

AN UNPUBLISHED INTERVIEW WITH THE LATE DR. GEORGE BURMAN FOSTER ON THE FUTURE OF RELIGION.

BY J. V. NASH.

NOTE: The late Rev. George Burman Foster, Ph.D., LL.D., was for many years Head of the Department of Comparative Religion at the University of Chicago and a widely known religious liberal. Dr. W. W. Fenn, Dean of the Harvard University Divinity School, declared him to have been, at the time of his death in December, 1918, the greatest theologian in America, if not indeed in the whole world.

IN MY article appearing in the Open Court for June, 1922, I gave some account of the life, personality, and philosophy of Professor Foster.

I had long known of his great reputation as a liberal thinker and the fierce opposition which many of his utterances had aroused in the ranks of Protestant Orthodoxy. As a religious inquirer of Roman Catholic antecedents, I was naturally interested in learning at first hand Professor Foster's views on the religious outlook in the light of the Great War, which, at the time of my first meeting Professor Foster, had been in progress over a year.

In the autumn of 1915 I requested the privilege of a personal interview, at which I might ask him certain questions. He invited me to call at his home. I did so on the evening of Monday, November 15, 1915. I had prepared in advance a list of questions, which I read seriatim to Professor Foster, taking down his replies in shorthand. The report of the interview, hitherto unpublished, follows:

Mr. Nash: Professor Foster, what is your idea of the mission of Christianity in the world to-day?

Professor Foster: To aid in the formation of free and independent personalities, and a kingdom of such personalities in which all are ends and no one mere means, the relationship among them to be one of mutual love and service.

Mr. Nash: What do you think will be the effect of the present war in Europe upon the future of religion?

Professor Foster: I think that the outcome of the war religiously will be to a large extent the discrediting of the traditional, dogmatic, and ritual Christianity, and the emphasis upon a religion of moral principles and of life in the spirit of Jesus. The ecclesiastical type of Christianity has broken down. We shall have an ethical and social type, in which moral values of spiritual freedom and brotherhood are supreme. Dogmatic Christianity could not keep from this war, and I don't think it can very well survive it. The old international Christianity is gone, and it is only by a restoration of spiritual brotherhood that the unions of peoples can be effected, not by dogmas and cult. I feel that that is the quite obvious outcome of the war.

Mr. Nash: Should the Church have a theological creed?

Professor Foster: I think the day of any kind of coercive creed as a basis of religious fellowship is past. That doesn't obviate, however, the personal need of intellectual convictions with reference to religious realities.

Mr. Nash: Modernism believes in the spiritual, but not in the supernatural. Is that a logical and tenable position?

Professor Foster: What do you mean by the supernatural?

Mr. Nash: Magic and miracle—interferences with natural law.

Professor Foster: I see your point. I think it is.

Mr. Nash: President-Emeritus Eliot of Harvard prophesies that "in the religion of the future there will be nothing of the supernatural." Is it, in your opinion, likely?

Professor Foster: Yes, all that sort of thing must go. But for all that, Nature is richer than the reports which science can make of it. Nature is a wealthier reality than can be gathered up in our cause and effect categories. There is room for appreciations as well as explanations, and so I am not content with Nature as supposed to be exhausted by science judgments. It is richer than that. There are emotional reactions that are valuable as well as intellectual reactions. I would not accept naturalism as usually

defined, any more than I would supernaturalism, and I discuss that matter in the first few pages of the sixth chapter of *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, where I show that a religion without supernaturalism and a science without mere naturalism will be our modern redemption. The spiritual is not exhausted in our naturalistic categories, and it does not require the affirmation of the old supernatural categories. The spiritual is as orderly as the natural.