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1952: Second Series: Experience and Interpretation

Charles E. Raven

Excerpt

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## I

## INTRODUCTORY: THE NEW REFORMATION

WHEN the Churches in spite of a larger measure of sympathy than he had expected failed to adjust their doctrine of Creation to the requirements of the post-Darwinian age, Thomas Henry Huxley was not alone in taking up John Milton's summons<sup>1</sup> of near two hundred years ago and proclaiming the need for a new Reformation. It had long been evident, as we have seen, that traditional orthodoxy was no longer consonant with educated knowledge or adequate to meet the moral needs of the social order then coming to birth. As in the sixteenth century so now Christianity was in the main allied with and represented by habits of thought and life and, indeed, definite convictions and policies which affronted the intelligence and scandalized the conscience of the age. Then, as now, there were groups and individuals within the Churches eager for reform: Cardinal Quignon and Desiderius Erasmus had plenty of followers; and among them were men of singular wisdom and devotion. But the temper both of the official leaders and of the rank and file in Christendom was against them—more so, as it transpired, in the nineteenth century than previously. It seemed plain that change by consent could hardly be accomplished in time to avert disaster. The new Reformation, like its predecessor, would involve the rending of Christendom—and as such might well prove beyond the strength of the institutions that required it. So at least it appeared to Huxley and those who shared his appreciation of the achievements of science and his genuine desire to see religion able once more to satisfy the aspirations and guide the conduct of mankind. This Reformation is in

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the magnificent passage in *Areopagitica* predicting 'The approaching Reformation'.

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fact taking place—though its progress is not what he hoped or expected.

That the situation is more difficult for the would-be Reformers now than in Luther's day might well be admitted. Both in the scale and in the speed of their reforms they must face a more exacting task. Industrialism and the hungry forties had produced revolutions in most European countries, and in many of them a complete estrangement between Christianity and any form of liberal or socialist policy. If in Britain, thanks to a handful of pioneers and one or two men of prophetic quality, no final break had occurred, there was a strong tendency to regard the Churches as always obstructive and if established as definitely reactionary. Frederic Denison Maurice had been deprived of his chair at King's College nominally on theological grounds but actually because of his advocacy of Christian Socialism; and Shaftesbury, aristocrat though he was, in his campaign against the exploitation of women and children in mines and factories never found clergy or ministers ready to support him on a public platform. Dread of reform was accompanied by alarm at the spread of liberalism in theology. Critical studies, first of the Old and then of the New Testament, could no longer be dismissed as atheism or ascribed only to a few blasphemous Germans. If Britain had been able to ignore the Tübingen school and had produced no Strauss or Renan, yet as Browning confessed in *Gold Hair*

Our Essays-and-Reviews debate  
Begins to tell on the public mind  
And Colenso's words have weight.

Uneasiness amounting almost to terror was widespread. Robertson Smith, a more learned reformer than the Bishop of Natal, had been driven from his own university. Herbert Spencer, appropriate exponent of contemporary agnosticism, had won his way to Oxford. *Robert Elsmere* had become 'the most effective and popular novel since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'.<sup>1</sup> There were plenty to

<sup>1</sup> So Oliver Wendell Holmes; see M. H. Watt, *The History of the Parson's Wife*, p. 130.

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advocate safe paths in perilous times: but to meet the real issues demanded not only learning but insight and courage.

Darwinism, then, coming at a time of general tension and in a form exaggerated by Wilberforce's intervention, served as the spark in the powder magazine. Under the circumstances a new Reformation might well seem the least that could be expected. For the situation plainly called for radical remedy, not only in regard to the specific problems, practical and doctrinal, already mentioned, but because behind them lay the basic issue of the relation of the world of nature to the world of religion, or more specifically of the principles and discipline of the sciences to the study and formulation of theology.

In Britain—more easily perhaps than anywhere else—the response of Christians to the new social order was sufficient to prevent the sheer antagonism universal in the Catholic countries of the Continent. The work of F. D. Maurice and the Christian Socialists, of E. V. Neale, Thomas Hughes and above all J. M. Ludlow in the Co-operative Movement, the Friendly Societies, the Working Men's College and all that accompanied these developments; the similar work of Stewart Headlam, Charles Marson and the Anglican priests who created the famous parishes in east and south London, in Leeds and Portsmouth and many other poverty-stricken areas; the example set by the great Quaker firms in improving conditions and humanizing relationships in industry; and the long tradition of public service among the Free Churches and of evangelism among the Methodists; these kept the young labour organizations from breaking away from Christianity—indeed, in very many directions supplied them with protection and leadership.

