
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

Burnett Hillman Streeter

(1875–1937).

By the Reverend J. C. Hardwick, B.Sc., The Vicarage, Partington, Manchester.

The significance of Streeter's work cannot be understood unless its inspiration is realized. All his work was inspired by the desire to supply the educated public with a religion which they could believe and practise without intellectual reservations. He had always been convinced that religion, whether in its mystical, emotional, or practical expression, was 'of little value if divorced from intellectual integrity.' Such integrity he saw to be a *moral* quality, and as such an indispensable condition for any healthy and vigorous religious life.

But Streeter's special place as a Christian apologist owes everything to the circumstance that he was not, primarily, either a philosopher (though he took a First in 'Greats') or a scientist, but a *Biblical student*—and more especially a student of the New Testament, the critical part of the Bible for Christians.

It is highly important to remember, though the fact is often conveniently forgotten, that by far the gravest difficulties for traditional orthodoxy spring not from the results of modern scientific research or philosophical speculation, *but from the results of the modern critical study of the Bible, and especially of the New Testament.* And, of course, in the New Testament itself it is the Gospels which are crucial; and Streeter, with the possible exception of the late Dr. F. C. Burkitt, of Cambridge, was the leading authority in England on the study of the Gospels.

It should be remembered that it is quite possible, not to say easy, to work out a more or less tenable and more or less orthodox Christian position upon the basis supplied by almost any philosophy of an idealist colour. Streeter himself in his early days was influenced by T. H. Green and Illingworth, and Oxford Hegelianism has always, theologically speaking, been respectable. If some 'Greats' men have become sceptics, others have become bishops. The gradient up to orthodoxy from any metaphysic tracing its ancestry to Plato is an easy one.

But this easy gradient was not the one travelled by Streeter in spite of his First in 'Greats.' When, after taking his degree, he turned his attention to Theology, it was history at first that engaged him. But finding Church history dull (not being, as he found out later, genuine history at all, but a form of propaganda), he tackled Textual Criticism. That was the turning-point in his career.

Streeter gained a First in Theology, took Holy Orders, and became Dean and Theological Tutor of Pembroke in 1899, being elected to a fellowship at his old college, Queen's, six years later. By this time the influence of Driver and Sanday had made of the Oxford Honours School of Theology an intellectual discipline based on the study of facts, historical and documentary, and not merely the manipulation of *a priori* theories. It was not many years before this young theological tutor, both as a teacher and as a leading member of Sanday's Seminar on the Gospels, was able to speak with authority on matters more highly crucial for orthodoxy than any that the scientists and philosophers were discussing. Two of his essays were included in an important volume edited by Sanday in 1911—*Oxford Studies in the Synoptic Problem.* But it was in the following year that the full results of Streeter's studies in the Gospels became evident: he edited the volume called *Foundations,* which in its way created as great a stir as *Lux Mundi* some twenty years before.

The object of the book—a collection of essays on theological subjects, by seven Oxford scholars of the younger generation, four of whom afterwards became bishops—was apologetic; the writers' purpose was to recondition traditional theology.

> 'The world is calling for religion,' declared Streeter's Introduction, 'but it cannot accept a religion if its theology is out of harmony with science, philosophy, and scholarship. Religion, if it is to dominate life, must satisfy both the head and the heart, a thing which neither obscurantism nor rationalism can do.'

Streeter's own essay was the most striking of the collection, and attracted most of the hostile fire which the volume drew upon itself. Its title, 'The Historic Christ,' showed that at least one of the essayists was ready to examine objectively those historical events out of which the Christian religion took its origin. The title showed also that the author was not prepared to sacrifice either the Jesus of History to the Christ of Faith (in the

Although his most important and original work was done on the Synoptic problem, Streeter never ceased to take an interest in the philosophical basis of religion, and also in developments in the different sciences, especially with reference to their bearing upon religious theory and practice. In particular did psychological science attract him. He was deeply interested also in art and in æsthetic theory, and especially in the relationship between religion and art, which he saw to be far closer than the corresponding relationship between religion and science. Thus, it was not at all surprising that he followed up his *magnum opus* on the Gospels with a work of popular apologetic, in which he gave expression to ideas which had been occupying his mind for many years. This work, *Reality* (1926), which Streeter's gifts of lucid exposition caused to reach a very wide circle of readers, was characteristically vigorous and constructive. Already in the Introduction a breeze of fresh air blows from the outside world through the musty atmosphere of the study:

> 'Instinctively any one brought up in the Christian tradition frames his question in the form, Is Christianity true? But merely to state the question thus precludes a satisfactory answer; for the very form of the question implies that Religion is itself the problem, whereas the truth of Religion is a matter worth inquiring about only if, and in so far as, it offers a solution of the problems which are posed by life. . . .
>
> 'Life has not ceased to pose its riddle; but who to-day has an answer which to the majority seems to have the authentic ring? Those who are without Religion admit that they have no answer. The Christian theologian stands on the defensive. Having once begun by asking the wrong question, he finds himself "defending the faith"; in effect, he has got himself into the position of being anxious to save Religion instead of expecting Religion to save him.'

