

The Finality of the Christian Religion [Version 1]¹

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The Finality of the Christian Religion. By George Burman Foster, Prof. of the Philosophy of Religion in the Univ. of Chicago. Press 1906.²

[Thus] it has come about that our religion, with a Master and a message, which claim to be the same yesterday, today, and forever, is summoned before the judgement seat of a progressive humanity, like all other professed finalities, and that the human heart, with its tumultuous experiences, is querying whether there be, amid the flux, some Eternal Rock whereon it can find strength and stay and rest. (p. 8).³

Thus not in the interest of any church or sect, or any particular religion, but in the interest of present human needs, Prof. Foster sets himself the task of proclaiming the finality of the Christian Religion, and its worth for human life.

The breadth of his scholarship, the depth of his own religious nature, the history of his own religious experiences, make this book especially valuable. There is nothing of sickly pessimism in it, or sickly optimism in it, but a strong, brave address to the deepest problems of

¹ Among the manuscripts left by Earl Clement Davis there were two very similar texts, "The Finality of the Christian Religion" and "The Finality of the Christianity." Both were connected to—perhaps prompted by—the book by Professor George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*. The text transcribed here, that I have somewhat arbitrarily labeled "version 1," reads more like a book report, or a review; Earl Davis' first pass through this material. The other text reads more like a digested set of remarks that are prompted by Foster's book.

² George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906.

³ George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906, p. 8.

life. Beneath it all there is a faith which is as solid and as unassailable as the rock of Gibraltar. The deep faith of the book is to me at least one of its great delights.

But when one sets himself to the task of reproducing in a short space the essence or the spirit of this book, he is really in trouble. It would be easy enough to state in a very short space the intellectual essence of the thing. In fact, Prof. Foster very nearly does that himself. His thesis is "Religion without supernaturalism, and science without naturalism."⁴ He wishes to show that religion, and especially the Christian religion, is not an affair of the intellect, but has to do with the will of man. On the one hand, he denies the validity of the claims to supernaturalness of the Christian Religion; on the other hand, he denies the claims of dogmatic naturalists who reduce the universe, and man included, to a mechanical system. He is to steer himself between these two rough and rocky coasts upon whose shores many a ship has foundered, into the deep and smooth-flowing channel of the human personality. Not a supernatural religion, on the one hand, nor an impersonal naturalism on the other, but a religion of Divine human personality. It makes no difference to him whether you say human personality, or Divine personality, for he says we are living in a world in which everything is both human and Divine at one and the same time.

One more thing. He is looking to a religion of development, of evolution, whose validity rests not upon its origin, but upon its ideals, not upon its roots, but upon its fruits, not upon its "whence cometh thou?" but its "whither going?" In short, he is looking not for a dead complete perfect religion in a static world, but for a growing developing unfolding religion in a world of "Becoming."

The first part of the book (275 pages) is concerned with the general subject of Authority-Religion (supernaturalism) and naturalism. In his chapter on the formation of

⁴ George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906, p. 199. The full quote: "But, religion without supernaturalism, science without naturalism—that is our thesis."

authority-religion and its succeeding chapter on the Dissolution, he traces the development of the religious deposit of Jesus through the externalizing process until at the close of the middle ages we find the full-fledged system of supernatural religion, or authority-religion in Roman Catholicism. Infallible book, infallible interpreter of the book, infallible appropriation of the book—all this belongs to the general idea of supernaturalism in Religion.

But the principle of Universal Priesthood, the principle that no human authority, claiming unconditional validity, is to come between man and God, the fundamental tenant of the Protestant movement, soon undermined the infallible and supernatural authority of the Church, and established in its place the authority of the Bible. But this same protestant principle, has also overthrown the idea of inspiration of the Bible, the prophetic argument of Deity and the miracles. To quote,

In a word, Christianity is drawn into the process which relativizes all that is historical, and hence the static finality given it for authority-religion is gone. Whether any conception of Christian finality is possible, or even pertinent, in light of the universal historical relativity is precisely the problem for our further reflection. (144).

