

CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

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The Present Age

AGES differ. As generation succeeds generation there is not sameness but continuous change and differentiation. No generation of men, of all those which have preceded us, has faced the same situation as that which confronts us. Whether we will or no we live in the twentieth century and face the problems peculiar to the twentieth century. Moreover of our age as truly as of former ages it can be said in the words of the Psalmist: "It shall wax old as does a garment and shall be changed."

One of the most outstanding characteristic of our age as compared with the ages that have immediately preceded us, is that the validity of the Christian life and world view is not generally admitted. In the days of our fathers, broadly speaking, the Christian life and world view was accepted in scientific, literary, artistic and educational circles; and so by public opinion and in the better forms of social intercourse. In those days, therefore, it was not so much the theoretical as the practical acceptance of Christianity that was involved. Those who were not Christians had the feeling that they ought to be, and expected to become such before they died. Or if they rejected Christianity as false and injurious, few had the temerity to confess it. On the other hand those who were really Christians had the consciousness of being in harmony with the general bent and tendencies of the times, both intellectual and practical. The spirit of the age acted as a support and protection, carried them along as it were, so that they were as those who swim with the current rather than as those who struggle against

it. Such, however, is no longer the case.

Today there is scarcely a fundamental idea about God, creation, sin, CHRIST, the atonement, regeneration, the ideal of conduct, life after death, future judgment—ideas which our fathers in general held as common property—that is not denied in the name of science, that is not questioned in academic circles, that is not uncertain in public opinion, that has not been banned as a proper subject for conversation in many serious-minded circles. Nay, more; that set of conceptions we call Christian is being increasingly supplanted by a radically different set of conceptions. As a result the right of Christianity to dominate the thought and life of the future is widely disputed, so true is it that in many circles a non-Christian interpretation of life has superior standing to the Christian interpretation. As a consequence it is becoming more and more true that the immediate question con-

fronting the non-Christian is not whether he will permit Christianity to have practical sway over his life. He is faced with the previous question: Is Christianity true? Does loyalty to truth and duty require the adoption of another and different confession of faith than that known as Christian? Moreover, as already intimated, if a non-Christian becomes a Christian he does not find that public opinion is wholly or even predominantly on his side. Not only in schools and colleges but in popular books and magazines a purely humanistic or a purely rationalistic interpretation of life and destiny is being everywhere set forth as the only valid one. Instead of being carried along, as it were, by the prevailing tendencies in thought and life he must struggle against them. No doubt this situation has its compensations. It tends to separate those who are Christians in fact from those who are Christians merely in name. Moreover those who maintain their Christian faith in the present situation may be expected to develop a strength and purity of Christian character that was often lacking in those who lived in times when it was relatively easy to profess and call one's self a Christian—in the New Testament sense of that word.

What has been said explains why the situation confronting Christianity today is so often compared with that which confronted Christianity during the first three centuries. During those centuries Christianity existed and had to make its way against a pagan culture and civilization. Then the great issue was whether Christianity was to dominate the culture and

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Books of Religious Significance

VENTURES IN BELIEF: Christian Convictions for a Day of Uncertainty. Edited by Henry P. Van Dusen. Charles Scribner's Sons. Pp. 242. \$2.00.

THIS is a significant but hardly a valuable book. It is significant because it contains a brief statement of the sort of beliefs that are being preached by those most in demand as college and university preachers today. It tells us what Reinhold Niebuhr believes about Christian faith in the modern world, what Francis J. McConnell believes about God, what Henry Sloane Coffin believes about Christ, what Leslie Blanchard believes about the Spirit and Life, what Henry Nelson Wieman believes about the world, what Angus Dun believes about man, what Kirby Page believes about society, what Harry Emerson Fosdick believes about the Church, what Rufus M. Jones believes about prayer, what Richard Roberts believes about the cross, what David R. Porter believes about eternal life, and what Henry P. Van Dusen believes about the resources of religion.

"The essays in this small volume," we are told in its preface, "are an attempt to state the major convictions of the Christian mind, clearly, briefly and as they may be held by young men and women alert to every breath of modern thought. . . . They have been written with a common purpose and with a common audience in view—the young minds of our land as they are represented typically in the universities and colleges. And the authors share common presuppositions, a common approach to problems of Christian belief. Although there has been little consultation among them, it is doubtful whether any of the writers would wish to take serious exception to the views of his collaborators. This the contributions may be regarded as springing, on the whole, from a single point of view." We are further told, in its preface, that these essays have been collected and that they are issued under the auspices of the Student Christian Association Movement of America with the thought that "while originally prepared with youth, especially the youth of the colleges, in mind, it is believed that they may prove none the less hopeful to those of an older generation" because "the religious perplexities of youth are, typically, the problems of all thoughtful men and women of our day, but perhaps more clearly and critically expressed."

