

## CHAPTER I

## THE SITUATION

STRICTLY SPEAKING no book was ever written except in the first person, and it is not modesty to say, "This is merely my opinion on my limited experience", for no human verdict on anything is ever more. Whether this remain mere personal idiosyncrasy or objective truth is not by any separation of reality from our knowing, but depends on the justification we have for thinking that our subjective assurance is due to our laying ourselves open, with utter honesty, to its testimony. In every sphere the failure is less in discovering little, than in not finding the attitude of mind and interest and service which could have discovered more.

Search for Truth and Righteousness is just accepting God's invitation to "Come and let us reason together"; and my general purpose is to ask what a true response would mean, or in other words, what bearing and attitude would be entire honesty in making life a continual reasoning with God in the sense of laying our minds alongside of His and open to His persuasion.

But as God has admitted all kinds of queer arguments from men and led them on by them, so it is fitting for us to exercise a large charity about what may have been a help at one time even if it became a hindrance to progress at another, even to the absence of such charity itself.

"In proportion", says Gardiner, "as the student of the history of the seventeenth century perceives clearly

that religious toleration was the goal to which it was tending, and that in it alone could its difficulties find its appropriate solution, he is tempted to think hardly and bitterly of those men who turned their backs upon such a benefit. Eliot and Winthrop would hear as little of it as Laud and Wentworth." But the student of history, he thinks, should draw wiser conclusions and entertain more charitable feelings, for an advanced opinion is like an advanced invention, requiring a corresponding progress in other things to make it possible or desirable.

In the days when Gardiner wrote there seemed good reason to believe that the time had come when this freedom was possible and would be a benefit without drawbacks. The old insistence on one Church with one creed and one constitution had only resulted in many sects, and liberty had diminished their virulence without apparently weakening their loyalties. The age was full of cheerful discussion and agreeable social intercourse. If some were disturbed by ideas about a mechanical universe, they were sustained by the assurance of a continuous upward thrust of progress. The churches were full of people who were honest, kindly and liberal. There might be the muttering of criticism about the Bible, but it was mainly over the Old Testament and did not seem to threaten any vital part. Life probably never was so secure in all the ages or material well-being so abundant and easy for so many, and if to some it seemed to go on so well of itself that God was a superfluity, to the great bulk of decent people it meant the additional assurance of a wise and good Providence, the due and becoming recognition of which was public worship, practical liberalities and an upright walk and

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conversation. Beyond this was the sense of blessings above desert, though the blessings themselves rather conveyed the sense of merit; and there was much confessing of sin, though it was apt to be conventional, like “your humble servant” at the end of a letter.

The blight to fair expectations, the uncertainty of life, the burden of the years were as in every other age, but progress in every field of knowledge hid the abysmal depth of human ignorance about what it most concerns us to know, and invention and enterprise helped to forgetfulness of man’s impotence to supply his deepest needs and secure his highest well-being. Wherefore, the time seemed favoured above all the ages; and, to the reasonably successful, their place in it highly satisfactory, so far as this expressed itself in religion, it was by faith in a genial Christ, who offered guidance, help and good fellowship and other aids to playing one’s part well, and who called men to amend society, unite the Church and convert the heathen.

If the Church itself was called in question, what it stood for seemed secure; if the Bible was less of an authority, much of what it taught was preached by every great writer. Nor is it doubtful that even a vague faith and rather formal relation to the Church did much to make decent hard-working citizens with kindly relations at home and abroad and some serious respect to duty and regard for society and the right direction of the State. With all its faults, it was no mere age of machinery, great as were the changes wrought thereby, but it was a time of widespread kindly humanities and of extended enlightenment, as well as of great minds and great thoughts, in which it was good to have lived.

