

Professor of Philosophy in the University of Reading

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UNIVERSITY PAMPHLETS NO. 3

THE CHRISTIAN
IN THE
MODERN UNIVERSITY

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by

H. A. HODGES, M.A., D.PHIL.

Professor of Philosophy in the University of Reading.

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General Preface

MANY of the problems which are investigated in this series of pamphlets have been much discussed in the last year or two, largely owing to the work of the pseudonymous Bruce Truscot, who has written the first British book on the university to be widely read since Cardinal Newman's *Idea of a University* in the nineteenth century. His *Redbrick University*, and to a lesser extent, its sequel *Redbrick University and These Vital Days*,¹ focussed these problems with vigour and clarity in the context of the modern English university, and crystallised a good deal of discussion which has been going on in senior common rooms and in such bodies as the Association of University Teachers and the National Union of Students.

The further the discussion proceeds, however, and the deeper it goes, the more clear it becomes that the basic problems of "Redbrick" are in essence very similar to those of other British universities, whether in "Oxbridge" or in Ireland, Scotland or Wales. They derive from the whole intellectual climate of the age and from the conceptions which are held as to the functions of a university. War shakes all social institutions, and although the universities were the only section of the educational structure not explicitly affected by the Education Act of 1944, it was inevitable that their "raison d'être" and their achievements should come under review. For one thing, the country is awake to the need for more applied scientists and technicians, and an expansion of the universities is planned to supply them. But it is clearly short-sighted to concentrate on the production of highly trained technicians without asking the question whether the *foundations* of university education are correctly laid. When this question is asked, it is impossible not to be aware of widespread criticism on just this point from many parts of the world

¹ Faber, 1943 and 1945, respectively.

and from both senior and junior members. Not only are there Mr. Truscot's books. There is the evidence of the collapse of the German universities in the face of Nazi ideology. There is the dissatisfaction with the rôle played by many universities in countries which were occupied and which had in consequence resistance movements. There is the searching criticism of the underlying philosophy of the Anglo-Saxon universities in the recent book of Mr. A. S. Nash, *The University and the Modern World*.¹

The Student Christian Movement is inescapably involved in this discussion. It is at work in all the British universities and in Trinity College, Dublin. As a national movement within the World's Student Christian Federation, it is also in contact with the thought of university men and women in many lands. Moreover, it is anxious to play its full part in the university community because it believes that the university has a definite place within the purpose of God. But it is a junior body, conscious of its inexperience. Accordingly, in December 1943, its General Council asked that a Commission of senior members of the universities should be called together to help it "to consider the fundamental pre-suppositions of university education and their implications for the work of the S.C.M. in the post-war university". That Commission met for three days in the autumns of 1944 and 1945 and also circulated a certain number of memoranda. It included professors, lecturers and members of S.C.M. staff. They came from the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Durham (and Newcastle), Manchester, Sheffield, Oxford, Reading and London. As a result of the Commission's thought and discussions, certain points of broad agreement emerged in respect of (a) a criticism of the philosophy underlying modern university education; (b) the Christian reasons for supporting and defending with vigour a "free" or "liberal" university; (c) the essential beliefs necessary to maintain such a university; (d) the responsibilities of a Christian student in such

¹ New York, Macmillan, 1943; London, S.C.M. Press, 1945.

a university. In addition to these points, a certain number of related questions—such as the place of “vocational” training and of a faculty of theology in the university—were dealt with.

These pamphlets are an attempt to gather the fruits of the discussions and present them in a form which, it is hoped, will contribute to the debate on the university which continues in full swing. All but two are written by members of the Commission (and the authors of those two were closely associated with it), but they have been written independently, as an attempt by individual members of the Commission to present their own conclusions on the different subjects treated in the light of the Commission’s discussions. At the same time, a striking degree of unanimity in general approach will be found. This agreement is itself noteworthy; for, although all the writers are Christians, they approach the Christian faith in different ways and belong to different denominations.

