

THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

Notes of Recent Exposition.

AN earthquake is one of the most profoundly disquieting things in human experience. The reason is that it reveals the instability of what was counted most stable. We live in the calm assurance that, whatever changes come, the earth remains steadfast. But if the earth be removed and the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea it shakes the stoutest heart, for it breaks up the solid ground of man's confidence and brings the fearful suggestion that the end of all things is at hand. The psalmist could conceive of no higher expression of faith than to say that in such dire straits 'we will not fear,' for God is our refuge and strength.

The Great War brought an experience of this sort in the world of human affairs. It has overturned so many institutions which were counted most stable and unassailable, it has so completely changed life for multitudes, it has removed so many ancient landmarks that it has spread through the world a sense of bewilderment and alarm, and has suggested to men's minds possibilities of fresh disasters which before would never have been dreamed of.

In these circumstances it is but natural that the foundations of human life in every department should seem to be giving way. Everything is in doubt, nothing can be received for sure. Many find themselves without an inch of solid ground to stand on, cast into a bottomless abyss of doubt. Euclid's axioms have been called in question and shown to be not necessary truths of reason as for ages had been

supposed. Similarly, the root principles of morality, the foundation truths of religion, the settled maxims in politics are all in the melting-pot, and many to-day are asking Pilate's question, 'What is truth?'

Most prominent among the things which are called in question is the Christian faith itself. Its doctrines, its claims, its prestige, the whole manner of life which it sustains, the whole type of civilization built upon it, have been made the object of the most formidable attack. In the current number of the *Hibbert Journal*, Professor MOWAT of Bristol University deals with this subject in an illuminating article on 'The Revival of Heathenism.'

Among the things most surely believed among us nothing was counted more certain than the bankruptcy of the old paganism. Great Pan was dead, without the slightest hope of a resurrection. 'Every civilised person grew up in the belief that paganism was just the primitive religious belief of barbarous tribes, which vanished before the development of knowledge exactly as darkness gives way before beams of the sun.' Missionary effort was supposed to be slowly but surely penetrating the last fastnesses of paganism in the remoter regions of the globe, and its final extinction was only a matter of time.

No doubt in the last two centuries forces of infidelity were at work. Gibbon, for instance, criticised Christianity as an unmanly creed which

aided the downfall of the Roman Empire by softening its martial spirit, and weakened Europe in its conflicts with the Turks. Such attacks, however, caused no serious or widespread alarm. 'Periods or waves of indifference, scepticism, infidelity and anti-clericalism are to be expected, with the balance redressed from time to time by religious revivals. It is all part of the perennial curve or oscillation of religious life.'

The present assault is a far different thing, which calls for the most serious consideration on the part of the Christian Church. It is no mere skirmish, no sectional operation; it is a fierce and determined battle along the whole front, in short a religious world war. It is an endeavour to overturn our Christian faith from its foundations, to uproot it and cast it out of the earth.

What is the nature of the new paganism? For one thing it involves a complete repudiation of the Christian spirit of love and gentleness, peace and goodwill. The Christian Church has never been pacifist. It has always recognized the use of force as legitimate in the support of justice and right. But it has set before the world the ideal of human brotherhood, and the Kingdom of the Prince of Peace. That ideal the new heathenism spurns with contempt. Away with the pierced hand of the Crucified, it cries; we put our trust in the mailed fist of the man of war. 'War alone,' says the official exponent of Italian Fascism, 'brings up to its highest tension all human energy and puts the stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to face it.' In Germany, as is well known, the same warlike spirit is glorified in flagrant contradiction to the teaching and the spirit of Christ.

All this is closely connected with the revival of an overweening and ferocious nationalism. 'The prevailing view of the State in Italy and Germany appears to be anti-Christian and, indeed, pagan. The State is regarded as something different and higher than the totality of individuals who compose it; as something which has a supreme claim upon them; as an end in itself for which the individuals and the whole people are only means. The State is

supreme - omnipotent, omniscient and eternal: that is, it is God.' Such a State will brook no rival, it will tolerate no divided allegiance. The Church must submit or be crushed. And so the age-long conflict between Church and State has broken out afresh, and persecution has become the order of the day. 'I little thought,' said Mr. Baldwin recently, 'as you can have little thought in those days before the War, that we should live to see ministers of the Gospel—and I use the word in its widest sense—suffering for their belief in countries that we had believed to be civilised.' In Russia rampant atheism has for years been in the ascendant and Christian blood has been freely poured out. In Germany there has been no official proscription of religion, but Christian ministers have suffered persecution for simple loyalty to fundamental Christian truth.