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But to-day we are asking whether the belief in liberty and progress, which was its chief inspiration, is sustained either by religion or reality. Were men not so comfortable with freedom, because they had not really thrown off the old authorities, but only made them sit more lightly while still holding the reins pretty firmly? Now, however, that their enfeebled hands no longer control, whither are we tending if not to the abyss? And as for the assurance of even progress, did it not rest upon a quasi-scientific belief of a necessary progress overruling all deficiencies of our purpose, which was neither freedom nor religion?

If religion can still work by freedom, at best it is a slow business of the ages, the more doubtful now that the comfortable doctrine of Providence, on which the hope of its attainment rested, seems to have been blotted out in the blood of the young and their mothers' tears. It may have flourished in the summer sunshine, but what is its value if it is like the sap of the dahlia, which dries up at the first touch of frost, and is not, like the maturing of the rose, a preparation for enduring the winter?

The immediate cause of the War may have been the machinations of wicked men, and their guilt is not condoned because God might have overruled it. Yet the final problem is just God, because, for what He could have hindered and did not, He, or at least the purpose He has to serve in allowing its course to human responsibility, must be the justification, if there be any; for in the end, we have to say with the prophet: "Is there evil in the city and the Lord has not done it?" The destruction of possessions may be profitable, the more perhaps

if painfully acquired, and necessary if not profitably used; and no one has ever had any lease of life. But what mockery that the supreme triumph of the science in which youth trusted, was to blot out millions of their lives and shatter many more, and leave still more broken-hearted and desolate. With the Psalmist our real trouble is not calamity, but the fear that the sufferings of the innocent may show the government of the world to be indifferent or blind or unjust. Above all, what kind of consistency can this have with the Father of Jesus Christ?

When, however, we look facts in the face, we realise that the War has done nothing but knock the spectacles of familiarity and custom off our eyes.

1. Nature unceasingly works the same destruction of human lives and of all man's handiwork, slower it may be, but more thoroughly and on a still vaster scale. In the days of comfort and cheerful human intercourse, of high hopes and youthful vigour, we could easily overlook what the Apostle calls "the bondage of corruption". But the real grip of this slavery upon us has never relaxed. Death and decay were always busy, and the bright hours were always swifter than a weaver's shuttle, man went to his long home and the mourners went about the streets, and dust and ashes was the end of all our human achievements.

2. God always gave scope to human sin and folly. What a man sowed he reaped, and God did not intervene to prevent the calamitous harvest of a sowing of wild oats. Vice ruined constitutions, wrecked homes and dugged untimely graves. Pride went before falls, often dishonourable falls, like dishonesty, the criminal

court or suicide. Even thoughtlessness had consequences of appalling severity.

3. There has always been solidarity in evil as well as in good. What Paul called the flesh we called heredity; what Augustine called original sin we spoke of as defective evolution. But under either description it meant that children suffered for the sins of parents, and subjects for rulers, and that every tie that knits men together can be turned to community in evil as well as in good, to building up a kingdom of darkness as well as of light.

Nevertheless nothing is the same for us mortals when the emphasis is either increased or changed. The most important difference is the fear that liberty may not be able to meet the increasing distress. Of its failure in the State we hear on every side, but, as freedom is a religion or it is nothing, the essential failure may be the Church. Why has the Church, in all its organised forms and activities, fallen into such weakness? Is it not the undermining of its compulsory, legal, externally authoritative basis? The denial of toleration might not have saved the situation, but is not the result of toleration just what those who dreaded it feared? Revelation is no longer submissively received as Divine legislation, attendance at worship is no more meritorious; directly or indirectly the Church no longer controls faith or morals. There are empty churches and full cinemas, and questionings of the fundamentals in conduct as well as creed, with no doubtful effect in unsettled lives and disturbed family loyalties, and preference for anything rather than serious responsibilities. Finally, with the loss of the legal view of redemption as an external

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transaction, the churches themselves have been left with no very obvious gospel, resulting in a tendency to allow sentiment to do duty for thinking, impression for persuasion, repetition of ancient formulas for living convictions and of antique resonant language for simple and sincere devotion. That they have lost influence with workers who are the real body of the people and who, as they handle life with ungloved hand, should naturally be the most religious, may be a calamitous loss for the serious ordering of all human relations, but we are the further from repairing it if the churches are not appealing by what ought to be heard, received and served.

