Perhaps nothing that he ever said aroused more bitter controversy on the part of this element than his famous challenge: "Liberty first, virtue second." It turned to scarlet the pallid cheeks of the disciples of Mrs. Grundy; many such, doubtless, were scandalized to the point of utter speechlessness. I confess that I myself was somewhat startled when I first heard it, but the more I have reflected upon it, the more I have realized the deep spiritual truth underlying the dictum. Can we have any ethical values at all, without liberty of choice or freedom of the will? Is the enforced, negative virtue of a Simon Stylites on his pillar, of an anchorite, a cenobite, in the desert, or of a "stationary," or again, of a convict in solitary confinement, to be our ideal, our model? In the allegory of the Garden of Eden, as told in Genesis, did not the Lord God place the apple on the tree, within the reach of Adam and Eve, and give them perfect freedom to obey or disobey the command to eat not of it? Certainly, the Lord God seemed to have instituted liberty first and to have desired that virtue should be the sweet fruit of it. A Prohibition Deity would have put up an iron-spiked fence around the tree. Personally, I can see no value at all in virtue anterior to and apart from perfect liberty.

From the foregoing, it may be easily inferred that Professor Foster had little sympathy with the Prohibition movement. Such was indeed the case. He did not care to associate himself with it. One day when he was down town, somebody pointed out to him a procession of Prohibitionists marching down Michigan avenue,

bearing placards and transparencies on which were inscribed slogans such as "Down with the Demon Rum," "Abolish the Whiskey Trust," "Make America Dry," etc. etc. "Ah," he commented, "but you couldn't get these people to march down Michigan avenue with signs reading 'Down with Unkindness,' 'Abolish Backbiting,' 'Make America Generous.' No," he continued, ironically, "they would hardly support a cause that did not promise them the pleasure of giving a jail sentence to those who do not share their opinions."

Professor Foster was one of the most intellectually honest and fearless men I have ever met. He refused to doctor, medicate, or sophisticate the truth as he saw it. It is true that he said: "In the pulpit I try to reveal my inmost faith, in the class-room my inmost doubt." But that was merely a matter of emphasis. In reply to a direct personal question, as we have already seen, he gave a direct, fearless answer without a moment's hesitation. His tone of voice was uniformly low; he seldom raised it. There was in it, however, a suggestion of the Southern drawl, which reminded one of the fact that he had been born in the Old Dominion and that the father of this apostle of spiritual freedom was a soldier of the Confederacy. In reply to a question, he would often give the answer in a terse, pithy sentence, with the characteristic Southern drawl, and with a certain emphasis on some word or syllable. An illustration of this occurs to me, but I must first resume my story by way of introduction thereto.

After having been personally introduced to Professor Foster, I made bold to leave with him one day to look over, a little paper of mine, dealing with some aspects of Modernism in the church of my own inheritance, the Roman Catholic. The result of this was an invitation to visit him at his home. Mr. and Mrs. Foster kept open house every Monday evening, at which times a remarkably cosmopolitan group, of various degrees of sophistication, assembled at the Foster home to discuss religion, politics, literature, and art. The catholicity of Dr. Foster's interests seemed to be without limit. I recall one such evening when a young radical poet, then little known but whose name is now almost a household word among literary folk, was the guest of honor and read from his verses. Professor Foster's sympathetic toleration of alien *mores* was strikingly exhibited at these soirées. I remember a certain highly cultured lady who was a frequent visitor at the Foster home, in company with her husband, a Harvard man and a distinguished architect. This lady was a Viennese and, in keeping with European custom, usually enjoyed a

cigarette with the gentlemen. Professor Foster, ordained Baptist clergyman though he was, never raised any objection to this practice. My own provinciality was such that I felt a certain uneasiness, and, in private conversation with Dr. Foster, I once alluded to the matter; but he passed it off with a laughing remark concerning the lady's nationality.