It is a testimony to the ineradicable religious instincts of the human heart that this new heathenism takes on in various ways the form of a positive religion. In Russia there is worship of the memory of Lenin together with an elaborate deification of 'communal man.' In Germany and Italy there is a glorification of living leaders amounting to idolatry. As a substitute for the Christian faith a 'German Faith' is offered, according to which Germany is the Holy Land, her people the Holy People, and her *Reich* the Kingdom of God. This religion is being expressed in a Neo-pagan ritual. *The Times* reported last Easter services in North Germany where 'the pastor spoke not at all of Christ but only of Germany,' and where in the evening a heathenish ceremony was performed around a bonfire at which men and women chanted a sort of Hitler litany, followed by the 'litany of eternal Germany.'

These strange aberrations are the result of the upheavals and sufferings which have followed the World War, and it may help us in reviewing them to maintain our mental balance by recollecting that there have been similar chaotic periods in past ages, notably at the beginning of the sixteenth century when the collapse of the Mediæval World was accompanied by 'a flood of pagan ideas and practices.' The crisis of to-day seems to be largely due to

the fact that 'nations have become self-conscious, and egotism, vanity and acquisitiveness have become national passions.' When these passions break out in the individual they can be held in check by social and legal control. But the world has not yet been able to forge an efficient instrument, either in the shape of international public opinion or sanctions, to hold in check the passions of nations. And unless this can be done there is a real danger that these national passions may prevail and wreck the social life of mankind.

For Christians the vital question is, can our faith and moral standards survive in a world of force? To this question Professor MOWAT offers no answer. He is content with the objective rôle of the pure historian, describing certain tendencies of the world of to-day in so far as these can be discerned and judged by a contemporary. At the same time the mere survey of the facts, brief as it is, is fitted to occasion grave concern. If the present resurgence of paganism were successful there would be nothing left between nations but naked force. 'The issue between Christianity and Neo-Paganism is, of course, far from being yet decided, but the comfortable nineteenth-century belief in the inevitability of the progress of Western civilisation can no longer be held. The Christian religion has been one of the greatest civilising forces in the world, and no generation before the present has shown any tendency to assert that Western civilisation can go on without it.'

While, therefore, the Christian Church is fully entitled to the assurance that in any event there are 'things which cannot be shaken' and will remain, yet the present crisis is one the gravity of which cannot be exaggerated. A world may emerge which has renounced the worship of the true God. What did our Lord Himself say? 'When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?' On the other hand, out of the melting-pot the social life of the nations may be poured into a Christian mould. And the responsibility rests on the Christian Church and upon every member of it to labour unceasingly for that great end.

Jesus Manifest (Cape; 15s. net), by Mr. Dmitri MEREZHKOVSKY, is a continuation of the same author's 'Jesus the Unknown,' a book which aroused much interest on its appearance in translation form a couple of years ago. This volume carries forward the life of Jesus to its culmination in the passion, death, and resurrection, and is characterized by the same combination of scholarship and conservatism, of historical outlook and mystical 'inlook,' of religious philosophy and Christian piety, as was conspicuous in the former volume. The translator, Edward Gellibrand, has obviously done his work well; and Dean Inge continues his sponsorship of the author, while noting that there is something strange and unfamiliar about the Russian mentality, and many things calculated to surprise and perplex in Mr. MEREZHKOVSKY'S presentation of his theme.

An account of the chapter entitled 'The Scourge of the Lord' will serve to illustrate this author's line of treatment and habit of mind. It is, of course, an exposition of the incident of Christ's entry into the Temple.

He begins by laying the blame of the betrayal and the Crucifixion upon the high priest Annas (Hanan in Hebrew). The great market-place of the Temple was the chief source of wealth and power of all the race of Hanan; and suddenly, in one hour, this same market-place was utterly destroyed by 'the Clown-King' on an ass. No wonder that Jesus was thought worth arresting after all.