Nor is anything else doing much to replace the loss. If life provides a whirl of variety for some, it demands a monotony of drudgery from others; and the lack of times of reflexion is not well replaced by increased distractions. Life in consequence has not grown deeper as it has grown wider. Even education has done little to redress the balance. Few prophecies have been less fulfilled than the high hopes of the Victorians from universal education. It has exposed many minds to greater ephemeral distraction, but how much has it done to increase discernment of the eternal amid the fleeting, of the elemental amid the trivial, or for that matter of independence of judgment of any kind? Even in more advanced instruction, the abler have been put into blinkers and driven in the ruts of specialism, while the less fortunately endowed wander aimlessly, loaded up with promiscuous encyclopaedic information. Neither way has proved much help for looking round one's whole position with wisdom and a responsive mind. Had the churches, when they were in power, not far greater

claim to have made people of character and wisdom? And were not good Evangelicals and High-Churchmen justified in all their fears of Liberalism of every kind?

And does not this Liberalism spring from one root?

Doctrines are of three levels. Religious belief is an emotion stirred by an idea, and the first level is just for common expression of a general experience, such as reconciliation to the Father by the manifestation of His love. This speaks only to those who have the experience. But emotions have to be conveyed indirectly by calling up common thoughts which may be translated back into a common experience. This produces the second level. Thus the Apostle presented his good-news in a way which he could sum up as the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Spirit. This was a compendium of the Gospel he had to preach, but one he meant to be known by being re-experienced, and it assumes the fellowship of those it would influence and who have at least the beginnings of a response. As all the members of the Early Church were in this position there was no need of any other form. But soon many came in attracted only by the more decent behaviour and higher tone of the Christians; and then, after Christianity became the religion of the Empire, there were even less Christian forms of attraction. This produced a third level of dogmas as authoritative mysteries on the authority of the Church and the Bible, which was sufficient when the Church ceased to be a family and became a State, because so general an institution as a State must be satisfied if its laws are not actively opposed or its organisation openly departed from.



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The conception of the Church, as Bellarmin puts it, which is as much a State as the Kingdom of France or the Republic of Venice, took final form when the Empire fell and the Church had to do its best to introduce order into the chaos. And while the Reformation called this claim in question, it not only transferred the same authority to the Bible, but assumed that in spiritual things the authority of the Church was not greatly altered.

The crisis for this whole conception of religious authority was the age of Rationalism, not merely because, with the rise of historical criticism, both authorities lost much of their infallibility, but because of the denial on principle that this kind of external rule was consistent with the responsibility of a grown man for his beliefs and actions, and the affirmation that only what we see to be true is truth for us and only what we judge to be right is righteous.

This is the principle of freedom, and the chaos of our time would seem to be its outcome. But is the cause freedom itself or failure to rise to its responsibility? This is our supreme question.

Among the most disturbing forms of proving our freedom has been the habit of shouting half-truths as slogans. At one time immanence was invoked to explain everything, with man as the incarnate divine; at another the only truth was transcendence, with God on one side and human pride and slackness on the other. At one time the world order was a fixed rule with no place of repentance; at another every colour was needed for the picture. At one time it was man's infinite perfectibility; at another it was a contempt for

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man compared with which total depravity was adulation. At one time it was the thrust of the even upward progress of evolution, at another it was crisis with even progress a vain illusion.

If, however, slogans are produced by freedom, it is not in order to make us free, but to create a kind of general authority to relieve us from the burden of personal insight, inquiry and decision. This may provide shelter in schools as well as in churches: and the way they are accepted is the worst kind of surrender of freedom, all the more dangerous for our honesty that their fashions are always presented as the last word in mental and moral emancipation.