

## Religion and Life.

BY THE REV. CHARLES COURTENAY, M.A.,

*Late Vicar of St. Peter's, Tunbridge Wells.*

THE question of modern religion and modern life is engaging the thoughts and pens of many at the present time, and another contribution to this burning subject may not come amiss.

There seems to be, unhappily, some serious cause for anxiety on the part of those who care for the spiritual welfare of their race, for the visible aspect of religion and life is not healthy; indeed, the many ugly symptoms only too visibly point to something radically wrong with the body Christian. Every age has, no doubt, its alarmists, who are ever crying "Wolf"; but it is not the alarmists who are crying out this time, but the sober, quiet people who, as a rule, possess their souls in patience.

I. Let us soberly and calmly look around us, and try to reckon up the spirit of the present age, not laying too great stress on details, nor seeking to aggravate symptoms which are innocuous.

For one thing, the *spirit of inquiry* is well to the fore in this present age. The old sacred fences which surrounded holy truths have long been broken down, and men are swarming over the ground like the crowd on a cricket field when the bails are removed. Nothing is to-day taken for granted. Everything is being shaken to test its stability. The fires of criticism are playing over the most sacred of documents, the most venerable of doctrines, and the most ancient of institutions. Old claims, accepted for many a long century without question, are being challenged one by one. It is not so much superstructures which are being examined as foundations. Now, *reverent* inquiry we welcome gladly, for why should we fear investigation, when we know that our ground is sure? But this spirit of free inquiry to-day is not always reverent. It is a hunt as for rats, which are to be destroyed.

Not only is this an age of inquiry, ruthless and rigid, but it is *an age of resurrections*. The study of comparative religions has much to do with these resurrections of old faiths, for out of Buddhism has emerged an esoteric Buddhism; out of Hinduism has been evolved a Theosophic system, embodying much of its tenets. Plotinus has his devotees to-day; the Neoplatonists are being reproduced, and no doubt the list might be considerably lengthened. All this reminds us of the days of decaying Rome, when Paganism was dying; then, you remember, the cult of the foreign and the odd ran its violent course, the East being ransacked for new faiths.

It is an age, too, of *strange conceit*; a conceit which, in its naturalistic tendency, deems human nature sufficient, without any outside importation. Man is again making self the great source of religious life, and the belief that to follow nature is to do right is largely prevalent. Probably, evolutionary thought is largely responsible for this, for does it not teach that man is on the upgrade, moving on to higher and higher perfections? To the modern, even sin is only a stage in the process of life, being just a dark tunnel reaching up to the light, presently to be met. And this conceit has awkward tendencies, compelling man to deny any other source of life than self.

It is only natural, too, that, being all this, it should be an age of *great denials*, that what is mysterious should be rejected, that the supernatural should go by the board, and that the Personal God should be resolved into a Great Unknowable, an Infinite, a Stream of Tendency, an Absolute.

Whatever is a strain on faith is rejected as impossible. There is no tendency to believe as of old, "because it is impossible." And because this strain attaches itself to most of our most cherished Christian truths, they must go. The Virgin Birth is out of the course of nature. No evidence is sufficient to prove the Resurrection of the Lord; the Ascension sounds too like a legend to be admissible. Of course, miracles draw far too largely on our credulity to obtain the assent of the intellectual world. And so they are all calmly thrown over-

board. What else, they say, can thinking, sensible people do? At the present time a philosopher is known, not by his reasoned beliefs, but by the number and quality of his doubts.

Naturally, because of these tendencies of to-day, the present is *an age of great unsettlement*. Nobody seems to know what is left standing amidst the smoke and dust of the fierce assault. The general world stands between the two positions—the position of the old theology and the position, proud and self-reliant, of the new—hesitating which to follow. For the assaulters are no longer ambushed; they have come into the open. They run a Rationalist press, they sell their publications at the cheapest possible cost; their lecturers stand at the street corners and preach aloud their unsettling doctrines; they mix their ferment with books of fiction; they write to the newspapers. That, under these circumstances, the unthinking and untaught crowd should be mystified and nonplussed is not to be wondered at. They hear the triumphant shouts of the assailant, and fancy that there must be something valid in the note of victory, and, so long as they are left to their ignorance, what can we expect but a crumbling of the little faith they have? You offer them a Bible, and they will tell you calmly that it has no authority, because the Higher Critics and the Modernists have emptied it of all its genuineness. You quote the verdict of the Church at large, and they tell you that a Church divided against itself can have no weighty and authoritative voice.

