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Christianity in Its Modern Expression—A Review

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Christianity in Its Modern Expression. By George Burnam Foster, late Professor of Philosophy of Religion in the University of Chicago. Edited by Douglas C. Macintosh, Professor of Theology in Yale University.

These are lectures on dogmatics and ethics, in the form last delivered to his theological classes. The editor says of Professor Foster, in the preface: "He could take more daring excursions into the realms of doubt that would have been spiritually safe for a less deeply religious man."

We agree that this properly characterizes him, if this book is a fair sample of the man. But was it safe for his classes to be led into such excursions of doubt from which it is to be feared that many of them never returned with a living faith? Professor Foster stands on the extreme left of Modernism. Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Kaftan are more to his mind than the Apostle Paul.

THE VIEWPOINT. "In the Christian religion what we have to do with ultimately, is a spiritual relation, not the holding of any particular historical datum as true. It is a supersensible, superhistorical relationship that we are concerned with; and the *requiring* of adhesion to any fact in history is subversive of the Christian religion. A jury of twelve scholars would scarcely agree on oath with reference to any historical fact in the life of Christ. It is too much to require adhesion to this or that historical fact, in order to be a Christian?"

Whether this is extreme rationalism or mysticism is hard to tell. How could a man establish a relationship to God unless he believed in the being of God, and the reality of the relationship to be established. We cannot so easily brush away the importance of beliefs, historical or otherwise.

GOD. Apparently accepting Kant's theory of knowledge with its limitation of the value of phenomena, and the regulative prerogative of subjective concepts, Professor Foster relegates to the scrap heap the ordinary proofs for God's existence, and declare that "The reality of such a God and of his dominion in the world can never be reached by a syllogism of the understanding; but can be apprehended in the heart's receptivity for redeeming and pedagogic love."

We ask: Why the arguments for the divine existence should be pitted against each other? If the appeal to the understanding is not as legitimate in its place as the appeal to the feelings? If two strings to a bow are not better than one? If we are imposed upon in the constitution of our being as to our perceptions, are we not equally deceived in our intuitions? Does not the argument against the validity of our objective knowledge make for the invalidity of our subjective knowledge.

REVELATION AND INSPIRATION. The author endeavors to show by a series of questions and answers that we cannot arrive at the trustworthiness of the Scriptures from a doctrine of divine inspiration; and says: "Here the thread of the orthodox system snaps." But Professor Foster formulated the questions, also the answer. When an attorney is prosecutor and witness, too, he has an easy case. But the Professor does not ask what the Scriptures have to say about their own inspiration, nor does he even surmise that what they say has any force against his dictum.

The formulation of doctrine, in Professor Foster's view, take slight account of the *ipse dixit* of the Scriptures, and none whatever as to their authoritative inspiration. "If the Christian religion is a sum of propositions, then it must be propagated by proof. But if its content is will and personality, then its propagation must be by will and personality." But we cannot escape propositions. Any statement of the content of Christianity is a proposition; even the statement that its content is will and personality. To deny its propagation by proof is to deny its intellectual content. To repudiate every proposition because it has an intellectual content is to reach the decision that nothing is true. If nothing is true, then the statement that nothing is true is not true, and the denial denies itself. Moreover, the intellectual concept of Christianity cannot be separated from its moral power. As a man thinketh in his heart so is he. That is not only inspired Scripture, but absolutely correct psychology.

Professor Foster further says: "The orthodox doctrine of the Scriptures affirmed their inerrancy. In this assumption it is dominated by a definite view of the origin of the Scriptures, that is to say, that the Scriptures originated from inspiration. The whole doctrine is based essentially on the inner witness of the Spirit." And Professor Foster thinks that no man can distinguish between the witness of the Spirit and the motions and notions of his own spirit.

He says: "There have been many attempts to change the inspiration-concept without changing the inspiration doctrine. This marks the beginning of the downfall of orthodoxy."