Frequently I formed one of the company at these Monday evening affairs, and thus had an opportunity of coming to know Professor Foster in a more intimate way than would otherwise have been possible. I have in mind one such evening when Professor Foster was feeling tired—he had been out lecturing the night before—and lay down on the couch, by the wall, having to double up his lanky frame in order to do so. Although weary, he listened alertly to the conversation. The question of evolution being under discussion, I said to Professor Foster: "If the theory of evolution be true, what becomes of Adam?" I settled myself respectfully to listen to a learned disquisition on Genesis in the light of modern exegesis and the higher criticism. But without a moment's hesitation, this laconic reply flashed back at me from the sofa, in that curious drawl to which I have referred, and with a loud emphasis upon the second syllable of the last word: "He's *eliminated*." Professor Foster then closed his eyes—having dismissed the subject with this terse answer to my problem—and the interrupted hum of conversation among the company went on as before.

Professor Foster's theory of religion, and the philosophy of it, centered around the word *values*. It was the inherent, spiritual value that gave validity to dogma and doctrine, which without it were sterile. Just as Professor James, through his theory that beliefs are of significance only to the extent that they have the potentiality to affect human action, formulated the Pragmatic philosophy, so it might be said that Professor Foster, through his insistence upon values as criteria, evolved a Valuistic—I coin the word—philosophy. Beliefs are of worth according to their power to give us spiritual nourishment and enrich our lives. That was his great contribution as a religious philosopher. He was constantly on a quest for "values," but he cared nothing for creeds as mere abstract theological propositions. "I am come," said Jesus, "that ye might have life, and have it more abundantly."

Although Professor Foster's youth had been passed largely out of doors, amid the mountain grandeur of West Virginia and the Blue Ridge, in his mature years he seemed to take little interest in

Nature. One day in early autumn I was with him in a party which went out to the Dune country of Indiana. The region is one which is full of thrills for the Nature enthusiast, but Professor Foster showed little emotion. I recall that we unpacked our baskets and enjoyed our little luncheon on the front porch of the clubhouse belonging to the Prairie Club, perched on the brink of the cliff and looking out over the broad expanse of Lake Michigan. Professor Foster gazed upon the sparkling blue waters of the lake spread below us, but he remained silent, the habitual dreaming, meditative, far away look filling his eyes.

Probably no other man of his day was assailed with such harshness by certain unthinking classes as was Professor Foster; yet he practiced forgiveness and forbearance more genuinely and more cheerfully than, I think, any other person whom I have ever known. He was most charitable toward the motives and acts of others, even, and notably so, in the case of those who disagreed with him most fundamentally. He tried always to look at a problem from his opponent's point of view as well as from his own. Indeed, his adversaries in debate used to admit that he stated their case better than they could do it themselves. It was seldom, if ever, that he criticised anyone; and if he did, it was usually in a playful way which left no sting behind.

One day the name of Mr. Mangasarian was mentioned in conversation. In answer to some question about this gentleman—an Armenian rationalistic lecturer of some note in Chicago—Professor Foster expressed the opinion that the great sway which he exercised over his audiences was largely due to his being “a natural born actor.” This was a penetrating analysis. I had on occasion attended Mangasarian's lectures and at once realized the truth of Dr. Foster's remark, casual as it was.

This Mr. Mangasarian, who had deserted the Presbyterian ministry, held a debate in Chicago some years ago with Mr. Algernon Crapsey, an Episcopal rector who had been unfrocked for heresy. The subject was the historicity of Jesus, Crapsey taking the affirmative and Mangasarian the negative side. I happened to mention to Professor Foster, one evening at his home, that I had been reading the report of this debate. With a twinkle in his eye, he observed that the only thing the matter with the debate was the fact that “neither of them knew anything about the subject.” Yet when Brother Crapsey visited Chicago shortly afterwards, Professor Foster entertained him as an honored guest at his home, extending to

him the hand of Christian fellowship denied to the deposed Anglican priest by his own denominational brethren.

Professor Foster suffered many heavy domestic afflictions, but he bore his cross and trod the road to Golgotha again and again with uncomplaining lips. The death of his son Harrison, who had been drafted into the army in 1917 and in the following January fell a victim to pneumonia in a Texas camp, was the last great blow of his life. He himself did not live out the year. Although, with heaviness of heart, he accepted the war in a genuine conviction of its necessity, he declared again and again, in addresses and letters to the press, that the war would be a failure unless it should not only guarantee the rights of small nations, but also assure social justice to the masses in every country.