Streeter would not call his book a 'Defence of Christianity,' admitting that in Christianity as traditionally presented there were some things he would be more inclined to attack than defend. 'It is an attempt to discover Truth' was all that he would say of his work's purpose.

Of course Pilate's question remains to be answered, and Streeter gives Professor S. Alexander's reply to it:

> 'Truth and reality are not identical conceptions. Truth is reality possessed by mind. . . . For truth is not reality itself, but the reality as the investigator possesses it.'

Human beings fortunately are equipped with more than one device for coming into contact with, or possession of, reality. There is in the first place Science, which supplies a diagram of portions of reality, which it conceives of in terms of quantity. Then there is Art, and also Religion, which supply something in the nature of a picture of reality, and conceive of it in terms of quality. But as quality can only be *felt*, the kind of knowledge provided by Art and Religion is necessarily somewhat different in kind from that supplied by Science.

Religion, unfortunately, sometimes also professes to provide the same kind of truth as that provided by Science, just as Art sometimes professes to provide us with the same kind of truth as that supplied by a photograph or a blue-print. But in so doing Religion and Art are entering an alien and lower sphere. If Religion wishes to give external expression to the truths it helps us to feel, it can do so by means of myths and rites. Streeter strives to show that the Christian myth does as a matter of fact give a true picture of reality in terms of quality—especially of moral quality.

In this book Streeter also makes an interesting attempt to supply a new theory of how truth is attained in the sphere of religion—*i.e.* a new religious epistemology. For the two traditionally accepted avenues to truth—reason and revelation—he substitutes the ratiocinative and the intuitive methods.

Thus the book *Reality* was a useful contribution to the philosophy of religion, and especially in view of the sort of public who were prepared to read it—*i.e.* the Anglican clergy as well as young people of the student class all over the world. It helped to instil into their minds two important ideas: (1) That there are different kinds of truth, because there are different ways of grasping portions of reality; (2) that the different ways of grasping reality cannot be arbitrarily divided into natural and supernatural. If we are to have watertight compartments, reason and intuition would be better terms to allot to them.

It might be thought that a man who was one of the two leading experts in England on Gospel studies, and who had a clear grasp of the problems of religious philosophy, had already displayed his share of versatility. But in addition to his other qualifications as a *savant* Streeter was also a Church historian.

His *The Primitive Church* was published in 1929, and the title-page of the volume declares that the

subject is therein studied 'with special reference to the origins of the Christian Ministry'; and the author expressly alludes in his Introduction 'to the importance of that topic in relation to the present-day discussion of Christian Reunion.' It may be that Streeter entertained the hope that his book would be read by the prelates who would be attending the Lambeth Conference in the following year. Whether it was so read it is impossible to say, but that it had no visible effect upon the results of their deliberations is certain. It would seem that historical truth is not the only consideration which must guide the policy of ecclesiastical assemblies.

Streeter summarizes the results of his researches thus in an Epilogue to this volume:

'Whatever else is disputable, there is, I submit, one result from which there is no escape. In the Primitive Church there was no single system of Church Order laid down by the Apostles. During the first hundred years of Christianity, the Church was an organism alive and growing—changing its organization to meet changing needs. Clearly in Asia, Syria, and Rome during that century the system of government varied from church to church, and in the same church at different times. Uniformity was a later development; and for those times it was, perhaps, a necessary development.

'In a book which aims at being a contribution to historical research, a discussion of issues which are a matter of controversy in the Church of to-day would be out of place. It would, however, be futile to pretend that the historical conclusions here reached are without relevance to practical questions keenly debated at the present time. All over the world—more especially in India, China, and Africa—disunion among Christians is recognized as a force of weakness. The obstacles to be overcome are many; and they are real. . . . But perhaps the greatest obstacle is the belief—entertained more or less explicitly by most bodies of Christians—that there is some one form of Church Order which alone is primitive, and which, therefore, alone possesses the sanction of Apostolic precedent. Our review of the historical evidence has shown this belief to be an illusion. In the Primitive Church no one system of Church Order prevailed. Everywhere there was readiness to experiment, and, where circumstances seemed to demand it, to change.'

Streeter's interest in Reunion, like his interest in Christian apologetics, was by no means merely academic. He had himself travelled and lectured in India, China, and Japan, and had come into close and intimate contact with Christians, and especially with Christian students, in those countries. At home, too, his lively and active interest in the Student Christian Movement, which seems to have meant a great deal to him, and but for the inspiration of which at its Summer Conferences, he would have relinquished his Orders, showed that he sat loosely to the narrower and more arid type of institutional loyalty. Ecclesiastical pedantry was foreign to him.