THE RELATION OF SCRIPTURE TO DOCTRINE. "Since the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is accessible to us only through the Scriptures, there must be Scriptural proof for every proposition in Christian dogmatics; but a proposition is not Scriptural because passages can be quoted in its support. It is Scriptural because it issues with inner necessity or consequentialness from the believing surrender to the revelation of God to which the Scriptures bear witness."

If we can extract a meaning from this, it seems to be that the source of dogma is not the Scriptures alone, nor predominantly, but a sort of congruity between the Scriptures and man's religious convictions and experience. Which is the more authoritative, the Professor does not say; but we discern clearly enough the principle of subjectivism, and surmise an element of mysticism due to the Pantheistic philosophy that lies in the background. More, the Scriptures are not the revelation of God, but only the witness of a revelation.

The view is further shown: "The material for dogmatics cannot be obtained from the Scriptures by *purely exegetical, historical information*, though such is essential. New Testament theology yields as such no Christian dogmatics. Dogmatics seeks not only to understand what is given in the New Testament in its historical actuality, but to win a judgment as to: with what *right* and in what *scope* faith may and must recognize a real revelation of God in what is narrated concerning Jesus Christ, and how correct was the understanding of the revelation by the New Testament witnesses."

In the sense in which Professor Foster uses the word 'faith' we gather that it does not merely connote an attitude of trust or belief nor a receptive faculty, but becomes a co-ordinated source and authority in religious things. Here revelation does not determine the content of faith, but rather faith determines the content of revelation.

CHRISTOLOGY. Who and what was Jesus Christ? In what aspect did he present himself to the world? Must we regard Jesus Christ under the same concepts as did the apostles, or are we privileged to reject their conceptions and still keep him and find in him a saviour? Let the Professor speak: "Paul conquered with the cosmic Messiah, not with the historic Jesus. Can religion do without mythology? Can we conquer with the plain simple categories of forgiveness, humility, righteousness, etc.? The great Messianic concept was the functional reality with which the primitive church conquered. They regarded it as ontological reality; but to-day we see that it was only machinery, and we put it aside as unusable by us, much as we put aside the old reap-hook in harvest and use the modern binder."

This is frank enough. We are not to accept Jesus Christ for what the apostles thought he was or said he was (what Jesus Christ himself thought he was or said he was we cannot answer with certainty); but we must in fact *make* our Christ out of the residuum of historical criticism and our subjective valuation. We are not, therefore to transfer Scriptural conceptions into dogmatics, nor to regard them as of permanent validity of faith. All knowledge is in flux; all faith is in flux; we are certain of nothing except our negations. We look only at phenomena, and they are deceptive; what the reality is who can tell? That is the left wing of modernism.

In one thing we agree with Professor Foster. He says: "Schleiermacher did for religion what Kant did for knowledge." Exactly true, for both of those worthies absolutely muddled the question with

which he dealt. Kant's transcendentalism led to absolute idealism, and Schleiermacher's mystic subjectivism led to a more subtle species of unbelief than Rationalism ever dreamed of.

To make his position more clear: "Must dogmatics content itself with a faithful reproduction of the Biblical estimate of Jesus? It must not be assumed that the New Testament theory is to remain eternally in theology. The question is: What re-valuation of Jesus is necessary to make him serviceable in the life of the modern man? Jesus Christ must be recast from the biblical form into the mould of the modern mind.

THE THEANTHROPIC PERSONALITY. "According to the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*, the peculiarity of the divine nature was communicated to the human, so that the human became omnipotent, omniscient, etc., and the peculiarity of the human was communicated to the divine, so that the divine could suffer and atone for human sin. Perhaps the form of the orthodox doctrine was necessary when the doctrine was excogitated; but that terrible being, the modern man, cannot do anything with it."

