

PREACHING THE GOSPEL

Approach Too Apologetic

CHURCH AWAKENING

DURING the last several generations, said the Rev. Professor John Baillie, D.Litt., D.D., when he delivered his opening Gunning Lecture in Edinburgh yesterday, those who preached the Gospel had been far too ready to conclude that life modern man had developed an immunity against its appeal. The approach, he said, had been too apologetic; the language of debate had too often been substituted for the old direct challenge. But now there were many signs that the Church was beginning to awake to the weakness of that supposedly improved strategy.

Dr Baillie instanced, in this connection, the movements associated with the names of Dr Frank Buchman and Professor Karl Barth—movements which he described as having presented a greater challenge to the religious mind of our time than any others.

AIM OF THE COURSE

Professor Baillie's lecture, which was entitled "Encounter with God," was delivered in the Library Hall of New College before a crowded audience of students and the general public. The title of the whole course is "Our Knowledge of God."

The lecturer explained that his aim was the clarification of thought in regard to the nature of our fundamental religious knowledge, particularly in the light of recent tendencies in theology and philosophy. He began by defining religion as the confrontation of the human soul with the transcendent holiness of God. When God revealed Himself to man, he said, then a characteristic disturbance was set up in the human soul and in the life of our human society, and that disturbance was what we meant by religion. The question might be raised whether there were or ever had been any men whose self-sufficient finitude had never in this way been disturbed. Was there, he asked, a consciousness which, while already fully human, was yet merely human and had never been invaded by the divine? Professor Baillie testified that he could not reach such a consciousness by going back to the beginnings of his own experience. No matter how far back he went or by what effort he attempted to reach the virgin soil of childish innocence, he could not get back to an atheistic mentality. Clearly, however, his infant experience was determined for him by the Christian tradition into which he was born. But if he had been born into the first generation of human infants, or into a society of the most primitive kind of which we had any knowledge or record, would his experience still have some religious quality, containing, as part of its substance, some encounter with the divine? One way of seeking an answer to that question was to ask whether the most primitive tribes, known either to the historian or to the geographer, were devoid of such religious awareness. That question was discussed, and answered in the negative; and the implications of that fact for the proper understanding of the missionary problem were then dwelt upon.

SITUATION IN WESTERN COUNTRIES

The lecturer, however, was more concerned with the situation in our own western lands, where the Church had to address itself to men and women who had been born into the Christian heritage and tradition, and whose lives had therefore, to some extent, been disturbed, not only by the approach of God, but by the approach of God in Christ. In those lands, he said, the Christian Gospel had been so long proclaimed that it had not only reached every ear, but had left some kind of mark on every human heart. The atmosphere in which all of us lived had been profoundly affected by Christian ideas, so that it was now impossible for any man to live in this country to-day just as if Christ had never been. This was true not only of the outward circumstances of our life—our language, our art and architecture, and our reckoning of time—but also of our most inward consciousness, and not least of our subconsciousness. The psycho-analysts had opened our eyes afresh to the great area of "repressed" disturbance of which we were not ordinarily conscious, but which accounted for so many forms of nervous and mental sickness. In the light of such closer scrutiny, then, the world's apparent self-containedness began to wear a somewhat different aspect. Our Western human nature was spiritually much more vulnerable than at first sight it looked. Our apparent self-sufficiency was largely on the surface, and did not go deep. Beneath the superficial placidity of modern society there was an uneasy conscience. And with this uneasiness the Christian gospel had a great deal to do. The great shadow on our modern conscience was the shadow of the Cross.

PROFESSOR BARTH'S VIEWS

Professor Baillie, in discussing the relation of Professor Barth's well-known views to the view he was himself concerned to put forward, said that Professor Barth would not agree that human nature had everywhere been disturbed by the challenge of God's holy presence, holding, as he did, that only in Christ had God addressed man at all. In his view there was no "point of contact" in human nature to which the Christian gospel could make appeal. The Gospel, when it was preached, did not link itself on to anything that was there already, but introduced something altogether new, so that the soul of the Christian was, in the most literal sense possible, a new creation. Man had been made once in the image of God, but, according to Professor Barth, no trace of that image was now left.

Professor Baillie argued, however, that we must not in that way completely sever the connection between the doctrine of the *imago Dei* and the doctrine of revelation. The image of God impressed upon man at creation was not a purely archaeological fact; it was a doctrine suggested to us by our present knowledge of human nature—just as was the complementary doctrine of the Fall. Professor Barth denied that our possession of a rational and responsible nature was, in any sense, a precondition of the possibility of revelation, since the omnipotent God could reveal Himself to whomsoever He chose. The objection to that position, however, was not so much one of principle as of fact. Willing as we might be to allow the possibility of God's revealing His will to "stocks and stones," we were unable to feel that in God's approach to us in Christ we had to do with that kind of exercise of omnipotence. The Christian preacher knew well that his task in leading men to a saving knowledge of Christ would be a very different one were he called upon to preach to "stocks and stones," or to beings not already endowed with reason and some sense of distinction between good and evil. He was, indeed, calling upon God to perform a miracle, but not that miracle.

NO NATURAL KNOWLEDGE

We must therefore agree with Dr Barth's critic, Dr Brunner, in holding that there was a "point of contact" in universal human nature which made possible our reception of God's revelation in Christ. Yet we could not agree with that critic in attempting to make an absolute distinction between the form and the content of the *imago Dei*, and holding that the former remained intact while the latter had wholly disappeared. Dr Barth, in his reply, had found no difficulty in disposing of that dichotomy, as also of his critic's equally sharp dichotomy between the natural and the revealed knowledge of God.

We were bound to side with Dr Barth in holding that no merely natural knowledge of God existed in the world, and that all the knowledge that did exist was the fruit of God's living and personal communion with the human soul. Yet we must differ from Dr Barth, and agree rather with Dr Brunner, regarding the actual extent and distribution of such knowledge. Dr Barth's position seemed untrue to the facts but clearly argued. Dr Brunner's position seemed nearer the truth but, because it did not go far enough, to be involved in confusion and compromise.

DR GUNNING'S GIFTS

The Rev. Principal W. A. Curtis, D.D., D.Litt., D.Theol., Dean of the Faculty of Divinity in the University of Edinburgh, who presided, introduced Professor Baillie as the twelfth holder of the lectureship, which, he said, was one of a series of munificent gifts to the University of Edinburgh made in 1887 by one of her own sons, a medical graduate, Dr R. H. Gunning, of Rio de Janeiro, who desired not only to add to the University's teaching resources and rewards for outstanding scholarship, but to commemorate the Jubilee of Queen Victoria.

To the Faculty of Medicine he gave twelve prizes, each of the value of £50. Those were associated with the names of distinguished teachers in the various subjects of the awards, and four of them were still awarded annually. As for their own Faculty, he gave them not only the Gunning Lectureship, but a series of prizes, ranging from £50 to £10.

The aim of the lectureship was to promote the study of natural science among candidates for the ministry, and he had in mind not only the Church of Scotland, but other Churches adhering to the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Professor Baillie was an alumnus of the Edinburgh School, and was held in high regard as a teacher and as an author of books on vital aspects of religious philosophy. He was appointed to hold the Lectureship not while Professor in their Faculty, but while still Roosevelt Professor of Systematic Theology in the Union Theological Seminary of New York.