In the general relationship of sacred to secular studies Britain owes its unique opportunity largely to the tradition and personnel of the Church and universities of Scotland. Robertson Smith might have to be sacrificed; but the intimate relationship of Church and State and the great inheritance of a religious education were preserved and splendidly employed. To pay homage to the succession of thinkers and teachers who held together the worlds

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of science and theology through the dark days of the opening century down to the present would be to recite a long list of names in almost every department of intellectual activity. To single out any in particular is invidious; but 'as in private duty bound' it may be allowable to express special obligation to Henry Drummond, to whom all Christendom is in debt, to J. Y. Simpson, whose two books, *The Conflict between Religion and Science* and *The Spiritual Interpretation of Nature*, were most timely and valuable, to Sir D'Arcy Thompson, last of the great omniscients, to the ever-loved and revered David Cairns, and among many other philosophers to Archibald Allan Bowman, greatest of our prophets in the years after the First World War. To these must be added by any Cambridge man the great teachers and leaders whom Scotland sent to us, and especially James Adam, Peter Giles, John Oman and Alexander Wood.

For discussing the problems that arose out of the critical study of the Scriptures, Britain also was fortunately placed. There was no such taboo upon scholarship as was imposed by the College of Propaganda in Catholic countries; nor was there the unchecked speculation which amid much that was suggestive and valuable easily ran to exaggerated extremes in Germany and France. Our tradition of classical scholarship, narrow as it certainly was, gave us a sound technique in linguistic studies combined with a sense of history in general and a knowledge of the Graeco-Roman world in particular. Men like the great Cambridge trio, J. B. Lightfoot, B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, or their successors at Oxford, W. Sanday, B. H. Streeter and their colleagues,<sup>1</sup> were admirably qualified for the special work which had first to be undertaken, the discovery and interpretation of the authentic text of the New Testament by the application to it of tests which the most sceptical investigator would approve. They did not make the mistake so common in biblical scholarship of divorcing the text from its background and ignoring its place in history. They

<sup>1</sup> It is a joy to an Englishman to read the glowing testimony to the sincerity and scholarship of Sanday's seminar on the Synoptic Gospels by Dean W. L. Sperry of Harvard in *Jesus Then and Now* (New York, 1949), pp. 191-4: his account of the contrast between their work and that of the neo-orthodox is highly significant.

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realized and were competent to deal with the importance not only of the small details of textual variations but of the large questions of date, provenance and authorship. In consequence their work has a soundness of scholarship and a broad-based wisdom to which few of their successors have attained. They vindicated the ability of theologians to hold a high place in the academic world and laid a sound foundation for the exegetical and doctrinal studies of the next generation. With these we shall be concerned hereafter.

Meanwhile, and in a sense prior to all other enquiries, there is the question how far theological studies, being concerned with religion and so with the most intimate and personal of human interests, are amenable to the same kind of treatment as is appropriate to scientific or historical research. In this matter there has been a considerable change of outlook in the past thirty years, parallel to the similar change in regard to science<sup>1</sup> and to history, and due to the realization that in no field of knowledge can absolute objectivity be attained. At present this change has, in theology, been carried to lengths which threaten to discredit the claim of Christianity to be in any real sense historic. If it is successfully pressed, a radical transformation of the faith will have been effected; and Modernism in the Roman Catholic sense of the word will have gained acceptance. The issue is plainly one that requires full consideration: it is, indeed, one of the most important with which Christian scholarship is at present concerned. It will be well to begin with a brief sketch of the development of the problem in recent years.

As a prelude and to avoid misunderstanding it is necessary to explain two points on which British theologians have been often and naturally misinterpreted at home, on the Continent and in America.<sup>2</sup>

These concern the terms 'liberal' and 'modernist'.

In Britain theological liberalism derives not from the 'enlightenment' of the eighteenth century, from Voltaire and his disciples,

<sup>1</sup> Due in the first place to the principle of relativity; cf. Vol. I of this book, pp. 189–97.

<sup>2</sup> A typical instance is Canon R. Lloyd's two volumes, *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century*; see Note at the end of Vol. I of this book, pp. 212–15.