We have reason to believe that the pamphlets will be read in other parts of the world as well as the British Isles; and we hope they will be criticised from all angles so that what is valid in them may be established, and what is error may be corrected. Correspondence will be welcomed by the Editor. The Commission is taking steps to present its work to a wider circle in Britain, the publishing of these pamphlets being the first of them. The first five follow a certain order of thought and should ideally be read in sequence. They all vary in the extent of audience to which they are addressed; those by Mr. Forrester-Paton and Dr. White, for instance, being addressed to junior members of the university; but it is hoped that most of them will be of interest to a wide range of both senior and junior members.

I trust it is not necessary to do more than say briefly that any form of “Christian authoritarianism” or “ecclesiastical control” is far from the minds of the

writers. If there are any doubts about this, a study of the pamphlets will remove them. The writers believe that a "free" university is for the good of Christianity itself; one of their main criticisms of the university to-day is that it is not "free" enough and that Christian students are being put in a false position in consequence. They would also raise the question as to how long a "free" university is, in fact, likely to survive in a hostile world without a considerable leaven of Christian support. But to pursue this theme any further would be to trespass upon ground covered by the pamphlets.

RONALD H. PRESTON.

*Study Secretary of the Student
Christian Movement.*

THE CHRISTIAN IN THE MODERN UNIVERSITY

THIS pamphlet is addressed to Christians in the universities, especially in those universities which have no Christian tradition and make no public profession of Christian faith. By Christians are meant not those who attend religious services because they have never bethought themselves to stop, nor those who are inclined to suppose that there might be something to be done with Christianity if only it could be refashioned in accordance with the canons of scientific thought. The people meant are those whose ambition is to live as slaves of Christ, and to bring all their reading and writing, their research and lectures and tutorials, into subjection to the Incarnate Word. The pamphlet is written from faith to faith. Those who do not come to it from faith will not be convinced by it.

1. THE SITUATION AND THE TASK.

The universities of modern Britain are liberal universities; that is, both in theory and practice they maintain the utmost freedom of thought and expression. Believing that honest enquiry can never fail to lead in the direction of truth, and taking for granted the intellectual honesty of their members, they have abolished all tests for admission except the test of intellectual ability. They took this stand during the nineteenth century, when liberal principles were on the up-grade in all spheres of life and activity.

Free trade and competition in industry, freedom of speech and association, and freedom of thought, formed at that time a compact body of ideas which seemed likely to conquer the world. To-day, while other principles begin to prevail in the economic sphere, the political and intellectual aspects of liberalism remain, so far as Britain is concerned, in full vigour.

More than a hundred years ago it was foretold that the adoption of these principles would lead, not to agreement in the truth, but to confusion; and to-day the prophecy has begun to come true. Freedom of thought has led to an increasing variety and divergence of views, and freedom of utterance has led to a certain bewilderment; for, even if we leave out the lunatic fringe which prejudice and eccentricity conspire to maintain, the variety of views set forth by competent authorities is too much for the ordinary man to master. The limit of disintegration has not been reached in this island, but it has in large areas of Europe, where we can see it leading to grave consequences. Some say that there is no solid basis of belief, that truth itself is an empty word, and give themselves up to nihilism. Others say that life is impossible if there is not at least one fixed point, and, unable to think their way through to such a point, adhere in blind faith to that doctrine which shouts loudest. In such conditions liberal principles cannot and do not survive; but some of us who have watched their steady decline, and in some countries their violent abolition, think that a great part of the dignity of man is perishing with them.

Some of the first prophets of disaster were Christians, and there has always been a strong body of Christian opinion which regarded liberalism with suspicion or open hostility. As the disintegration of thought has spread, more and more voices have been heard summoning Christians to rally in defence of their ancient certitudes. On points of detail, no doubt, the modern world has made great discoveries, but its principles are wrong, and against them

the traditional Christian philosophy must be firmly reasserted. All modern trends of thought, humanism, subjectivism, relativism, etc., are to be treated as aberrations; our business now is to recall the world to the solid principles of the "age-long philosophy".