Professor Foster was an optimist to the end. During the last year or two of his life, he held several debates with the brilliant barrister, Mr. Clarence Darrow, on such subjects as, "Is the Human Will Free?" and "Is Life Worth Living?" These debates were held before packed houses at downtown theatres on Sunday afternoons, under the auspices of Mr. Arthur M. Lewis's "Workers' University Society." At one of them, after Mr. Darrow had proved to his own complete satisfaction that life was not worth living, Professor Foster rose from his chair, slowly pulled himself up to his full height, and "floored" the cheerful pessimist by drily replying, in his accustomed drawl: "Well, if all you say is true, I can't see, for the life of me, what right you have to be here this afternoon at all—you ought to be out under the lake." And again, I recall the deep feeling with which, in closing his side of a debate, he quoted Henley's famous lines:

"It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll;
I am the master of my fate—
I am the captain of my soul."

The force of this fine affirmation was not weakened by Mr. Darrow's cynical if paradoxically witty retort: "You haven't got any soul, and you're not the captain of it anyway." Yet Mr. Darrow was one of Professor Foster's warmest admirers, and in a splendid public eulogy mourned his loss when he passed into the beyond. With an earnestness I shall never forget, Professor Foster asserted, in one of these debates, that notwithstanding all the sorrows that had been his, he still found life worth living, and would be willing to live his life over again, if thereby he might be of service to the world. .

Professor Foster's death, occurring as it did, when he was apparently just at the zenith of his career, and on the point of delivering a noteworthy series of lectures, by special invitation, at Yale University, came as a great shock to all. The death of his son Harrison, which I have already mentioned, and the illness of other members of his family, added to the loss of two children some years before, greatly weakened his vitality. However, he continued about his duties, holding his classes at the university, often hurrying out at night to bring a religious message to groups of eager inquirers, frequently securing a hearing among groups opposed to religion in any form, and filling pulpits in distant cities as special supply preacher on Sundays. Though living in Chicago, he was for a number of years the pastor of a Unitarian church in Madison, Wisconsin, making weekly trips back and forth between the two cities during many months of the year. Mrs. Foster used to relate how time and again he returned home late at night, tired to exhaustion, but brimming over with eagerness to tell about his experience at some workers' meeting out in the slum district where he had spoken that evening.

In the dark days of the fall of 1918, the deadly epidemic of influenza swept the country, taking a heavy toll of life. In November his old friend, President Van Hise of the University of Wisconsin, succumbed. Professor Foster was asked to conduct the funeral service. Although far from well, he responded to the call, and set out for Madison. It was a cold, wet day, the house where he was lodged for the night in the Wisconsin city was poorly heated, and he returned to Chicago with a severe chill. He kept up and about, however; on Thanksgiving day, the weather being fair, he even played a little golf, his favorite outdoor recreation. Shortly afterwards, his condition became such that he was obliged to go to St. Luke's hospital. Complications soon set in, with fatal issue, the immediate cause of his death being abscess of the spleen.

To the end he held the faith which he had proclaimed all his life. His last words, whispered to Mrs. Foster as she bent over the bedside, were: "Tell them I still am captain of my soul."

And so, on December 22, 1918, the great spirit of George Burman Foster passed onward: onward, one fain would believe——

"Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem."

The funeral was held on Christmas eve, in the Baptist church, to whose fellowship he had clung throughout the years with a pathetic devotion.

Early in January, 1919, a noble memorial service was held in

Mandel Hall at the University of Chicago. At about the same time a memorial meeting was held for the general public at the Garrick Theatre downtown. It is of the university service that I would speak here. A large oil portrait of Professor Foster, singularly life-like in expression, occupied the place of honor on the platform. A great concourse of friends filled the hall. One after another, distinguished colleagues arose and bore witness to their appreciation, from different points of view, of Professor Foster's life and work. Telegrams and letters from former students scattered all over the country, many in places of eminence, were read. One of the most notable tributes was that of Dr. William Wallace Fenn, Dean of the Harvard University Divinity School, one of the principal speakers, who declared that, in his opinion, Dr. Foster was without question, at the time of his death, the greatest theologian in America, if not in the whole world besides. In a subsequent letter to the present writer, Dean Fenn said:

"As I reflect upon him now and look at his photograph which hangs on my library wall, the sweet loveliness of his nature stands out more prominently in my memory than his keen and mighty intellect. That is as it should be, and as he would have it."