As an amateur theologian, we submit that Professor Foster has not stated the Reformed Christology correctly, except perhaps the peculiarity of one sect. The transfer of attributes is ruled out. The hypostatical union of two natures in one person may be unique, but involves no contradiction, and is abundantly justified by the evidence. Of course, in Modernism there is no divinity in Jesus Christ other than in every man, except more intensified. "If Jesus is an alien importation into the race, then we cannot take Jesus as a piece of the whole and judge by him. But if Jesus came up within the race, we can." The meaning is that we must judge God by his works. Why shall we not judge God by Nero and Herod? God is as good as his best work, and therefore as good as Jesus is. We may therefore love a God that is as good as Jesus is. Thus the person of Jesus may be an object of faith, for therein we have the fullest expression of the character of God. "In the last analysis one passes through Jesus to God as the sole object and portion of the Christian religious faith." Jesus is only the highest work of God; he is the object in which we best see God revealed. This is perfectly Schleiermacherian.

Only so much of the divinity of Christ is retained as is necessary to make him the ideal of humanity, the best expression in human life of God-consciousness. Christ interprets God to us as being the finished creation of human nature, and nothing more. When this doctrine of Jesus is carried out to its logical conclusions, it creates more difficulties than it relieves.

THE ATONEMENT. Professor Foster absolutely rejects the Messianic character of Jesus Christ, and regards him in the Pantheistic light as the highest type of man. "Who died on the cross according to Paul? Not the man Jesus, but the 'Heavenly Being,' the Messiah." The Professor repudiates the conception of Paul.

“After you have stripped off all the Messianic predicates, is the death of the man Jesus such as makes for the salvation of men? It was the death of a peasant, a man who had wanted to revolutionize theology perhaps; but who did not want to die and had no thought of saving men by his death. Is there a reduction of values as the Messianic predicates are reduced? Is not the human more than the Messianic? Perhaps the peasant of Galilee has 'more to him' than the God-man had? If we can say so, there is a way out of our difficulty. Is not the essentially and ideally human the divinest thing we know anything about?”

No part of the book is so dogmatic as the objections to the orthodox view of the atonement.

(a) As to the necessity of penal satisfaction; on the ground that it puts “God's love in tension with his righteousness.” “If what is true of the Father is true of the Son, why should the Father have a monopoly on wrath, and why should not the reparation be made to the Son as well as to the Father? The second person of the Trinity dies that the first person of the Trinity may forgive. There must be penal satisfaction to God by God antecedent to divine forgiveness.

After all, it is not what man thinks, but what God says. But leaving out positive teachings of God's Word, we submit that the orthodox view is more consistent with the rational fitness of things than this minimizing Modernism.

To leave the race to perish in sin would impinge on God's love and mercy; to pardon without atonement, in other words, to set aside the penalty due to sin, would infringe on justice. The atonement satisfies justice and mercy and makes salvation possible with the harmony of all God's attributes, and infinitely better than Modernism exhibits the perfection of the divine nature.

It is not atonement that puts God's love in tension with his righteousness, but sin, and the atonement is the way out of it.

(b) The second point of objection is vicarious satisfaction; that God's righteousness is to be satisfied by the transference of guilt and punishment to the guiltless. This is only to say that the exercise of God's love and mercy is not satisfying to himself. It pleased God to show forth his love and mercy by saving man by his Son, and the Son was party to the contract. If God had laid penalty on an innocent one without his consent, there would have been injustice; but God maintained his perfect righteousness by the assumption of the penalty. Thus God could be just and justify the ungodly. That God permitted a substitute was an act of mercy; that he provided a substitute was a greater mercy still; but that he became the substitute was the crowning exhibition of infinite mercy and love. What could put God's love and mercy in better light than his own assumption of the penalty of human sin? To smirch God's righteousness in such a case is to abuse his grace. When we consider the modernist's view of Christ's death, it is trivial in comparison.

(c) Objection that Christ should be considered at the “object of divine penal judgment and the bearer of the divine wrath and curse.” “A God who would forsake Jesus on the cross is not the Christian God at all.”

This, of course, overlooks the unity of the Godhead in the plan of redemption, the offices of the persons in the Godhead (in Modernism there is no distinction of persons in the Godhead), the voluntary assumption of human nature in the incarnation and of liability in the work of atonement.