Now, if this unsettlement were confined to a few, we might calmly say, "No matter; it has always been so; history is only repeating itself." But, unfortunately, it prevails largely. The man in the street has been caught by the sceptical tide; the young are infected by it; and even in circles where we might least expect to find it, it turns up and stares you in the face with the most unblushing effrontery. Yea, and even in Christian spheres this spirit, like a rising tide, has eroded whole stretches of faith.

And yet, amidst all this incredulity of the time, it is also *an age of great credulity*. That an age which is rejecting the

truths of the Gospel should take in the hoary heresies of the past and the baby heresies of the present is surprising enough ; yet so it is. What is denied to a Christ and to a Paul is given freely and unquestioningly to Mrs. Eddy, and what the philosophers of the Christian Church have believed for nineteen centuries is passed by at the demand of a modern Campbell. In fact, the very people who shake their wise heads at the claims of Christian truth will crowd the palmists' chambers and gaze ecstatically at the necromancer's crystal ball. The clients of the fortune-teller are in many cases the apostates of the Christian Church. Having turned Christianity out of doors, they welcome the charlatan, the cheat, and the wizard. Men must believe something, and if they will not credit the reasonable and the divine, they are given over to believe a lie, smitten through and through with strong delusion.

That it should also be *an age of levity* is not at all surprising. Religious doctrines are dealt with in the most jaunty of fashions, and discussed with the same easy manner as the last ball or the state of the weather. Half the world scarcely seems to realize that these are eternal questions, matters of awful moment, and that golden things ought not to be thrown about like pebbles. It is this lack of seriousness which is one of the most distressing signs of the times ; an utter inability to see the gravity of the spiritual. Mankind nowadays is too much like a ship without either cargo or ballast, with all anchors hauled up, and drifting lightly here and there as the currents choose to take them. Being the sport of the waves, we naturally expect just such a cork-like buoyancy as exists. Men call it freedom ; it is more like tragedy.

The direct consequences of all these sad features of the age are that it is also *an age of license*. Is it any wonder that we see the world engulfed by a high and strong wave of worldliness just now, like the tidal wave after the earthquake ? And what this advanced, and advancing, wave is sweeping away we know too well. It is removing some of the most sacred of our landmarks. It is helping to decimate our churches. It is

depleting the Church of its old, warm blood, and replacing it with the chilliest of chill fluids. It is shutting men's Bibles, secularizing our Sundays, and profaning what we most venerate. Its effects are seen in our churches, our Sunday Schools, and in the increasing difficulty of filling the vacancies in our working staff. It is lifting pleasure to a serious pursuit, and crowning sport, games, and amusements with a dignity and importance which they never have had before, except in heathen ages. Our sacred services are only tolerable when they are made spectacular and professionally perfect. The money which once helped to keep parochial wheels turning is now, in many cases, consumed on bridge, week-ends, motor-cars, and extravagant dress. The sons are not as their fathers were, and when the old generation passes away, it is a common complaint that the heirs do not fill their places. How can they, when they dismiss their fathers' faith and godliness? When the fear of God is gone, there is not much left.

And yet all the time the gay world smiles on, expecting, it seems, that flowers are to be grown without roots, that ships are to be sailed without pilots, that harbours are to be entered in the dark with nobody at the tiller, and that the machinery of life is to be run by moonbeams.

Such are a few of the disquieting signs of the times ; familiar to us all and questioned, I think, by none. The fear is lest, in our love of peace and quiet, we cover them up and refuse to face them ; although, how it is possible to do so when they thrust themselves close to the most purblind, I cannot think. Things are not improving ; we are not as a Christian people holding our own ; the Church is fast losing its faith and integrity ; faith is being submerged by a rising tide of doubt ; indifference is smiting even more, and all the land over the religion of the Lord Jesus is being thrust into the background.

