
A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

Notes of Recent Exposition.

THE REV. CLEMENT F. ROGERS, M.A., Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Theology, King's College, University of London, is well known as an apologist for religion and Christianity. His publications are on popular lines and consist chiefly of lectures, many of them delivered in Hyde Park. His most recent volume, *Modes of Faith* (S.P.C.K.; 3s. 6d. net), is characterized by the same simplicity and vivid quality as its predecessors showed, and bears evidence of the writer's diligence in keeping in touch with recent relevant literature.

The subjects handled in this little volume are Agnosticism, Rationalism, Materialism, Dualism, Atheism and Theism, Institutionalism, Sacramentalism and Catholicism. An analysis of the chapter on Atheism and Theism will serve at once to indicate the style and standpoint of the work as a whole, and to present an exposition of the Christian conception of God as personal.

The writer begins by asking what 'makes up' our idea of God? And first he calls our attention to the philosophical quest for unity in the world. As men reflect on the universe and on the unifying principle that runs through it, they see that it seems to answer from outside to their intelligence, to respond to their interest in it. The assumption is that behind all the 'shows' of the world there is an Eternal Mind. But can there be mind and intelligence without some one who exercises these? A man who feels, thinks, and acts is called a person. Is not the final unity that we are seeking to be found in some one who is also a person, or who is at least personal?

It may be said that in this way we have merely created God in our own image. But how else can we think of God if we do not think of Him in personal terms? The anthropomorphic way of approach to God is the only true way for us. We must not interpret God by anything lower than man, by the analogy of animals or machines, by zoomorphism or mechanomorphism. We speak of God as a person. That is the best word we can find. Or, rather, we say that God is personal.

When we say that God is personal, we do not mean that He is limited as we are limited. Theosophists and Christian scientists officially deny the existence of a personal God, but it will be generally found that by a personal God they mean a God with the limitations of human personality. We mean by a personal God One who is at least all we understand by a person, One who feels and thinks and acts, who responds to our personal actions, and who creates. The alternative is that of an impersonal God, a Natural Law, or a mere Life Force.

It is better, perhaps, to say that God is personal rather than a person. The word is inadequate, but, as St. Augustine said long ago, we must either use it or be silent. The mediæval philosopher had an expression, 'the way of eminence—*via*

eminentiae.' Think of the best and highest you can; then try and think of something better and higher. That is how to reach the idea of God. As St. Thomas Aquinas says: 'Since everything that is perfect must be attributed to God, this name 'person' is fittingly applied to Him; not as it is applied to creatures, but in a more excellent way.'

We Christians believe that this personal God has been revealed to us in the face of Jesus Christ. 'The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.' Other religions show us a God of power, of wisdom, of goodness, of pity even, but the Christian religion alone shows us a God of love—the broadest and highest conception of God that the world has known.

The urge of the religious spirit is in two directions, inward towards communion with God, and outward towards the service of man. From this there is apt to arise a certain tension of soul, and a perplexity as to the due adjustment of these diverse impulses. According as the one or the other is unduly emphasized we find two types of religion, the quietist and the active, the former turning from the world to find refuge in God, the latter seeking to serve God in the activities of social work. This suggests a question of great practical importance, What is the relation between these two impulses, and how are we to maintain them in due harmony the one with the other?

That excellent American quarterly *Religion in Life* has an article on this subject from the pen of Professor Henry P. VAN DUSEN of Union Theological Seminary, New York. It is entitled 'The Inner Life and Social Effectiveness,' and its aim is to show that there is a vital connexion between the personal and the social gospel.

We feel in our bones that there is this vital connexion. 'Unless truth is divided against itself, experience of personal religion should widen social vision and augment social effectiveness; and intense devotion to the problems of mankind's corporate life should deepen one's need of inner resources, indeed one's experience of individual religion.' But in actual practice it does not seem to work out that way. There is a distinct cleavage between those who preach a social gospel and those who stress conversion and personal religion. This cleavage is certainly not lessened by the political and economic upheavals of our time. On the contrary, these have tended to the disintegration of the traditional social gospel. Many of its recognized spokesmen are manifestly growing less certain of its efficacy, questioning whether religion is adequate to battle with the evils of man's corporate life and to effect social transformation. 'They are increasingly critical of those who preach personal righteousness; may they not be props of an outlawed order, clothed in robes of pious self-deception?' Meantime from the other side there is a growing distrust of the social gospel, and the question is being asked anew, 'whether Christian leaders can be trusted to meddle in essentially political and economic questions.'

What, then, is the relation between personal religion and the social gospel? What contribution, if any, has the one to make to the other? In answering these questions Professor VAN DUSEN suggests that 'the distinctive gifts of the inner life to social effectiveness are at least five.'