(d) Objections to the effect of a vicarious satisfaction constitute “the dissolution of the ecclesiastical doctrine of the atonement.” What are these objections? (1) The active obedience of Christ in fulfilling the precept of the law does not excuse man from the requirements of obedience and its therefore not vicarious; “but typical, exemplary, and obligating us to imitation.”

Well, the exemplary features are not less on the ecclesiastical view than on this modern. The orthodox view possesses ALL the advantages of the modern and many others besides. The vicarious view does not take an iota from the exemplary values of the atonement, but adds to it values of which the other is destitute.

The modern view makes Christ an example, but the orthodox view makes him an example and a substitute, too, and not less the one because the other.

It is to be observed that Christ's vicarious obedience was not a substitute for the obedience which man can render, else we would have antinomianism, but for that degree of obedience which he cannot render in his fallen state to the demands of God's perfect law. The fact that both Paul and James had to meet the error of antinomianism, is proof positive that they had preached a doctrine of vicariousness, for it is just such a doctrine that would be misconstrued into antinomianism. Had Paul, James and the early church preached salvation on the ground of works, obedience, imitation, no such misconception would have been possible. The error that arose shows what doctrine of the atonement was preached. The doctrine of the apostles and the New Testament is a doctrine of vicarious atonement. But all this is lost on the modernist since he recognizes no obligation to accept the view of the apostles and the writers of the New Testament.

(2) Objection is made to the satisfaction of penalty by the vicarious suffering of Christ since man's physical sufferings continue; and as to eternal sufferings “the God-man did not suffer eternal death.” “His endurance of the punishments of hell could be only moral sympathy, not an active endurance of the sufferings of the lost.”

We are not obligated to such a position in holding the various nature of Christ's sufferings. That is a horn of a dilemma which we decline to accept. An atonement of infinite value because made by a person of infinite dignity and worth satisfies all the requirements as to form. And that is was vicarious

is written on nearly every page of the Scriptures, and confirmed by the experience of the universal church which has never ceased to sing:

“I lay my sins on Jesus,
The spotless Lamb of God.
He bear them all and frees us,
From the accursed load.”

That is not only Scriptural, but experiential.

Moreover, this modern view makes Christ not the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifices as types of his own, but the annulment of the whole sacrificial conception contained in those types. Thus the New Testament is not the development of the Old, but the antithesis. It would make Christ say: “I came not to fulfill, but to destroy.” The whole question goes back at length to the relation of man to God's eternal law of righteousness. Modernism calls the ecclesiastical doctrine a return to legalism. It cannot abide legalism. The word “satisfaction” is taboo. The requirements of law are dissipated in a new view of God, who is above the constraint of law. Can God set aside his own laws? Is not all law the expression of God's nature? To set it aside would be contradiction in the nature of God. Hence the necessity of such an atonement as the Scriptures give us. This is what Modernism hates and stigmatizes as legalism. If Modernism would escape the realm of law, natural or moral, it must get out of the universe. The church doctrine does not make less of God's love than Modernism, but preserves the balance of the divine attributes. God's love moves to save. But love without holiness is capricious and erratic. The expression of God's righteousness in the atonement is that feature of satisfaction which Modernism repudiates as legalism and casts out as an offense.

Modernism's historical criticism present the same negations.

Professor Foster says: “In Jesus' won thought of his death there is an entire absence of the doctrine that that death had an objective reference God-ward, on account of which alone God would forgive sin; witness the parable of the prodigal son.”

It is a fatal fallacy to make that parable the sum of the whole plan of salvation instead of a fractional part. And Christ said: “This cup is the New Testament in my blood shed for the remission of sins.” And further, he “came to give his life a ransom for many.” An objective atonement cannot be eliminated from the Scriptures.

Again it is said: “The voluntariness of the death of Christ, as set forth in the church doctrine, is not supported by the facts of the record of the life of Christ.” But John 10:18, “No man taketh it from

me, but I lay it down of myself; I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it again.”