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but from an older and more august ancestry, the Cambridge Platonists or 'Latitude-men' of the seventeenth century, who broke away from the Calvinism of the Puritans and the Catholicism of Archbishop Laud and appealed to the Fourth Gospel and the Greek theologians of Alexandria on behalf of a reasonable faith. S. T. Coleridge, Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, F. D. Maurice and the liberal or broad-church movement in England and Scotland carried on this tradition which has always been independent of Continental liberalism even when it has owed much to it.

In 'modernism' the two principal claimants to the title are less easily contrasted. The proper use of the word should apply it to the movement within Roman Catholicism, associated with George Tyrrell, Baron F. von Hügel and others in this country and with A. Loisy and a small group of French scholars.<sup>1</sup> They were united in their acceptance of historical criticism for the study of Scripture, found themselves constrained by it to accept opinions widely different from those imposed by authority, and sought a solution by contrasting the verifiable facts of the historian with the differently verifiable experiences of the believer, and maintaining that facts of faith need not necessarily be such as a secular historian would accept as having actually happened. Their views were condemned in 1907 in the Papal Encyclical *Pascendi*. In Britain the same title has been given to the group of 'Modern Churchmen' initiated by Bishop Boyd Carpenter and Dr H. D. A. Major, and including Bishop E. W. Barnes, Dean W. R. Inge, J. F. Bethune-Baker, Hastings Rashdall, William Sanday, B. H. Streeter and others, and represented by a periodical and an annual conference. These, although as liberals they would admit a wide divergence of individual opinion, yet had in common an insistence upon a reasonable faith, a regard for scientific studies and an emphasis upon history; and in this last respect were almost exactly the opposite of Continental Modernists. They were and are convinced that scholarship and all the resources proper to science, history and philosophy must be applied to the study of theology,

<sup>1</sup> Tyrrell's own definition treats it as simply the opposite of medievalism (cf. his *Medievalism*, pp. 143-4); obviously this is only appropriate in a Roman Catholic context.

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since, if truth be one and Christ be the truth, anything less is dishonest and dishonouring. They have therefore felt obliged to examine and test the historicity of the Scriptures and to reject, or reserve judgment upon, the records in accordance with the evidence. Insisting that the basic message of Christianity proclaimed the actual occurrence at a certain time and place of certain momentous and revelatory events, they insisted that if this occurrence were abandoned the Christian claim could not be sustained, and so regarded Continental modernism as a surrender of it: if facts of faith had no factual origin except in human imagination, then Christianity did not differ from an enlightened Mithraism. In their contention they may have been mistaken; if this tendency in neo-orthodoxy prevails,<sup>1</sup> we may find that some sort of Christianity can still survive. But at least it is unfortunate that 'Modernist' should be a term applied to two movements which in their essentials proceed from similar starting-points but in different directions.

These explanations account for the concern of progressive theologians at the turn of the century with the scrutiny of the Gospels and the analysis and comparison of their sources. The historicity of 'the things concerning Jesus' was plainly the crux of the Christian position as they understood it; and now that the text of the documents had been securely determined the interpretation of their relationship to one another and thence to the facts could be investigated. The patient persistence with which the task was fulfilled and the value of the results obtained can hardly be appreciated by those who only know the story at second hand: to those who took part in the work its thoroughness compares very favourably with the relatively superficial and speculative studies which succeeded it. Its chief defect was that it was too narrowly concerned with the documents, treating them without due regard to the nature of their sources or the circumstances of their

<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to foresee the effect of the recent protests against mythologizing by Dr R. Bultmann and his colleagues. Their value will probably depend upon the quality of their historical researches; and for this, Bultmann's work on Form-criticism is not a very encouraging preparation. But he is certainly right in warning us against the danger of suggesting that Christianity is a myth.



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composition. But when this was recognized by the form-criticism school, the reaction, in some cases at least, clearly went too far. A more serious but cognate weakness was the tendency to ignore the subjectivity inherent in every record of human happenings and to ascribe to the evidence an almost scientific precision. In their zeal for historical accuracy they fell into the error, common at this time to most secular historians, of expecting history to yield a complete and objective rendering of the facts. They thus tended to define theology as if it were an exact science capable of an academic, indeed mathematical, precision, and this invariably led to disappointment.<sup>1</sup>

