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P. Gardner-Smith, F. C. Burkitt and C. E. Raven
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THE CHURCH'S FAITH
By
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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

THIS is a very small work on a very great subject. Any attempt to deal with the Church's faith and ideal brings us immediately into sight of vast questions of philosophy and ethics. In the ten short chapters that follow the author has only tried to advance certain elementary considerations which call for attention from those who are just beginning to think seriously about the problems of life and faith. No claim is made that the presentation of the Church's faith is sufficient, or that the philosophical questions which arise are adequately discussed. The treatment of the subject is purely introductory, but perhaps enough has been said to stimulate thought, and at the end of the several chapters a few books are mentioned which some may find useful for further study.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE NEED OF FAITH

What is the Christian faith?—Christianity is above all a way of life; but intimately connected with a standard of conduct is a standard of faith.—Belief is an ambiguous term, and some beliefs matter much more than others, but in some degree nearly all beliefs affect conduct. So they should be carefully chosen. They should be consistent with one another and reasonable in themselves. Thus they provide a philosophy, without which no thinking man can be content.—Christian faith rests upon beliefs which matter very much because they affect life at many points. Christianity implies the acceptance of a very definite philosophy.

WHEN the younger Pliny, Roman governor of the province of Bithynia in the early days of the second century, tortured two Christian girls to find out what Christianity was all about, he says that he discovered no more than a wicked and arrogant superstition. That was the impression that the popular Christianity made on the mind of a cultured Roman. Tacitus, the historian, would have agreed with Pliny, for he too, describing the persecution of the Christians by the Emperor Nero, refers to their religion as a pestilent superstition.

Pliny and Tacitus were wrong, and we are reminded that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Neither had any idea of the real nature of the Christian religion, and they judged it by certain superficial characteristics which offended Roman taste. The crude notions and undisciplined enthusiasm of some of the Christians seemed to

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them beneath contempt, and they had no opportunity, perhaps no inclination, to enquire more deeply into the beliefs of 'those whom the common people hated for their secret crimes'. If they had had the power of looking into the future, and if they could have foreseen the wonderful history of the Christian Church, they might not have liked Christianity any better, but they would not have treated it with contempt. For the triumph of the Christian Church is the most wonderful fact of history. In three hundred years Christianity had overcome the hatred of the ignorant and the contempt of the learned and had become the religion of the Empire. For more than a thousand years it remained a dominant force in the world's affairs; and today among the religions of the world it is still the religion of the most progressive peoples. What is it? and whence does it derive its power?

In the days of Pliny Christians were distinguishable in two ways—by their beliefs and by their practices, by their creed and by their conduct. And so they have always been. So they are still. Conduct is three parts of life, and it is natural that we should think first of Christianity as demanding the acceptance of certain moral standards, and commending a certain way of living. In the Acts of the Apostles we find the new religion frequently referred to as 'the Way', and it was Christian conduct which first attracted the attention of the world. The humble believers whom Pliny examined were certainly not scientific theologians or speculative philosophers, but they had

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gained from Christian teaching a very clear idea of how life should be lived. Pliny says that they were accustomed to meet together in the morning for purposes of devotion and to bind themselves with an oath not to commit any crime of fraud or violence. Throughout the Church's history the practical aspect of the Christian religion has loomed large, and we are only following the teaching of the Gospels in giving it the first place in our regard. Sometimes dogmatic interests have predominated, particularly in periods of controversy such as the fourth century or the sixteenth; but those are not the periods of which we have most reason to be proud, and whenever it has been true to itself Christianity has been 'the Way'. There are very few people today who are disposed to exalt orthodoxy above holiness of life.

But we must not forget the essential connexion between faith and practice, or minimize the importance of Christian belief. It is a very shallow view that so long as a man's conduct is honourable his creed is a matter of no importance. Conduct depends on character, and character is built on creed. That is a point worth insisting upon, for there are many people who while admitting the importance of right conduct, on which the happiness and well-being of society depend, yet fail to see that morality and faith are necessarily bound up together. Figs do not grow on thistles.

THE MEANING OF FAITH

Let us study a little more carefully the meaning of faith. It is a word around which a good deal of ambiguity has gathered. Even in the New Testament it is used with several shades of meaning. St James seems to mean by it the acceptance of dogmatic assertions—‘the devils believe and tremble’. For St Paul faith means far more than that, it involves the surrender of heart and mind to Christ. In the Epistle to the Hebrews faith is a quality of mind whereby we are made conscious of the invisible world and confident that our best aspirations will be fulfilled. These writers express different aspects of Christian faith, but whatever else it means faith must always include an element of belief, and belief is the acceptance of a statement as true. ‘He that cometh to God must believe that he is.’ If faith describes the Christian attitude of mind towards GOD, it obviously rests upon a conviction of GOD’s existence, and without that faith means nothing at all. So there is what we call a dogmatic element in the Christian religion, a belief in the truth of certain assertions without which we should have no foundation for our faith. What this dogmatic element is we shall have to consider later.

But here we must notice that belief itself is an ambiguous term. The character and effect of a belief vary greatly with its intensity. We may accept a statement because we think it to be made on good authority; we believe it, but it does not greatly interest us and it neither influences our thought

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nor controls our actions. For instance, we read in books by astronomers of repute that the mean distance of the earth from the sun is nearly 93,000,000 miles. We believe it because we trust the astronomers to make the observations and work out their calculations correctly. But the fact is not vividly present to our minds, and it has no influence on our lives. If another school of astronomers were to prove to the satisfaction of the learned that the previous calculations were wrong and the distance of the sun is 100,000,000 miles, we should accept the revised estimate and think no more about it. Some beliefs are not to be so lightly dismissed. If the astronomers were to assure us that on a certain date, say three months hence, the earth would collide with another celestial body and be completely destroyed, we should find, if we believed them, that our belief influenced our conduct very materially. We should not arrange our summer holidays, we should not invest our money in annuities payable twenty years hence; our new belief would fill our minds, influence every action, and alter the whole course of our lives. Of course beliefs of a more cheerful kind may be equally potent. Any vivid conviction which concerns the fate of the person who holds it is bound to have a very practical influence on his life.

Christian faith rests upon beliefs of this latter kind. The Christian creed makes assertions no less momentous than the prediction of our hypothetical astronomers that the world would shortly be destroyed. It states facts

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which, if they are accepted, establish a new order of values and give a new meaning to life. Not that its compelling force is of the same kind as that exercised by the prediction of a great disaster, for love, not fear, is the controlling force in the minds of Christian men; but it has the same effect of producing a new outlook upon life, of supplying new ideals, new ambitions, new hopes, and new resolutions. The acceptance of the Christian faith must carry with it the most momentous consequences. What they are we shall be better able to judge as our studies proceed. Here we are only concerned to point out how absurd is the popular notion that religious convictions have no practical significance. A faith sincerely held, so far from being a matter of indifference, is the most powerful force in life.

PHILOSOPHY AND FAITH

If beliefs are so important, how are they to be determined? We all believe thousands of things, and no two men believe all the same things. Some beliefs are certainly mistaken. How are we to know which beliefs are worthy of respect, and, amid the appalling diversity of opinion, to construct our creed? Many who feel the task impossible take the easy course of falling back upon authority and accepting the dictation of their church or perhaps of some individual teacher whom they revere. Reliance upon authority is wise provided that there is no doubt about the competence of the authority, but where there are many