This pamphlet is written to support a different view. It will urge that humanism, subjectivism, relativism, and the other ruling principles of modern thought, have important lessons to teach us, and that Christians have a positive interest in seeing them explored and worked out to the end. It is precisely the Christian who can make a creative use of these trends. The Christian can walk on the waves where others may sink. If this is true, it will follow that the Christian contribution to the life of a shaken world is different from what so many Christians suppose: not defensiveness, but adventurous exploration, not smothering the awkward questions which modern enquiry has raised, but going deeper into them than has yet been done. We have not to bury liberalism, but to save it from itself and give it a spiritual stamina which hitherto it has not possessed; for the only workable liberalism is precisely that which springs from Christian roots.

To make this good, I must show what it is in Christianity which leads to such conclusions, and what they mean in detail.

2. CHRISTIAN RESOURCES.

Three aspects of the Christian Faith are especially relevant here.

(i) *The Christian anthropology or conception of man.*

Since Darwin we have all learned to see man as a product of natural processes and a long development. Christianity has no interest in questioning this, but it takes matters a stage further for it sees nature itself, including the evolutionary process, as the work of God. The result of this is to show man in a rather different light. On a purely naturalistic view, man is the culmination to date.

of a process of development which is the most interesting thing in nature. By a series of adaptations, hitherto all brought about by the play of unconscious forces, life has arisen out of inorganic matter and taken to itself more and more complex forms, and a more and more intricate balance between the organism and its environment, and a more and more integrated consciousness within the organism itself. There is no reason to think that the process is ended, but with man it enters the stage of conscious planning and self-development. Man is thus a being of great intelligence and power; he explores nature, he makes himself, he is constantly reaching out into the unknown. But on a Christian view the context is wider. As man develops away from unreflective instinct he moves not into unknown territory, but towards a higher power which was there from the beginning, and from which all intelligence and power are derived. He is not so much a pioneer as a child learning to know his parent. He does not make himself, but is called into being, as in Michael Angelo's famous painting, by the touch of God's finger upon the earth.

The purpose for which God calls man into being is that man may enter into relations with God, and it is his power to do this which makes him man. It has been traditional to say that man is man by virtue of his possessing reason, and no doubt it is possible to read a rich and true meaning into this; though it may also be taken to mean mere cunning, as if man were superior to the dog simply because he can catch his rabbits more efficiently and can bury his bones without forgetting where he put them. That is not what makes him man. He is what he is because he is capable of a kind of double awareness; while seeing around him the same physical world in which his dog moves, and controlling it much better than his dog can, he can also discern a Presence half hidden and half revealed by the façade of physical things and processes. This insight gives to his own existence and activity a quite new significance. Man stands before nature as its potential

master, but in face of the Presence he is conscious of responsibilities and obligations. It gives him a new dignity, and it brings him a new kind of risk; since if he gets out of harmony with the all-pervading Presence he will get out of harmony also with himself, and will begin to tear himself in pieces. That man is now tearing himself in pieces is a fact which everyone can see. The Christian awareness of the Presence gives the explanation of the fact; and Christianity adds that a word has been spoken to man from the Presence, and a hand stretched out to heal.

(ii) *The Christian faith and hope.*

The Presence does not, in fact, sit aloof and distant. We have not to do with an impersonal or self-absorbed Absolute Being, but with the Living God, who drew men from the earth that they might learn to live in reciprocal relations with Himself. To this end the course of history is controlled; a strategy is at work which educates mankind through experience and progressively sifts truth from error. The same divine strategy controls also the life of the individual. His birth and circumstances are not accidental; and the more he understands this and lays himself open to the shaping action of God, the more he finds things work together to an end which becomes ever clearer. The Lord is His people's shepherd, guiding them along paths which they could not have found for themselves. He is their light, bestowing a wisdom and discernment beyond their unaided powers. He is their king, sending each upon those tasks which he is best fitted to fulfil; though the task which God assigns to a man in the economy of His own purpose is not necessarily the same as the function which the world thinks he can most usefully perform. Nor is it only those who know they are working for God who are in fact so working. Wherever men act in sincere good will, their action may be caught up into the divine scheme; and even where there is ill will, His strategy can make a positive use of that, and cause the wrath of man to turn to His praise.

Those who know that the Lord is King, and follow His known will with loyalty and trust, find their faith more and more justified by experience, and face events with a confidence which has nothing to do with human optimism.

