

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-65640-6 - The World of the New Testament
 T. R. Glover
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INTRODUCTION

In the New Testament we have the opening pages of a story, familiar to us, but yet very insufficiently realized. The story is two-fold; it shows us a new conception of life in an old world, and at the same time a new society within an older and a much greater society. In that world, and that society, the books of the New Testament were written. The writers did not need to paint the picture of that old world for their first readers. It is from other sources that we have to draw our knowledge of their environment. From those sources we realize that it was a world of great ideals, a world of very great achievement in every phase of man's life, in social life, in political and national life, yes, and in the higher and more universal life which touches such things as exploration, geography, astronomy and all other branches of science and art, of philosophy and literature. That is the background; and one of the fascinating things in New Testament study is the problem of the influence of this great world upon the new conception of life; they will react upon each other, that is inevitable, but which will be the more potent? Will the new conception of life hold its own, or will it be so modified as to lose its value and its force?

In the next place there is the story of the new society within the much greater society of the whole Mediterranean world. The one is a mere group, a group in-

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spired with new principles and new convictions, possessed of a new objective, all related to the central conception of a new type of life altogether, a life in a new relation to God but to God conceived in a wholly new way. Yet the group is very far from understanding in its fulness the conception for which it stands; it does not yet realize what is implied in its new relation to God. The interpretation of God is always difficult, and in this case the difficulty is not lessened by the greatness and profundity of the conception. The story is one of conflict, of course; and to conquer that old world the new society must be equal to facing the intellectual standards, and to meeting the needs that are implied in the thought-out society, that underlie it and animate it. There are in every society only too many of the unthinking and the unintelligent; but a new conception of life, if it is to conquer the world, has to win the thinking and the intelligent, and it has to satisfy them at their best and at their highest. Not only have their intellectual conceptions to be faced, whether to be reconciled or to be overcome, but their artistic instincts and their imagination have to be satisfied; and in the background there is always their pride in the tradition of the greatly better days of the past. It may be possible for the new society with its new conceptions to achieve all this; or it may be that the old world finds in the new group something else, something that will meet yet greater spiritual needs which it feels, and meet them with a compensating power of such force and value as to outweigh any failure in the other directions.

The new society has yet to think out its new prin-

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ciples for itself. It has to understand what these new principles mean in relation to the ordinary facts of experience, to physical life, and again in relation to the traditions and the inheritance of the larger society that is round about it, that overshadows it. It has to think out its new principles in relation to the whole intellectual life of that larger society. It has to grapple, for example, with the very idea of thinking which possesses that larger society. Standards of thinking and habits of thinking do not uniformly prevail in all races or at all periods; but that great Mediterranean world was fundamentally intellectual, as a result of six centuries of the keenest activity of the best minds which perhaps the world has ever seen. Greek culture, the essence of which was the habit of facing and testing ideas, was all round the Christian group; and the group had to face a world of thought, to face the conclusions which the world drew from this thinking, the dogmas which the generations had achieved and handed down as the foundations of all speculation and of all life.

Yet again, the new principles have to be re-thought in relation to the whole social, imperial, and economic fabric of the world round about. That old world had had too much of war and waste, the sheer destruction of human life, the loss of home and gear and all that makes life livable. Very generally it had lost heart and hope; it had ceased to believe in anything but blank endurance, but acceptance of whatever the selfishness of rulers and adventurers and the malice of irrational fortune might bring upon them. There is an avowed scepticism and there is an unavowed scepticism which may influence society; both are to be found in

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that ancient world. It had in a sense ceased to believe in the old ideals of freedom which once informed the social life and the thinking life, even while it cherished them. It was still easier to lose faith in the new monarchies, Greek or Roman, in the restorations and reformations of the social order. Sheer Chance had been too much and too evidently the dominating power, the goddess of all the world. The world despaired on the whole of reaching truth, though it still felt what the philosophers had urged for centuries—that man was born to examine life, and must and will examine it; yet all the examination seemed somehow inconclusive; the experts differed so much and yet came short of their goal.