The first two are part of religion's gift of sight. There is a gift of *vision* and a gift of *insight*. The gospel gives a vision of the ideal. In Whitehead's words, 'Religion is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realised.' This vision is seen by the inner eye in communion with God, and it furnishes the goal and norm of all Christian social endeavour.

That may readily be granted, but many will doubt the claim that religion gives also insight into the actual. Surely the deeply religious man is more of a visionary than a realist. But stop and think: Where shall wisdom be found, a wisdom adequate for the crisis of our time? The insight of

statesmen, of diplomats, of experts has conspicuously failed; they are bewildered like the rest of us amid the tangled maze of world events. May this failure not be due to the lack of something deeper than mental acuteness and knowledge of facts, something ethical and religious, something that will clear the eyes from blinding fears and distorting passions? 'The inner experience of religion should lift one up from the swirling stream of history where sound judgment is impossible, to a place of relative quiet and of higher vantage-ground; there one may survey the fast-flowing flux with some detachment; there one may bring the powers of a steady and unbiased mind to bear upon its meaning; there one may open a receptive consciousness to the imprint of its significance; and thereby one may perceive more truly and judge more competently.'

These two contributions—the vision of the ideal and insight into the actual—give birth to *religion's radicalism.* 'True religion is incurably, indomitably radical—radical in its unsparing criticism of the inadequacy, the brutality, the stupidity of the prevailing order; radical in its restless and unappeasable dissatisfaction with things as they are; radical in its unwearying struggle for change—drastic, fundamental, ultimately revolutionary change; radical in its life-devotion to an ideal which human eyes shall never see fully realised, its faith that that ideal may become real.' This is due not merely to the fact that the gospel throws a powerful light on the awful gulf between the ideal and the actual, but still more to the fact that in communion with God the soul enters into possession of the ideal, knows it, grasps it as the only real, and in the power of this conviction is dauntless and undiscourageable.

But we must go a step farther, and here we tread on more controversial ground. Religion not only shows the ideal in violent contrast to the actual and becomes an incentive to social radicalism; it does more. It clearly indicates the only ways by which those ills from which the social body suffers can be soundly and permanently rectified. '*It dictates the conditions of effectual social change* [italics ours], the methods in the social struggle to which Christians can give support.' At this point Christianity comes into fundamental conflict with the programme of Communism. It is implicit in the Christian view that the methods used to accomplish social change must themselves be in harmony with the goal to be reached. 'To employ injustice, violence, coercion for the achievement of socially desirable ends is to let loose in the world forces of evil which—the universe being a moral unity—are certain to take their toll from those who employ them and to qualify, and in some measure nullify, the good ends achieved.' The kingdom of heaven, if ever it is to be built securely within human society, must be constructed from materials and by methods of its own nature.

The last gift of the inner life to social effectiveness is also the greatest. It is *fidelity,* or in religion's own vocabulary—*faith.* Amid the changes of the new age one thing is certain. We are moving on to a time which will tax to the uttermost the endurance of every idealist. The roseate optimism of former days has faded. The 'war to end war' proved a vaporous mirage. Influential voices are telling us that optimism is cowardice, that our civilization is doomed, and that nothing remains but to meet our fate with defiant courage, standing on the rock of invincible despair. Religion supplies the spirit that can meet and defy this pessimism. It is not suggested that only the man whose inner life is fed from the springs of personal religion is capable of faithful devotion to society's reconstruction. But there is a peculiar form of devotion which is characteristically Christian and which draws its resources from the inner life—'dogged, unremitting striving, united with patience, fairness, forgiveness, steadiness, optimism, hope.'

How such fidelity and endurance are nourished by the inner life it is not difficult to state. 'Exhausted with fruitless struggle, we retire to its friendly comfort, there to have our wounds dressed, our spirits relaxed and rested, our famished souls replenished. Rebuffed and retreating, we climb again to its point of vantage to survey the scene

afresh, to re-examine our strategy lest it have been faulty, and then to give ourselves to new measures or to old measures with strengthened conviction. Flushed and jubilant with victory, we pause in its calm to give thanks, to repent any unkindness, to steady our minds and hearts for the next advance. Discouraged, near to despair, or tempted almost beyond resistance to some cheap short-cut, we enter once more into the inmost chambers of the inner life—there to claim afresh our vision of the ideal, to have renewed within us our experience of its reality, and so again to be made certain that devotion to it is alone worth life's all. It may be the nurse of all manner of self-deception and self-excuse—the inner life; but for many of us it is the begetter, the renewer and the guardian of such social usefulness as shall ever be ours. For the deepest secret of the soul's social effectiveness lies just here—it knows the ideal to be real, and it is denied peace until that ideal is translated out of its own interior certainty into the structure of the world's life.'