'Magnificent portals with colossal, twenty ell high, entrance columns of white marble, ceilings of carved cedar wood, and floors of many-coloured slabs of stone surrounded the exterior yard. Here Jesus saw the great bazaar of Hanan, the cattle sheds and the aviary, the many shops and booths where sacrificial salt, oil, wine and incense were sold, and the many exchange tables and counters where pilgrims from all corners of the world exchanged the Roman "unclean" coins stamped with the head of Caesar for "holy silver," the ancient Tyrian "zechel," the only money in which the Temple tribute could be paid. The tinkle of silver on the

exchange tables, the flapping of the wings of the doves in the numerous cages, the abuse, the oaths, the shouts and shrill chatter of the bargainers—bargaining as only the sons of Israel can—the melancholy bleating of sheep and the gloomy bellow of oxen sensing the blood of the approaching sacrificial slaughter—all this blended into one deafening chorus. Heinous profiteering, deception and robbery reigned here in the very heart of the Temple, by the holy of holies.’

Then our author describes in graphic language how at the Lord’s entry there was suddenly a great silence, and how Jesus stooped low and picked up two strong ‘hempen ropes’ and made a ‘scourge’ of them, and, aided as He must have been by the people, destroyed the crowded shops and booths, overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and cleared the whole of the immense exterior courtyard.

Was there not a secret meaning, our author goes on to ask, in what happened? There are many hints in the Gospels of such a meaning. Probably, when clearing the Temple Jesus said something, something too soon forgotten by friend and foe alike because too incomprehensible, about the destruction of it. In any case is there not an inner connexion between the clearing of the Temple and its destruction—the old polluted Temple to be purified by fire, and a new one built in its place? And does not the Lord prophesy the destruction of all the temples on earth made by hands, and the building of the one and only Temple not made by hands—the Universal Church?

Thus Christ is represented by our author as revolutionary indeed. It is not only Herod’s Temple He would destroy, but all temples. ‘Christians are greatly mistaken if they think that the purifying by fire—the destruction of the Temple—refers only to the Temple of Jerusalem. No, it refers to all temples made by hands, and to the Christian temples among them—to the churches.’ And by saying (in what was formerly the house of God, but was now the house of Hanan), ‘I will destroy the Temple,’ Jesus pronounced His own death sentence.

Why are there so many desperate attempts to take from Jesus the rôle of revolutionary, to snatch the scourge from the hands of the Lord? Even to the Synoptists the scourge was already an ‘offence,’ and they make no mention of it. True, He, who said ‘Resist not evil,’ could not have raised the scourge; but could not He have done so who said ‘The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence’? The contradiction between the two sayings is not to be resolved if we take them as immovable dogma. But if we consider them as two movable spiritual experiences, the contradiction perhaps resolves itself. And however numerous are the people trying to snatch the scourge from the hands of the Lord, the new Buddhists, the followers of Tolstoy, and so on, they will never succeed.

When the disciples saw the scourge in the Lord’s hand, they remembered the word, ‘The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.’ But the word was best understood by Peter, the only one to raise a sword in defence of the Beloved, and John, the only one to remember the scourge in the hand of the Beloved, and perhaps by Judas, one also eaten up by zeal for the house of God. As soon as he saw the scourge in the hand of the Lord, he understood everything, and was suddenly happy.

‘The guard was stationed at the last gate, the fortress had been taken by assault. All waited for Jesus to speak, to act, to lead them, and more anxiously than anybody, waited Judas. But Jesus was silent. Perhaps He remembered these two sayings, the one “the kingdom of God is taken by violence,” and the other, “resist not evil,” and His soul was torn asunder between the two, as a cloud is torn asunder by lightning. Slowly He lifted His eyes, and the burning glance of Judas hit Him across the face like a whip, and suddenly He saw it all. “Having raised the whip, thou hast raised the sword also.” The fingers of Jesus loosed the scourge with as great a disgust and horror as if they were clasping a snake. And on the red porphyry of the porch, coiling like a snake, it lay at His feet, silver-grey in the uncertain flashes of lightning.’