

*LEX QUÆRENDI*¹

A SPIRITUAL force incarnate and commingling with the material movement and flux of history. Beneath the phenomena a fact—the concreted result of a supreme revelation of the spiritual in space and time. That is the tremendous historic reality of the Religion of Jesus Christ. A hundred questions at once press forward to be uttered. This fact which the whole world recognizes, can it be defined, fixed, interpreted? Can the categories of the human mind enfold it adequately, or at all? What is the relation between defined doctrine and formulated thing, between the affirmation of faith and the reflection of theology, miracle and truth testified? What are our criteria and how are they to be applied to history? What is history for faith?

Less than a century ago there was a relatively limited number of answers. The human mind was comparatively insular—confined to its individual expressions in this man and that man and this and that class, country and creed. For protestant and papist, liberal and agnostic, there was a well-spread assortment of “cumulative” arguments. Each, being insulated, could afford to mix his own apologetic panacea (they still exist), and his position of stable equilibrium was chiefly determined by the ingredients he chose. Looked at from the angle of the isolated subject on his intellectual desert-island each position was curiously compelling.

Since then we have passed through a succession of catastrophic crises. Liberal protestant theology sprang up rapidly, to wither soon in many quarters and to be superseded. But it pervaded the masses. Science contributed her share of vast questions and opened new vistas of vision. Modernism was born, here to remain, there to disappear as quickly as it had come. The ethical and social implications of Theism were cast into a furnace of criticism by the greatest war the world has ever seen, to be followed by a succession of facile pantheisms and other makeshift philosophies fabricated largely to deal with the crisis. The brilliant theory of Albert Schweitzer made the eschatology

¹ *The Credibility of the Christian Faith*. By H. S. Shelton. (Simpkin Marshall, 8s. 6d.)

of the Jesus of history a matter of general discussion, and while it was being ruthlessly criticised by the experts it was suggesting a thousand novel surmises and scepticisms to lay minds, by the mere suggestion of the possibilities it did suggest. And to-day we are surrounded by a huge medley of social and political "ideologies," shot through with the rainbow light of a million theories of religion. There is the so-called "Dialectic" Theology of Barth, and *Formgeschichte*, the revival of interest in Schweitzer by Rudolf Otto, the atheism of Sigmund Freud, and the libraries of critical contributions to the interpretation of religion, by psychologists and philosophers, historians and anthropologists, with innumerable other specialists, all suggesting new approaches, often in fact mutually destructive and always possibly so. The enormous progress in the output of cheap printed matter, methodical propaganda on a big scale, and the universality of the radio, have wrenched all alive minds out of their former insularity and thrown every uncriticised prejudice into the formless cauldron of modern thought.

The older questions were comparatively simple. To-day, for the sincere seeker after truth, there are untold technical problems and unplumbed intellectual quicksands on every side. These are dominated by a few crucial questions of completely general purport, which have perhaps more edge for the clear-thinking mind that stumbles across them than all the others put together. Neither sheltered theologian nor storm-swept wayfarer on the unchartered seas can make one iota of permanently effective contribution to the present crisis until they have been faced—and faced honestly—and solved.

What trust can we put in the human mind in face of the infinitudes of modern thought and criticism? Are there any *clear criteria for dealing with religious experience and historic Christianity*, and if so what is their character? Must we look to historical datum in an age when nothing seems fixed and when we do not know to whom to go to ascertain what is generally held to be fixed? Or must we look to philosophic speculation, instead of to rationalised objective fact, to inward intuition and mystical experience rather than to the meaningless flow of external phenomena? Is there nothing of what we can be sure except the "Absolutely Other," the "Unconditioned"? Is there any absolute

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significance in the traditional criteria of the truth of religion, or are we confined to a "normative approach" in which every tenet and every doctrine, every historic datum and every critical theory, are but ephemeral moments in the ceaselessly revolving wheel of thought?

These are questions which are vital for every critical mind and every candid spirit. No convert to the Christian Faith worthy of the name can shirk them. They are not academic problems posed as an exercise in dialectic, but incidents in the grim struggle of the modern world to find a point of purchase and a basis for spiritual and moral growth. He who is bored by them, or thinks an insistence on them fanatical or scholastic, is mentally moribund and out of contact with the spirit of the age. His thinking is unreal and narcissistic. Whether his foundations are of rock or sand we do not know, and a modern mind is not likely to trust them until we do know, or even to examine them. For the principles and assurances upon which reconstruction is to be built must be such as have themselves been cast into the furnace and proved themselves gold. And if there are few, then these few are worth all the uncriticised assumptions of a prejudiced psychology taken together.

That there is a problem is a fact that cannot be blinked, though for some of us there are certain solutions. For others, unsheltered, staggering blindly this way and that in the maelstrom of incoming ideas and facts, and often jeered at by cowards safe behind their own battlements, there is so far no solution. It is to these courageous spirits that our sympathy and our interest instinctively go out. (Were it not so we should not be worthy of the name of Friars Preachers and of Apostles.) And any utterance, any book, thrown up momentarily from the turmoil, however fragmentary, and however full of misconceived directions, is as exciting to behold as the chalice which Schiller's diver fished up from the abyss. That is why the present book interests us—not because it is without serious gaps and faults—but because it indicates the fresh and unspoiled impressions of a non-specialised, unsophisticated, "lay" mind, unsheltered and unassured, in the heart of the fray. As such, and in common with all such books (and there are thousands), it has a great deal to contribute. And this particular book is a particularly good representative. Its guiding genius is

shrewd and freshly critical. Everything should be done to put such minds into contact with one another and with the very best sources of information our civilisation possesses. It is only thus that they can ascertain the lacunae in their thought, and can take and leave, assimilate and throw aside, according as the material they have studied is new or antiquated, relevant or irrelevant. The enviable generalness of vision which is often the prerogative of the unspecialised lay mind will so be joined with a critical awareness of essential instruments of enquiry and the really burning technical problems. The serious character of the subject requires such a fusion.

Chief things one would require before the book had the value of a complete outline, are some discussion on the doctrine of Karl Barth; of *Formgeschichte*; of the present situation with regard to the eschatology of Jesus; and a far more worthy examination of Liberal Protestantism (it is preposterous to make Bishop Barnes its representative figure!) And the author's analysis of the Thomist theodicy is, of course quite inadequate, and in dismissing the Aristotelian definition of movement as irrelevant he misses the entire point of an argument from motion. Also inadequate is his discussion of the relations of reason to intuition (he does not even define what he himself means by these terms), as well as his arbitrary minimizing of the unchallenged greatness of some of the world-religions outside Christianity, and the insufficient clarity of his notions of certitude. Until this last matter is cleared up (we do not expect to agree but we do expect some understanding of one another's definitions of basic principles) any realistic discussion as to what is and what is not the Catholic position with regard to the credibility of revelation cannot be taken far. It is often surprising that it can even be begun. Yet this author does it; and he achieves a very fair amount of preliminary skirmishing.

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