In his brilliant and suggestive book, *Essays in Construction*, Dr. W. R. MATTHEWS has two chapters on the Virgin Birth that are helpful if not decisive. It is true that, as he says, this is not the 'live' issue it was in the days of King Edward VII., when it was everywhere hotly debated. Probably people to-day recognize that the grave problems go much deeper. Still, on the other hand, it is equally true that many among both the laity and the clergy are deeply perplexed about this article of faith, and find it difficult to join in the Christmas services without searching of heart.

It must be realized that there are two problems concerning the Virgin Birth which should be kept distinct, though they have, ultimately, some connexion with one another. The first is that posed, somewhat crudely, in the question: Does the Virgin Birth matter? Has it a necessary place in the Christian Faith? In other words, what is its theological significance, and what theological consequences would follow if it were no longer believed? The second question is the historical one: Is it true? The two questions react on one another, but it is important for clear thinking to deal with them separately. There is a familiar argument which demonstrates that the Virgin Birth is a part of the system of orthodox Christianity, and proceeds to infer its historical reality. But this kind of argument has no point of contact with the man who doubts whether orthodox Christianity can be held in the modern world.

In an important sense the Virgin Birth does not matter. It needs to be stated that it is possible to believe the essential doctrines of the Christian faith while doubting or rejecting the Virgin Birth. Belief in the Incarnation is not bound up with belief in the Virgin Birth. It is certain that St. Paul's writings contain no direct or plain reference to the Birth story. This does not, of course, prove that he did not know it, but it surely does prove that he did not consider it a part of the primary message. In the various summaries of 'his gospel' he makes no mention of it. The evidence of the New Testament seems to show that belief in the Incarnation was prior, in point of time, to belief in the Virgin Birth. Many came to believe in Jesus as Lord and Son of God before they heard of His miraculous nativity.

Belief in the Incarnation is also prior in order of thought. The Incarnation supports the Virgin Birth, and not the Virgin Birth the Incarnation. It may even be argued that a natural birth of the Son of Man harmonizes better with a true doctrine of the Incarnation than a supernatural one. A genuine Incarnation must be, it might be alleged, the manifestation of the divine nature in a person and life which were truly human. The Incarnate Son and Redeemer must come trailing no more clouds of glory from the unseen world than those of every mortal human being, and He who was tempted in all points like as we are must have entered human life by the same door as ourselves.

But, while these arguments deserve careful

attention, it is still true, on the other hand, that the Virgin Birth has great importance for our faith. Though we may believe in the Incarnation without the Virgin Birth, it will not be precisely the same kind of Incarnation, and the conception of God's act of redemption in Christ will be subtly but definitely changed. One of the religious values inherent in the Virgin Birth is that it emphasizes the truth that Christianity is a New Beginning. This is important, for it is an essential part of the Christian message. The actuality of a new start and the consequent possibility of a 'new creation' for man are the distinguishing marks of Christianity over against the tired philosophies of progress. This new beginning is symbolized in the Virgin Birth. But it is important to disentangle this religious value from the antiquated theology in which it has become involved.

That theology insists on the doctrine of inherited guilt, and says that we cannot believe that Jesus inherited guilt and was born a 'child of wrath.' It was necessary, therefore, that He should be freed of this at birth. But do we really believe that any human being is born in that condition? And, moreover, even if we were to admit the transmission of moral guilt, does the theological necessity of the Virgin Birth seem convincing? It is a strange idea that to be born without a human father is the requisite condition of being born without inherited guilt. Is original sin propagated entirely by the male sex? In this situation the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary seems logically to follow. But this leads us to another absurdity. If the Blessed Virgin could be born by natural generation without original sin there seems to be no reason why Jesus should not have been born in the same way with the same immunity.

The significance of the Virgin Birth, then, is religious, not theological. It symbolizes and asserts the New Beginning that took place in the birth of Jesus. But there is another value as great expressed by the Virgin Birth. It lays stress on the fact that Christianity is an act of God. The Christian religion is always in danger of being dissolved into a spiritual humanitarianism. The temptation is particularly strong at the present time to represent it, in accommodation to 'modern thought,' as simply the culmination of man's best thoughts about the unseen world, and to accept as its ideal purpose the establishment of some human Utopia which is dignified by the title Kingdom of God. If these tendencies are given free play they will end in the ruin of Christianity as a religion. Christianity has always claimed to be the gospel of an act of God. This transcendent element is of the essence of the Christian message. 'I can think of no symbol which puts the essential point more clearly and more dramatically than the phrase "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary."'

The majority of Christian people have been singularly unperturbed by the grave difficulties which can be raised about the Birth stories in the Gospels. They have listened to the critics respectfully and have gone on nourishing their souls on the Christmas gospel. Is it that they have been culpably indifferent to the claims of truth? Perhaps they have been dimly aware that the truth of the Virgin Birth is wider than the occurrence of an event, and that its religious value depends on considerations which are beyond the scope of historical criticism.