So men fell back upon the compromise of accepting while they rejected what the experts told them; all eclectics, as Novalis said, are sceptics, and the more eclectic the more sceptical. The world was weary of ideas; a person who cross-examined men as Socrates did is unthinkable in our period; and yet to be weary of ideas and to despair of truth is to be conscious of both, it is a tacit admission that thought and truth are essential. Weary of the philosophers, mankind is even more weary of the personal ambitions of politicians and of kings; it has turned to the practical business of life, to that sordid poverty-stricken notion which to-day the unreflective call “getting on with the job”. It generally means the job of physical living, of escaping thought; here it also meant the job of administering the Empire, of keeping roads in repair, of looking after the food supply, of collecting the taxes, and providing some sort of law and order.

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The world is immensely set and fixed in all its ideas and inhibitions, philosophic and economic; nothing can ever be changed; men have seen all that can be devised.¹ Yet with all its disillusionment the world was still cherishing its splendid past, its last idealism. The past had been great, there had been an age of genius, and against that great past the world measured all that was presented to it. Unequal to our ancestors, sorely declined as we may be, we feel that the new heroes and the new ideals presented to us must measure up, not so much against ourselves, as against the great whom we remember, whom we idealize. "Let us remember", says Aristotle, "that we should not disregard the experience of ages"; and he adds, "Sometimes men do not use the knowledge they have".² The Graeco-Roman world is all for keeping the heritage of the ages, but not for venturing upon too abrupt a use of it.

Our story is one of conflict. Will it be victory for the new or for the old, or will it be, as commonly in human affairs, compromise? Let us glance for a moment at the experience of modern missions, whether among the savages on the Congo River or among the civilized in India. A thoughtful man does not work long among people of either kind before in ceaseless succession new and difficult questions present themselves. How far is the advocate of the new faith to recognize the social and economic traditions of the people among whom he lives? For instance, in the history of mankind it has

¹ Cf. Marcus Aurelius xi, 1, 2, the man of forty, if he has any sense, has in a way seen all that has been or will be.

² *Politics*, ii, 5, 16.

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long been a difficulty to determine the frontiers of magic and medicine. Perhaps it is not yet decided, even among civilized people, that the two things are distinct; popular ideas of suggestion keep open a broad No-Man's-Land between the two spheres. Is the traditional treatment of smallpox, for example, in southern India, by killing a hen and pouring its blood over an image or a lump of mud, magic or medicine? If it is magic, is the magic also idolatry? May a Christian use such a prescription? This is an actual case which has occurred. Is astrology compatible with Christian faith? What does the Gospel say to polygamy? It has in some places seemed to offer a great opportunity for shrewd polygamists, who were tired of unnecessary and middle-aged wives; and the missionary has had to decide whether the unnecessary wives were to be ruined by the polygamous husband's acceptance of Christ. How many centuries did it take for the Christian world to decide whether slavery is economically right, and whether what is morally wrong can be economically right? When we see an independent native church in India and in China, we shall see a great deal of Indian and Chinese philosophy incorporated in Christian thinking, which will certainly be uncongenial to ourselves, but which may or may not be germane to the mind of Christ. How much of religious usage is to be preserved with or without a new significance, transformed and assimilated? Or is all ritual of the older religion rejected, as a danger to the new faith? In the phrase of the parables, how far is it wise to go in putting new wine in old wineskins?

How far could the adherents of the new Christian

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faith in that old Mediterranean world go in accepting the ordinary education of the day? Was it too pagan? Was it inevitable unbelief and idolatry? Is style in this instance to be severed from thought, or can the Christian accept the great literary traditions of the past untouched by their paganism? Could he accept the art of the past? That meant the statues, the idols, the Aphrodites, the temples; if he rejects these, what could art mean? But if art is rejected, the life of man is mutilated; and was it conceivable that life in Christ lacked something that life without Him gave? I was criticized myself in southern India for speaking to Christians of the great temple of Madura as an architectural achievement; it is carved all over with idols; it has heathenism in every stone; supposing the whole community become Christian, what can it do with a temple whose every stone defies Christ, to say nothing of decency?