The consequent failure of the attempt to apply the scientific method, as then understood, to the field of theology led to an emphasis, first, upon the difference in the data to be studied as between science and theology and then, less justifiably, upon the contrast between their respective methods. Theology, it was urged, dealt with facts which, though they happened at particular times and places and in connexion with special individuals, yet were in character experiential, intimate, personal, indeed internal, such that only the person experiencing them could record and describe. For such events the ordinary criteria of historical investigation are inappropriate; even the tests of analogy and probability cannot apply to what, if true at all, is unique and unprecedented. We can only take them in relation to the whole Christian claim in itself and in its effects and, if we make the venture of faith, accept these data as part of it. Moreover, this experiential element enters into the whole evidence; for the New Testament in all its various parts is the product of men who had shared and believed and been converted by the 'fact' of Christ. To disentangle the fact from its impact, the event from their response and interpretation of it, is an impossible proposal: inspiration, the revealing experience which illuminates and transforms, cannot be weighed and measured by any application of the scientific method: it belongs to a different category and can only be examined by those who have themselves a first-hand acquaintance with it. Only Christians living

<sup>1</sup> For a further and similar source of difficulty, cf. Note 1 below, p. 204.



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in the community of the Church can understand and expound theology.<sup>1</sup>

This claim, unsound though it plainly proves to be, is yet obviously arguable. It has been expanded by some recent apologists into the statement that as the New Testament deals with a unique event, only appreciable at its true value by those who experienced and recorded it, their testimony is beyond criticism and must be accepted or rejected as it stands. This, if we agree to it, would imply that in fact the whole study of theology would be reduced to an exegesis of the Scriptures—if, indeed, exegesis could properly be applied to a theme which had been thus removed from the categories of human understanding. We should be driven, as fundamentalists have in fact been driven, to the segregation of the Bible to a realm apart so that only its language remains for our study, and this can only be understood by cross-references within the inspired volume. No one who appreciates the need for an exact interpretation of the text and has fully realized the difficulty of defining the great words of the New Testament will lightly criticize the insistence expressed so strongly by Sir Edwyn Hoskyns, that religion has a language of its own and that the Jewish-Christian experience charged with new significance the terms of common speech. But here we touch a problem which we shall meet continually in each phase of Christian doctrine and particularly in Christology. Granted the uniqueness of Christ and of the records of His coming, it still remains that unless His language and the language of His disciples had been intelligible without special vocabularies to contemporary hearers and readers, the Christian religion could not have been founded or propagated. ‘Speaking in a tongue’ had to be interpreted in order that the casual listener (ἰδιωτῆς) might be seized of its meaning. Incarnation if it is to be real must involve the acceptance and use of language ‘understood of the people’. Much of the current insistence upon the esoteric meaning of

<sup>1</sup> This seems to be the contention of Dr Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1, pp. 22–8. But his dialectic method of making one elaborate and exaggerated generalization, following it by another on the opposite side, and then producing a sort of synthesis makes it sometimes difficult to be sure of his own real meaning.

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Scripture is appropriate only to a divine intruder, a Gnostic or Apollinarian Christ.

The same objection is relevant to those who insist upon the contrast between scientific and theological methods. So long as scientists restricted their researches to data only amenable to quantitative treatment it was plain that their method of study could only be slightly and indirectly relevant to the subject-matter of theology. But as we have seen with the coming of the new physics, of the new concepts in regard to natural law, and of psychology and kindred sciences, the restrictions have been relaxed and new lines of investigation are being explored. Indeed, whatever may have been claimed for it in the past, the method of science has in fact never been so peculiar as laymen have supposed. It consists in the assembling, testing, sifting and classifying of data and the formulating by induction of an hypothesis, in testing it by comparison with possible alternatives, in revising it in the light of analogies and of its bearing upon cognate problems, and so in relating it to the whole body of relevant knowledge. Such a method is merely that which every branch of enquiry pursues: the field of research will differ; the particular means of obtaining and testing data will differ; the technique appropriate to the formulation of results will differ; but the main process is the same whether we are investigating the structure of an atom or a problem in animal evolution, a period of history or the religious experience of a saint. The field differs; yet even so in the last resort every problem, like that of the 'flower in the crannied wall', only becomes fully answered as it is related to the whole body of knowledge.

In point of fact the changes thus outlined, as they win recognition, will in themselves amount to a New Reformation attained not by the breach with the past that tore Christendom asunder in the sixteenth century but by the gradual acceptance of a new outlook such as seems now to be gaining ground. At present the air is still heavy with controversy: liberals and neo-orthodox, immanentists and transcendentalists, not to mention the representatives of the traditional schools, Platonists, Thomists, Lutherans, Calvinists and the followers of Kierkegaard, create a superficial