II. I have put the question as uncompromisingly as I could, because I feel that the more clearly we see things, the more likely we are to be on our guard and to try to reverse the evils of the day. But first, I think, we must ask the question whether

there is no blue sky of religion ; whether there are no alleviations.

I think there are. I think the very symptoms of unrest have a good side to them. If we cannot get full satisfaction from this conviction, we get enough to lead us on to inquire further. Let us endeavour to discover, if we can, some hopeful signs from the present darkness.

*Is inquiry, let us ask, wholly bad ?* May it not be distinctly good ? People who are wholly unconcerned about religion do not study religious matters, do not ask questions, do not burn midnight oil over them. And *ought* we not to inquire, and search, and grope about the foundation of things ? How can we give a reason for the hope that is in us, if we have not found any reason for ourselves ? Are minds given us to lie fallow, and are thoughts to be shut down like a played-out mine ? Are we intended to open our mouths and shut our eyes, and take what any religious teacher may be disposed to give us ? The Church of Rome may command it, but not the Protestant Church of England. If it be a fact that only the truth which we have digested and spiritually grasped is of any avail, then there is all the reason in the world why we should examine all claims and test all offered truth. The heap of truth which lies on the mind is larger than we are conscious of ; we have to treat it as the unground corn in the hopper of the mill is treated—turn the mind's handle, that it may fall within the rollers and be ground into wholesome wheat. May not, then, the sceptical world be working out its own enlightenment by the very process of thought which so far has had such unpleasant consequences ? I do not think we need ever despair of an honest inquirer coming round to the truth.

There is a little satisfaction, too, to be gained from the *sceptical world's honesty*. They say, " We cannot come to your churches because we are not persuaded that you are right. And so we prefer to stand back until we can come honestly." Probably, in the olden days, there were many who had as little religion as the modern man, but they disguised it, covered over their in-

difference and doubt with silence or nominal adherence, or with a general acquiescence. This is not the case to-day, when it has become more fashionable to deny than to profess. There is no fear of public opinion being against the unbeliever now, for the fashion lies elsewhere. But this present attitude may be a more moral thing than the old, and we are more likely to see good come from it than by the falsity of nominal consent. The cold is better than the lukewarm, we are taught.

There is also a clear possibility that scepticism will *work its own cure*, from the fact that the failure of search in the wrong direction may lead the seekers to turn their weary eyes to the orthodox faith. We know that they are wandering in boggy ways in which they will never find foothold, and we can only hope that after they have slipped about enough they may see the wisdom of planting their unsteady feet on the Rock of Ages.

Neither must we forget that as there is a *Providence which watches over children and drunkards*, so the same Providence is watching over these wanderers. He, Whose love is so infinite, is not likely to forget the many who, longing for the light, cannot yet see their way aright. He who bore with a Thomas, and finally led him into the safe harbour of faith, can be trusted to guide all erring feet into the true fold, if so be they are honest seekers for truth.

There is a big bit of brightness, too, in *the analogy of the past*. Dark days of carelessness and unbelief are not confined to the present age. Take the eighteenth century, and we may congratulate ourselves on our present spiritual condition. And God Who drew back the sceptical veil, and irradiated the land with the light of the Gospel through the efforts of His servants, will, doubtless, in due time bring light into the darkness. The darkest hour is before the dawn, and we may therefore confidently hope that some great spiritual revival will come to break up the present indifference.

If, too, we are at the parting of the ways in religious matters, where the seas of conflicting thoughts are meeting, *we may expect some disturbances*. Undoubtedly, we are passing through

a religious crisis in which the fierceness of the conflict is more evident than the usefulness of it. Nevertheless, if we believe that our God rides upon the storm we may confidently expect that the great calm will follow. The position of things to-day is not unlike the clash and thunder of some great dockyard where a monster ship is in course of construction. To the onlooker all is confusion, and it seems impossible to imagine anything perfect emerging from it. Nevertheless, we know that before long there will slide from the stays a finished, mighty Dreadnought, which shall sweep the seas if necessary. The plan was there all along, known to the builder, just as we believe the plan of the renewed Church is in the mind and purpose of our God, Who doeth all things well.