But now, what is the view of Christ's death set forth in this volume?

“It is the suffering and death of the martyr; the suffering and death of the innocent on account of the sins of the guilty that saves society—like that of Bruno—and if the sight of the toiling and suffering of the righteous for the sins of the guilty will not save, *nothing will.*” (Italics ours)

The view of Christ's death is that it is nothing more than the death of a martyr. It is on the same plane as the death of Bruno or Abraham Lincoln. It is a lofty example of fidelity to principle, but its only saving power is in the example which it sets and the stimulus that it gives.

If this is all, what a farce is the New Testament! With what propriety can the apostles point to Jesus as “the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world”? Or say, “The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin,” or “There is none other name whereby ye can be saved” If martyrdom and example were all, then the New Testament should have set forth the glory of martyrdom in general and not held up Jesus Christ as the only Savior from sin. If this view of Christ's death be correct, then Christ is no more a Saviour than any other martyr, and we might as well read the lives of Bruno and Lincoln, and expect to be saved by their example. Then, too, the incarnation was needless; for any noble example of martyrdom would have served as well as that of Jesus. Thus modernism, boastful in its destructiveness, is absolutely puerile in its constructiveness.

Further, Professor Foster cannot too vigorously repudiated the Messianic idea of Jesus Christ, especially as related to atonement. He says: “The category of the heavenly Being or the Messiah, is not of the modern world. Our task is to substitute for the mythological vessel” (the human-divine Messiah) “the vessel of immanence,” (the Pantheistic conception of God in man) “and to preserve the eternal gospel in the forms of our time.” “With the change of the modern world view we can keep the myth of Messianism only by moral insincerity.” “There are only two interests to be satisfied in our doctrine of the meaning of the death of Jesus: First can the modern man assent to it? And, second, can the religious man be satisfied with it?”

What is this modern view of the world?

The immanence of God pressed to the borders of Pantheism; the evolution of the universe by virtue of this immanent power; the supernatural resident in the natural; all men divine as being the product of immanent divine evolution; Jesus Christ divine in the same sense as other men, but the highest and best expression of immanent evolution.

Thus we get a Pantheistic God, an evolved universe, a natural supernatural, a human Christ, an exemplary atonement, a Bible which is the record of man's growing religious concepts.

Immanence in extreme is Pantheism; transcendence in extreme is Deism. Orthodoxy keeps to

the middle of the road and holds both in proper balance. Modernism in some of its forms is essentially Pantheistic. It is the recrudescence of Spinoza, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, and Schleiermacher. Professor Foster is deeply read in this speculative philosophy, and it gives form to his dogmatics. "Evaluation" is a key word in Modernism. Everything must be evaluated, even Jesus Christ, with proper discounts or appreciation for the needs of the present day. Well, Modernism must be evaluated, too, and when it is, it will be found wanting. The modern man will have something to say even about Modernism.

Will this modernism satisfy the modern man? We venture to say it will not. The modern man will be no more satisfied with the impalpable vagueness of this modernism than he is reputed to be satisfied with the subtleties of Scholasticism. This terrible modern man, who is ever demanding of the world to "get down to brass tacks," has no affinity for a will-o'-the-wisp. Side from its utter irrelevancy to revealed truth, it fails to satisfy a logical and serious mind because so systemless, chaotic and intangible. The human heart and mind ever cry out for certainty, and will never consent to take a final stand on a quicksand without bottom. We turn from all this and say: "But we have a more sure word of prophecy to which ye do well to take heed as unto a lamp that shineth in a dark place."

One naturally wonders why Professor Macintosh gave this book to the public. If it was to exhibit the extreme radicalism of Modernism, he has admirably succeeded. If it was to stamp that Modernism with the imprimatur of the chair which he holds, he at least succeeded in giving a rather black eye to the theology of the great New England university.

In closing, we may say that Spinoza accounts of Schleiermacher, and Schleiermacher accounts for Professor Foster, and Professor Foster accounts for a considerable lot of current Modernism.