

CAN CHRISTIANITY SURVIVE ?

The Gospel and the Church

A Study of Distortion and its Remedy. By the Rev. Canon Charles E. Raven. Pp. 256. (London : Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., 1939.) 8s. 6d. net.

CANON RAVEN examines the character of Christianity in Apostolic days and also in the early centuries, and shows the serious nature of the distortions that occurred. These are more obvious in the formative period between the second century and the collapse of the Western Empire. There were three directions especially in which the primitive Gospel was abandoned : The renunciation of Nature, the distortion of history and the development of institutionalism. Dealing with the first of these he points to the stress laid on miracles, the craze for which had permeated all classes of society, and as a consequence of this obsession religion was identified with the crudest supernaturalism. The pernicious influence of Jerome in dealing with sex is well known and is shown by his deliberate mistranslation of "almāh" as meaning "virgin" instead of "a young woman of marriageable age", and in many other ways as well. He maintained that both Joseph and Mary preserved their virginity and explained the "brethren" of Jesus by asserting that they were His cousins, children of Clopas or Alphæus and another Mary, sister to the mother of Jesus.

In history the distortion is seen in the almost complete neglect of the Gospel records. With the disappearance of the earthly life of Jesus there arose a multitude of saints, some purely mythical, and through neglect of history religion was largely divorced from life. The loss of the sense of the value of Nature and history implied a change in the quality of Christianity, so much so that during the fourth century "it is doubtful whether we ought to say that the Church conquered the world or that the world invaded and subdued the Church".

In order to explain the persistence of the Church's distortion in regard to Nature and history—and we cannot deny that this distortion is still evident—it is necessary to take into account another condition of its early period, the fixing and form of its organized structure. Owing to the rapid crystallizing of Christian institutions and to the form that they adopted, transitory stages of belief became part of the Church tradition. This subject is dealt with by Canon Raven with consummate skill in Chapter v, "The Church Organic

and Organized", and he has no hesitation in attributing the lowering of the spiritual standards in the Christian institutions of the third century to the assimilation of Mithraism. The degradation of the Eucharist is described as one of the most tragic of all the distortions of the Apostolic gospel, but many will wonder whether the description given of the superstitions associated with the Eucharist in the third century is not applicable, in part at least, to large sections of Christendom to-day. If Christian orthodoxy refuses to accept the value of Nature and history—a value inherent in its own basic tenets—can it continue to survive in the environment of modern knowledge ?

Two chapters, "The Recovery of Nature" and "The Necessity of History" are constructive ; but readers will ask how far it is possible to apply in practice all that is advocated. We are told that if we are to learn the lessons that Nature can teach, "it must be by recovering the sense of its wholeness and its value, the humility and the wonder which science in its conflict with religion too largely lost". Furthermore, it appears that the population outside the churches which has discovered the absorbing interest of Nature can be approached by the churches if they free themselves from a distorted tradition. We are disposed to think that Canon Raven has over-estimated the number of people with the "absorbing interest in Nature". In addition, the form of Christianity that would result from his suggestions would be too emaciated for the great majority of people (we are, of course, considering the adherents of Christian tenets outside Anglicans and Protestant Nonconformists), and many would find refuge in magic, charm, talismans, etc., rather than in a religion largely devoid of the element of mystery. It is certain that Mediterranean Christianity would never assimilate a religion similar to that of the Apostolic days. Again, if we recover a sense of the importance of history, is it possible to believe, remembering the reaction against liberalism from which so much was expected, that a synthetic theology will ensue out of the antithesis of recent years and restore to us the proportion of the faith ? Throughout his constructive scheme Canon Raven, in the opinion of the present reviewer, appears to have largely overlooked the strong appeal still made by the pagan elements surviving in Christianity.

The book can be recommended because it contains so much with which all reasonable Christians can agree.

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