Still, with all these considerations to comfort and assure us, we must not let our eyes close on the dismal present, with its deadness and indifference and unbelief. There is less religion than there was ; there is a huge divorce of religion from life ; and there is a fear lest amongst the so-called religious many may have a name only, and are dead.

III. Passing on now to another division of our subject, let us ask ourselves *whether any blame for the present condition of things may be laid at our own doors*. Is the Church to blame for the deadness of the present age to things religious? May it not be that the alienation of men is a revolt from our unsatisfactory leading ?

For instance, have we ourselves been *fair representatives* of the faith we profess? Have we lived up to it day by day? We are not perfect ; but might we not have been more perfect, more consistent, more unworldly, more true? We are living in days when the cloth is not respected for the cloth's sake. Our people look deeper, and judge more rigorously.

Have we ever assumed the garment of *infallibility*, and presented our truth as if we were the perfect exponents of it, ranging all truth under the same category, and being as positive about disputed points as we are about the undisputed, about the minor as about the major ones? There is a fear lest in our

positiveness we declare our truths without giving any reasons for their reliability but our bare dictum? All this hurts, and is naturally resented.

Have we lost ourselves in mere *externals*, and buried ourselves under our multitudinous machinery? It is possible we have been simply fussy servers of tables, and have neglected the weightier matters of the Gospel.

It may be, too, that while we have been doing our duty well, we have been neglecting the inner heart of things; attending to the material rather than the spiritual.

It is possible, too, that *the man has hidden the God* in our work, and that we personally stood too vividly in the sunlight. Such diversion is bound to be fatal, for there is no poison so deadly as the self-spirit, when injected into our spiritual fare.

Perhaps we have been *unduly denunciatory*, condemning what we did not understand, and in our outbursts falling foul of innocent things.

It is very probable also that we have, for sheer lack of knowledge, *failed to understand modern thought* and modern movements, and, venturing to speak, have spoken foolishly. For nothing in this world is so disastrous as to deal with a man wiser than ourselves, and to correct views which we have not the power to appreciate at their true value. No layman is going to sit at the feet of a minister whose mind is a blank on the weighty questions of life, and it is a calamity for us to hear of modern difficulties first from the suffering souls who are distressed by them.

There is a tendency, too, for some minds to *throw everything into a controversial mould*, and to bring their truth, cast into bullets, to fire off at the mistaken. Controversy has its use, and the controversialist is born, not made, but no controversial truth ever converts a soul or builds up a Christian. Has the Church been too controversial?

Have we been *too frigid* in our presentation of truth, serving it up in cold masses, unappetizing and indigestible? We know the danger of it. Spiritual appetites have to be tempted, and

many a soul has been thrown off its feed by uncooked, or badly-cooked, and slovenly-served truth.

Have we raised *unnecessary barriers* to man's approach to God, making the way unduly circuitous? If the way be open, why interpose anything or anybody? Men are apt to resent these interpositions.

I have ventured to suggest a few of the causes for the common damping down of the religious fires of to-day, because, as a matter of fact, much of the diversion of men from our Church ways and orthodox creeds has arisen from such souls seeking in the new thought and ways just what we may have omitted to give them.

We have, for instance, proclaimed a *Transcendent God* and pressed this doctrine home, while often the equally genuine truth of an Immanent God has been left out. And, consequently, the New Thought, having raised this immanence to the summit of their creed, has gained multitudes. We have proclaimed a God at work in the heavens, in the Church, and in the world; they strike in with the even more necessary truth of a God at work in the human heart, resident there and inspiring. It is no new truth; it is the old, old truth since the Day of Pentecost. "That Christ may dwell in your hearts," prayed St. Paul; "Christ in you the hope of glory." And just because many of us have lost the right emphasis, we are corrected by those who saw the gap and hastened to fill it. Can we complain?