(iii) *Christian personalism.*

What God does for one He does for all. Wherever I see a man, I see one to whom God speaks, and for whose good will God has paid a great price. This gives to every human being an inalienable value, a claim on our reverence and regard. And it is not only that God speaks to men; He can also speak through them. No man is omniscient or infallible, and in God's providence each may learn from any. In each man, therefore, we must see not only a potential hearer of the Word but also its potential vehicle. To alter slightly an old tag: *homo homini propheta*.

3. THE CHRISTIAN'S TRIPLE TASK.

If we survey the present intellectual situation in the light of this faith, we shall see three things which need to be done.

(i) The first is *to construct a Christian logic*. What does this mean?

By a Christian logic I do not mean a logic of Christianity. There is such a thing as a logic of Christianity, just as there is a logic of scientific research. Ever since the days of Bacon the scientist's aims, methods, and presuppositions have been subjected to detailed study, and the characteristics of that mode of thought are now well known. The thinking which goes on in connection with religious belief and doctrine, and especially in connection with Christianity, is of a different kind, but it too is no mere fanciful play of ideas. It has its own aims, methods, and presuppositions, and there is really no reason, apart from indifference and intellectual snobbery, why Christian thinking should not be as carefully studied and analysed as scientific thinking has so often been. The result would be a logic of

Christian thinking, and such a logic ought to be written. This, however, is not what I mean by calling for a Christian logic.

What I mean is a study, not of one department of thought, but of human thinking in general, carried out in the light of Christian faith. This faith has a real light to shed. It is true that there is a kind of formal logic, perhaps better known to students than any other, which is so abstract that no faith, Christian or other, has anything to do with it; but there is also a wider treatment of the subject, which takes in such questions as the nature and the criterion of truth, the limitations of human thinking and the extent to which they can be overcome, the relation between thought and its object, and the part played by thought in life. Such questions lead us in the end to the fundamental issues of the nature of man and his place in the scheme of things, and here Christianity has a word of its own to say. It is impossible that a reflective Christian should take the same view of the nature and function of human thinking as is taken by some of the movements of our time. In short, there are consequences for logic which flow from Christian faith, and we ought to set ourselves to find them.

Some of them have long been recognised among us. For instance, we often hear it pointed out that man is higher than the beasts and lower than the angels; and there are types of logical theory which misrepresent his position, either by denying him the power to know reality at all in any proper sense, or by crediting him with a range and depth of insight which is not his. Creaturehood means limitation, and for man it means long and painful struggles with the evidence, leading to momentary flashes of insight. But surely the growing consciousness, so characteristic of our time, of the relativity of all human thinking, is a striking illustration and confirmation of this verdict. Why has it a bad press among Christians? Because it is seen to tend

towards cynicism and indifferentism. But it is precisely the Christian who should be able to face the facts without these undesirable results. Man is not God; he is not even the strongest of the intelligences created to worship God. He differs from all the rest of them by being involved in the mazes of space and time, having always a past from which he comes and a future to which he yields place, always limited by the one and surpassed by the other. Yet it is just this relativity-ridden creature to whom God speaks and whose nature God has chosen to wear. God does not mock His people. If He has made them incapable of avoiding error, it is because there are worse things than being in error, and our very errors play a part in His design, turning always to His glory, and to our own profit so far as we recognise our creaturehood and place ourselves in His hands. The history of science we know, is not without instances of a false theory proving fruitful through the further enquiry which it provokes, and so leading to its own eventual correction. Are there no instances in Christian history where a false or limited approach to truth has proved similarly fruitful? God, who scatters those who are proud in the imagination of their hearts, exalts the humble and meek, and gives the Kingdom to those who in the depths of their spirit acknowledge their poverty.

But man's state is not wholly one of creaturehood. It is also one of sin and corruption. This fallen state of man is the very thing which called forth the saving acts of God in Christ; but it is also the thing which led us to crucify Him when He appeared, and to continue to this day denying and perverting His message. The will of man is diverted from its proper end and focussed on himself; and the mind of man shares in the consequent disintegration. Passion and prejudice pervert our thinking and keep us from recognising plain facts. There is also a sin which is peculiarly a sin of the mind, when instead of letting our thought follow the evidence and be guided into conformity with its object, we try to force the object into a pattern of our own.