Once again, how far could the adherents of the new Christian faith go in accepting the economic order of existing society? Here we have to remark that there is, in the main, less question, because in most ages of our history the economic challenge is never so explicit as the literary; economic thinkers, and still more, business people who do not think, seem to resent contradiction more than artists, philosophers, or men of letters; we accept the economic rules of everyday life, we are slow to recognize economic facts, even when they clash with what otherwise we believe. How far could the social and personal habits of the day be accepted? What is moral, what is immoral? The usages of daily life, like the Imperial order which

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crowned the whole structure of society, were all tainted with idolatry. The problem of the supremacy of the State, the problem of standardization by social environment and common education,—perhaps even to-day we do not find it easy to solve these.

The church, as we see, was face to face with a thought-out society; its own principles were not yet thought out; and the question the student soon reaches is this: How far were those early Christians conscious of a unity of experience, a unity of ideal, with that larger society, how far conscious of diversity, and how far was the diversity significant or material? Must all life be remodelled—and why? Or only some of it? All the old familiar problems of drawing lines, of the number of grains that make a heap, etc., are revived; endless distinctions have to be drawn with every kind of uncertainty; and as the watcher of the struggle realizes what is going on, and how vital are the issues for all time, the fascination of the study grows. It is part, after all, of our own story, this conflict between the ideals of Christ and the traditions of our race.

It may seem a simple division of society to distinguish in it the three groups, the worst, the neutral, and the best; but simple as the division may seem, it is a question where in that ancient world the war was really waged. There is in every human society a large mass of decent or half-decent people, either quite unreflective, or only reluctantly stirred to occasional reflection. I cannot help asking myself whether in the ancient world that mass of unreflective mankind was not, as it so often is, a sort of body of Patroclus, almost

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dead in itself, for which the contending forces were battling. From time to time this neutral section woke to some consciousness and realized dimly that something was happening, felt vaguely that some change was inevitable, and wondered whether the change need be so great after all. Each successive awakening has been apt to mean some progress recorded; but the progress is always slow, and hard to track through a maze of compromise. Putting all this section of society on one side, we have to ask whether the real conflict of the church was with the best or with the worst. Would the best elements co-operate with the church in relation to the world? The classical scholar will hesitate to affirm this. But if the best of society are to co-operate with the church, the best have to be won. It is the thesis of this book that the best was very good indeed, and that it was won for Christ.

There are two lines of approach. As in modern India the capture of the untouchables by the Christian church, sometimes a whole tribe at a time, is recognized by thoughtful Hindus as one of the greatest challenges and dangers to their religion, so in the ancient world we find the Christian apologist pointing with something of pride to a new life in the depraved, to manhood and womanhood remade in a larger mould, a truer and more God-like. Secondly, there is the appeal to the best elements in the world along the lines of agreement.

Then for what are we to look in our study of this ancient world? There are various choices. We may, if we choose, look at the worst—at the moral degradation of society. We may steep our minds, if we

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have nothing better to do, in Juvenal, or perhaps Martial, and recall heathen ways and habits, which, it might be said, may be found again almost as easily in Paris or New York; or we may study certain recognized practices of society and the judgments of human nature and morals which underlie them, practices and judgments with which the Christian apologist challenged his heathen critic. Or we can turn, as so many do to-day, to the emotional movements in society, and study the mystery religions. Perhaps it would be a good thing to study the mystery religions, for to-day they are brought before us with an enthusiasm that outruns knowledge. The different cults are recklessly blended to produce a general type. But it is far from clear that the type which modern writers offer us ever existed. We do not know exactly what was taught in one or another of these religions; where we are given hints, it is not always clear what those hints imply; the modern advocates of the mystery religions seem careless in this matter, and in any case they are not dealing with theologies which have been thought out as the Christian theology has been. We may be too easily the victims of casual similarities or loose analogies; and some of the most assured writers on the subject can hardly be acquitted of guess-work. It is very difficult to date the documents on which we have to depend for our inside information; we do not know at all precisely the range of diffusion of these cults nor the extent of their popularity; they may have been essentially secret and esoteric; but perhaps the most important fact is the small attention which the apologists give to the mystery religions as compared with the great tradi-