Take the question of *the inner light*, pressed for long by the Mystics and the Quakers, and now insisted on by the New Thought. We are all getting to be Mystics now, because we see that it is a real part of Divine revelation and the genuine dowry of man. But why did we drop it? Why did we so long treat the mystic faith as if it were an extravagance, and as if the cultivation of the thought of the presence of God within would be likely to lead to the visionary and unreal, as if a first-hand dealing with God was dangerous. Now that we are bringing it again into prominence, we find that multitudes have gone off

perhaps never to return again. It is easier to cast out than to recall. Surely, is it not this mystic element which is the chief charm of Theosophy and of the revived Neoplatonism? The pity is that, having lost these earnest souls, we have handed them over to systems in which much error is interwoven with the truth, for the new Mysticism is not so sane as the old.

Take the question of Christian evidences in which we have been so well drilled. But the opposition has wheeled round since those days, and has developed new methods of attack. And so the old defence touches but feebly the needs of to-day. The argument from prophecy, from miracle, from Bible coincidences and designs, are not the same sharp weapons as of old, although to us as Christians they are entirely convincing. To-day we are required to deal with Evolution and its manifold applications to life, with Philosophy and Metaphysics, with Higher Criticism and Modernism, with Spiritualism and Christian Science and New Theology. No longer do we tilt against Science and Natural Law, for Science has held out its hand to Religion, accepting its claim to insist on its own inner evidences, and accepting Christian experiences as valid proofs. The intuition and the axiom are allowed an articulate voice in the debatable sphere; and all this has made a tremendous difference to the science of the Apologetic.

Take the *findings of the New Psychology*, which are now a commonplace, but which are revolutionizing the minds of our thoughtful laity, working out into definite faiths, with huge followings; the great *power of thought* to affect for good or evil both body and soul, sweetening or poisoning the centres of life; an echo, by the way, of the old truth, "As a man thinketh in his heart so is he"; the discovery of *the dual mind*, with its objective and its subjective plane. For if this subjective mind be a reality, and if only a tithe of the powers attributed to it be valid, we are on the verge of enormous revelations. We are "more fearfully and wonderfully made" than we know. The tremendous *power of suggestion* in the moral and physical world, whether hypnotic or not, whether self-suggested or suggested

by another, the minister of Christ cannot afford to neglect. Surely, we cannot leave these findings of psychology to the quack or to the unauthorized. Whatever is a fact of God is a fact for His Church to use, is a revelation which can be easily absorbed into the Christian message. In fact, it is only in its proper place when so applied. Let it not be said that the Christian Scientist and the Theosophist exercise a more direct and sweeping faith than we Christians do. With ourselves, moreover, the pressure of such truths will be free from the extravagances of modern thinkers. The peril of the New Thought is in its tendency to Pantheism, in its identifying the world with its God and identifying the soul with God, treating it as a bit of His essence and Being. This is why we press Transcendence as well as Immanence. But let us be careful lest in our zeal for orthodoxy we denounce *all* their thought as false and misleading. It is in such ways as these, I think, that we as religious men have to mend our ways and our methods.

IV. The last division of our subject brings us to *the question of remedies*. The world is largely alienated. How shall we regain it?

*Not by surrendering our own established truth.* We are invited to do so by liberal theologians. But while we are willing to believe that many of their contentions are new forms of the old truth, we are not going to change our terminology, or throw scorn on the old theology. These are no days for surrender, but for holding fast the more strongly what we have tried and proved. The process of give and take for the sake of unity and peace may be too expensive, and is not likely to win anybody. They must step up; we cannot step down. It will possibly be found that while we have been joining hands at the outposts, the enemy has captured our citadel.