If this little book really expresses the major "Christian" convictions as they may be held by thoughtful men and women today, it may as well be confessed that Christianity, as it is set forth in the New Testament, and as it has been confessed throughout the Christian centuries by the most virile as well as the most humane of our race, is no longer tenable and that the time has arrived to catalogue it among those religions that are no longer able to meet

the needs of intelligent men. We have read the book with some care without finding even mention of any of the distinctive beliefs of historic Christianity. No doubt there is frequent employment of words and phrases that have been much used by those who have held to Christianity as taught by Christ and his apostles, but in every instance it will be found that they are used in a context that give them a significance quite different from their historic meaning. Unquestionably one of the ablest chapters in the book is that by Henry Sloane Coffin, entitled "The Meaning of Jesus," but it is hardly open to question that the Jesus whose meaning Dr. Coffin outlines is a very different Jesus than the Jesus of the New Testament and of the great historic creeds of the Church—Catholic and Protestant alike. We wonder, however, whether Dr. Coffin approves (we are sure that most of the writers of this book do) when Dr. Wieman writes: "Men have found it impossible to believe in the supernatural. Heretofore for several centuries men have envisaged their highest values and vocation in terms of the supernatural. But there is no supernatural and men are fast coming to see that there is not" (p. 101)—even though the editor tells us that probably none of the writers would take serious exception to any of the views expressed in the book. Certainly historic Christianity is supernaturalistic to the core to such an extent that Christianity de-supernaturalized is Christianity extinct. No doubt men may continue to call their convictions "Christian" even after every trace of the supernatural, in any proper sense of the word, has been eliminated from their thinking; but only those who are interested in the label rather than the contents of the bottle will be deceived thereby. A rose by any name would smell as sweet, but it does not follow that whatever we choose to call a rose will possess a rose's fragrance.

It will be seen, therefore, that in our judgment the sub-title of this book is a misnomer. And that because the convictions it commends for a day of uncertainty are not rightly called "Christian" convictions. The book would have been more accurately named if it had been entitled, "Ventures in Belief by those who no longer believe in historic Christianity."

S. G. C.

THE ATONEMENT AND THE SOCIAL PROCESS. By Shailer Mathews, Dean of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. The Macmillan Company.

THIS is another of those books that offer conclusive evidence that Modernism is something other than Christianity. It is true that its author professes to be an exponent of Christianity, despite the fact that he cheerfully admits that the "Christianity"

he commends is "different from the Christianity of the Churches, whether Catholic or Protestant." In order to justify this claim, however, he is obliged to maintain that "the only definition that can possibly be given to Christianity is that it is the religion professed by people who call themselves Christians" (p. 130). If everything that is professed by people calling themselves Christian is really Christianity Shailer Mathews is, of course, an exponent of Christianity; but if Christianity be an "historical" or "founded" religion that had a definite beginning in the life, and teaching and work of Jesus Christ and that was given its content once and for all by Christ and His apostles, it is obvious that only that is real Christianity which was taught by Christ and His apostles. We discussed the question, What is Christianity? at some length in our June issue, and need not repeat what we then said, but it may not be out of place to again remind our readers that if everything professed by those calling themselves Christians is really Christianity then not only are Mormonism, Russellism, Spiritualism, New Thought, and Christian Science rightly called Christianity but it is proper to speak of Christless Christianity and even of atheistic Christianity. A poorer definition of Christianity than that given by Dean Mathews it would be difficult to discover.

In this volume Dean Mathews' particular concern is the Christian doctrine of the atonement; and inasmuch as this book explains this doctrine away it strikes at the very heart of Christianity as it is set forth in the New Testament and the historic creeds of Christendom. According to Dean Mathews the various theories of the atonement that have appeared in the course of history, including that taught by the apostles, are but attempts to make clear how it is morally possible for God to exercise forgiveness. In the early history of the Church according to the existing social consciousness God could forgive only on the basis of an expiatory sacrifice; and, as a result, Christ's death was pictured as such a sacrifice. Later the social consciousness demanded a ransom, or a satisfaction of the divine honor or divine justice, or the payment of the debt the sinner owed God; and consequently other theories of the atonement were advanced. Today all the historic doctrines of the atonement have lost their efficiency and what is needed is a doctrine of the atonement expressed in terms of the social process. "The Christian religion," he writes, "has always seen in the life of Jesus the revelation of what is meant by 'being at one with God.' But the establishment of such a relationship on the part of maladjusted men does not