Some of his friends were disturbed when, after coming into contact with the Group Movement in 1934, he associated himself actively with it. But it was not in the least surprising that his sympathies should have moved in this direction. He was interested in the young, and in vital religion wherever he saw it, and he clearly saw the great and unexplored possibilities of a group system in religious life. The first Christian group consisted of a dozen, and it is where the 'two or three' are gathered that Christ is present. The early Methodist 'Class' system had proved the efficacy of the close religious association of a few kindred spirits; clearly the optimum number for a religious group is a small one; the psychology of crowds and even perhaps of the much-desired 'large congregations' is to be distrusted. Streeter, too, with his lively interest in psychology and in the personal problems of the individual, was alive to the spiritual needs of middle-class young people, and saw that 'sharing' often gave them just what they needed most—escape from themselves and from a sense of inadequacy. He recognized that one of the chief needs of the Movement was a sound modern theology of a simple, straightforward type which he attempted to supply in his last book—*The God Who Speaks*.

The influence exercised by Streeter in his published works probably exceeded that of any other Anglican religious writer, but, in addition to this, we must take into consideration his work as a University teacher, from the date of his first Fellowship, 1899, until his death. During those thirty-eight years a very large number of men destined for the ministry in the Church of England and other religious bodies must have come under his influence. A pupil of Streeter's writes to us of his influence as a teacher as follows:

'For two years I enjoyed the privilege of reading with Canon Streeter for the Honours School of Theology; and, since this meant taking to him a weekly essay, the period offered abundant

opportunities for coming to know him. Fortunately for me the number of his pupils was not large; so that I always went to him alone to read, and receive his comments on, my essays.

'In some aspects of the course prescribed for the School he had little interest. Thus in Old Testament subjects he sent some of his pupils by exchange to a tutor of another college; and with Church history he resolutely refused to concern himself. But in the Gospels, the Epistles of the New Testament, and in the development of Christian doctrine, he was vitally and enthusiastically interested. From the standpoint of a pupil anxious to cover more or less adequately the main points of the rather wide syllabus, indeed, his interest in these themes was a trifle embarrassing. For he dealt out such a formidable list of essay-subjects and books for reading in these fields as to leave little time for other things.

'I well remember that, after reading my essay, Streeter would begin, slowly and hesitantly at first, and then with increasing animation as his mind kindled, to comment not only upon the particular topic, but upon all kinds of related subjects. He was never "academic" in the desiccated sense of that word, in dealing with theology. His mind was always alert to connect its several aspects with contemporary problems of faith and practice. As I came to know him better, he opened his mind on many things; and his conversation was religious as well as theological.

'Perhaps the chief profit which I received from him was the conviction of intellectual integrity and strength, as of a man who had built his beliefs upon the rock. And, as I look back upon the friendship with which he then and subsequently honoured me, I realize how much I learned of religion and life, as well as of academic knowledge, from his inspiring personality.'

There can be no doubt that Streeter, besides being a great scholar, was also a great man. Whether theological studies will in the future continue to attract men of the same mental and moral calibre seems uncertain. Yet the future influence of the churches must depend upon their doing so.

Literature.

CHRISTIANITY AND MODERN KNOWLEDGE.

It has often been observed during the last thirty years or so that this is not a time for creed-making or even for constructive theology. We have been living in a 'transition period' when it has been difficult, if not impossible, to assess the value of new discoveries and ideas, or to understand their effects upon traditional doctrine. Matthew Arnold long ago insisted that a period of criticism, of winnowing, of breaking up, must precede a period of construction and the appearance of a genius. Are we coming to the end of such a critical period in theology? It is possible. At any rate, there are now and again tentative efforts being made at some kind of positive system, or at least efforts, to consider seriously the results which modern thought has for Christian faith.

One of these, and a very interesting one it is, has been made by the Chancellor of Liverpool Cathedral, the Rev. J. S. Bezzant, B.D., M.A., in *Aspects of Belief* (Nisbet; 7s. 6d. net), which contains the William Belden Noble Lectures for 1937. It is not an easy book to read, simply because it is so closely reasoned and the argument is so close knit. There is no obscurity. The style is perfectly clear. But the slovenly reader will find himself hard pressed, just because there is no waste of words and the thinking is so strenuous. Mr. Bezzant is a Modernist in his acceptance of critical and scientific conclusions. And his lectures are a brave attempt to explain what the effects of these conclusions are on the Christian belief about man, God, Jesus Christ, and the Church.

The growth and great success of scientific method and the adoption of the theory of evolution, have (the writer contends) involved an approach to the facts of life and of thought different from that which dominated the thought of the past, a method which is experimental and empirical. It may be that such empirical methods cannot take us as far as the older speculative systems, or give us the same appearance of certainty. But, at any rate, they offer a firmer