The immensity of the field covered by Professor Foster in the domain of religion—historically, philosophically, psychologically, and comparatively considered—was astonishing. That a single investigator could successfully have worked so vast an area seems well-nigh incredible. The Annual Register of the University of Chicago for 1917-18, the last full academic year of Professor Foster's life, credited him with the following courses of instruction:

1. Outline History of Religion.
2. Outline Philosophy of Religion.
3. Psychology of Religion, Individual.
4. Psychology of Religion, Social.
5. Religion of Primitive Peoples.
6. The Egyptian and Assyro-Babylonian Religions.
7. Religions of the Indo-European Peoples, Indian and Iranian.
8. Religions of the Indo-European Peoples, Greek and Roman.
9. Religions of China and Japan.
10. Epistemology of Religion—The Knowledge Problem.
11. Metaphysics of Religion.
12. History of Patristic and Scholastic Thought.

13. History of Protestant Thought Prior to Kant.
14. Kant's Philosophy of Religion.
15. Philosophy of Religion from Kant to Hegel.
16. Hegel's Philosophy of Religion.
17. Schleiermacher's "Glaubenslehre."
18. The Relation between Religion and Morality.
19. The Relation between Science and Religion.
20. The Relation between Religion and Art.

"The greatest living thinker in his line!" President Harper exclaimed enthusiastically when, only three years after the opening of the University of Chicago, he announced that George Burman Foster, a young man still in his thirties, professor in McMaster University, Toronto, had been secured as Professor of Systematic Theology in the Divinity School of the University. President Harper was seldom mistaken in his judgments, and the passage of the years increasingly confirmed the early estimate of Professor Foster's scholarship. Nor did his constantly growing reputation seem to change in the least his characteristic modesty and democracy. Whether we see him as the young Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of West Virginia, working his way through the seminary as a student preacher in the hill towns, or thirty years later, as the distinguished head of the Department of Comparative Religion at one of America's greatest universities, he is ever to our eyes the same figure, going his way quietly and unassumingly yet with the unconscious dignity which marked him as one of the world's elect.

He possessed abundantly not only the high respect but the deep affection of a host of friends drawn from varied walks of life. Students and colleagues, working folk and professional men, clergy and laity, orthodox and heterodox, conservative and radical, all alike revered the qualities of heart and mind which made him all that he was—all that he meant in their lives. The beloved Dr. C. R. Henderson, in one of his last addresses at the university chapel services, characterized Professor Foster, in the hearing of the present writer, as a man whose mighty intellect he admired and whose great heart he loved.

Professor Foster's literary fame rests largely on two noteworthy books published during his lifetime: first, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, a work of ripe scholarship, finely keyed together; and, second, *The Function of Religion in Man's Struggle for Existence*, a book designed for popular reading. Although

both books have been criticised by some as destructive, what can be more truly constructive than to provide a solid foundation, cleared of rubbish, upon which the earnest spiritual truth seeker may construct his own edifice of belief? That was Professor Foster's purpose in both books. In conversation with him one day, on the steps of Cobb Hall, I recall his remarking, with reference to *The Function of Religion*, "I tried to give a minimum of hope that was sure, rather than a maximum that was not." His exquisite meditation on "Death," published in the volume of "University of Chicago Sermons," brought comfort to many bereaved by the losses of war.

At his lamented and untimely passing, Professor Foster left a large amount of manuscript, none of which he had had time to prepare for the press. This was distributed by Mrs. Foster among his various friends for editing. To Dean Fenn of Harvard went his miscellaneous sermons, to Dr. Douglas C. Macintosh of the Yale Divinity School a set of his class lecture notes on the interpretation of Christianity, now published by MacMillan under the title "Christianity in Its Modern Expression," to Professor George Herbert Clarke, of the University of the South, his papers on Nietzsche, while to the present writer's hands there came the notes of his lectures on Maeterlinck, Ibsen, and Bjornson. The world of thought will surely be the richer for the eventual publication of all of this material.