*Not by charitably covering over men's errors.* The worldly theology of the day, for all its soft speech and Biblical phrasing, is steeped in assumptions which, if admitted, will work our ruin. The golden rule in reading such works is to look, not so much at their *admissions*, but at their *omissions*. They will be found

to leave out some of the most necessary truths of our Christian faith. The reality of sin, the Divinity of our Blessed Lord, the uniqueness of our Scriptures, the necessity of an atonement, have no place in their creeds. Thus, the very foundations of our faith are ignored.

*Not, again, by blotting out distinctions.* The world is not the Church, and never can be. The natural spirit of man and the Holy Spirit of God are whole worlds asunder. The improved natural man is not made into a Christian man by his amendments. The ardent theologian, who is a keen student of truth, is not necessarily a converted man of God. In a common tendency to merge all men into a Church upon earth, we are in danger of breaking down Divine barriers and creating new standards which God does not respect. We must draw the largest of distinctions between a religion which is alive and a religion which is dead.

*Not, either, by lowering our standards.* Once begin to eliminate this or that requirement of Christ, and we may soon find ourselves in a morass. Where modern thought can raise our standard higher we are willing to raise it. We are willing, with the Christian Scientist, to insist on the intimacy between mind and body, to believe more in the sacredness of the body, and in the contention that God is the great Healer. But then this is Christianity, and ought never to have dropped out of our creed. We are willing to accept the possibility of a Divine power entering into every part of our nature—spirit, and soul, and body; but we ought to have believed this before. And if, as I think, they have shown us the duty of enlarging our Christian boundaries, and of putting a greater emphasis on certain forgotten truths, we are not ashamed to learn from them and to be thankful to them. But we are not disposed to *diminish* our boundaries anywhere—no, not by a hair's-breadth.

*Neither can we diminish our Christian demands.* We are not going to say, "It does not matter what you believe so long as you are in earnest." We are not inclined to raise sincerity into a safe religion. Neither are we going to say that all roads

lead to heaven, and that God is not particular how we approach Him. We intend to be as broad as God is broad, and to be as narrow as God is narrow, and these are our rigid limits. Repentance and faith, in our view, are the two great indispensables of the Christian's entrance, and we have no right to waive them aside as unnecessary. The need of a new nature is a prerequisite of a new life and a new standing before God. And the test of the life is always, and will ever be, the only satisfactory evidence of the possession of a Divine religion. Christ Jesus is the Way, and the only Way, and only by faith in Him do we come to the Father. We cannot diminish the supremacy of Christ by elevating men to be Christs, too, in potentiality. Neither can we broaden the narrow way to admit an unrepentant multitude. Our Christian demands on the soul are an irreducible minimum, and they are all as indispensable as the keystone of an arch. What is dispensable we are willing to waive, but the indispensable must abide.

Now all this may appear to the world as somewhat unnecessarily rigid and unbending. Let it be so; it is safer so.

Then, it may be asked, are you not closing the door against the lapsed and the lost? No, we are opening it; we are emphasizing it; we are giving it its proper prominence.

The truth is, that no propaganda which is based on surrender and compromise will ever prevail, and the sooner we understand that it is *not* along these lines that we shall win the world, the better. Christianity will become winsome to the outside world only when the exponents of it are themselves winsome. The latest modern warship has deviated from the old by the simple device of so mounting her guns that they can all be fired from either side in one great broadside. Hitherto, the Church has been firing her guns in units; what the world calls for now, if real execution is to be done, is that the whole of the Christian guns should fire as one. Single Christians have lived the true life and have done some good near at hand, but what a power would be felt if all who name the name of Christ were alive, and loving, and joyous, and kind; if all set forth the glories of

their common faith, and trod the way of life in step, and praised in unison! So long as the Church hides its light, and masks its beneficent batteries, so long shall we be ineffective in our Christian crusades. Nothing can be recommended for the rallying of her scattered children, for the wakening of her sleeping ones, and for the quickening of the dead multitude, but a Church setting forth the beauty of holiness, and instinct with the love and life of our Lord. A revived Church would mean a revived world. The reproach will go the moment her pulse quickens and the glow of joyous health shows in her face. The possibilities of our Christian religion are unspeakable. When what is possible becomes visible, the battle, so nearly lost to-day, will be won.