In chapter IV Prof. Foster discusses the dissolution of authority-religion, examining in succession the claims upon which this supernatural structure rests. (1) The authority of the Bible, identifying the old and new Testaments with the concept of "the Hand of God" is examined first. The result of his examination is thus expressed, "Inspiration of the book is untrue, historically and impossible psychologically." (87). (2) He then passes to consider the question as to whether or not the designation, "Word of God" is, in its full scope, applicable to the Bible canon in toto, and exclusively. To which question he replies that the canonization is a natural process of elimination, good from the unfit, and especially the canonization of the N.T. is the work of the Catholic Church, and Protestantism is in an especially embarrassing position in accepting the doctrine of the Divine authority of the Canon, for in so doing, she accepts as authoritatively divine, that which

has been produced by the Catholic Church, whose validity she denies. (3) The third consideration of this chapter has to do with the so-called prophetic argument. O.T. prophecies, and N.T. fulfillments, in which argument he finds no satisfactory support of authority-religion. (4) He passes to the consideration of the argument from miracles. As an illustration of his line of argument in this chapter, I will, if possible, point the way in which he treats miracles.

Instead of being naturally or historically, or psychologically mediated, miraculous events are due to immediate particular volitions of Deity by virtue of which there are causes without their usual effects, or effects without their usual causes.⁵

Now as to the possibility of miracles there are two questions. (1) First is a miracle compatible with the nature of God in his relation to nature? This is the objective consideration of the problem. (2) Can a miracle be known by man as [a] miracle: This is the subject considered subjectively. As to the *a priori* possibility of miracles, one can neither affirm or deny. Whether it is possible or not, it is of no value as an authentication of revelation. A miracle being without the usual order of the world, an event with unexplained causes, or a cause with unusual results, we, who know things only relatively, are not competent to judge as to whether or not an event is miraculous, attributable to particular Divine causality. Hence a miracle must be endorsed by supernatural revelation in order for us to accept it. But the miracle which demands supernatural revelation for its validity is of course of no value as a witness to that revelation upon which it rests. So whether a miracle is possible or not, it is valueless as supporting a supernatural religion. Indeed the entire miracle argument is in a circle.

But as to whether we can experience a miracle or not is another thing.

Miracle is a supernatural affair occurring in contradiction to natural laws, through whose temporary abrogation alone it is possible. An

⁵ George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906, p. 116.

outer fact is knowable only through outer experience; only facts of a natural-legal character can be experienced: natural causality is the condition of all outer experience. Consequently there is no experience of miracle. Whether miracle be possible or not, our experience of miracle is not possible. Equally impossible is it for an outer occurrence to have redeeming power. (124).⁶

Thus the miracle became not a theoretical, but a practical impossibility.

Thus one after another the pillars upon which rests the foundation of supernatural religion, or authority-religion, are destroyed and the whole superstructure falls to the ground in ruins. This chapter closes with these words,

And if by anticipation the reader has caught the suggestion that the dignity of things, even Christian things, is disclosed, not in their cause, but in their end; not in the form of the origin, but in the worth of the content; not in their structure, but in their function; not in their credentials, but in their service—then he has already entered upon a more excellent way than any religion of authority has ever known. Then, too, has he exchanged the world of Thomas Aquinas for that of Kant and Lotze and Charles Darwin. In this new world there is no room for the theory of Christianity's exclusive supernaturalness, over against which all besides is not God's work, but man's; for in this new world the opposition of human and divine is overcome, and all is human and all is divine at one and the same time.⁷

In the chapter on the changed view of the world, he points out the changed and changing conception of the Universe as involved in the discoveries of modern science, especially Copernicus. But in spite of opposition on the

⁶ George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906, p. 123-4.

⁷ George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906, p. 146-47.

part of the Church, the new world conceptions have established themselves, and the old Roman world with its big flowing river, and its inverted bowl for the sky is only a dream of ancient days, which we recall nowadays with something of a condescension. But with the old Ptolemaic world there were certain forms and habits of thought which no longer fit into the world of today.

Primacy of the intellect in man; the ascetic-contemplative life the highest life; knowledge the chief good; dogma, or "sound doctrine," the essence of Christianity and the content of revelation, such content guaranteed by infallibility of Pope or Book, whose credentials are necessarily miraculous; saving faith, first of all holding things to be true because Pope or Book says so, the finality of the Christian Religion consisting in the miraculously authenticated divinity of its doctrines—this is all this is of a piece, and it all fits into the old Graeco-Roman and medieval world, with its static cosmology, and its static Empire and hierarchy over the spirit. The primacy of the will in man; the practical-moral life the highest life; character, the chief good; ideals the essence of the Christian religion and the content of revelation, which latter in the history of great souls and the soul of history; ideals valued teleologically and not causally; faith, not assent, but moral action; the finality of the Christian religion in its ideals—this, too, is all of a piece and fits into the modern dynamic and biological world. (189).

This is the relation, the Christianity of the modern world. "It is open to the humblest, not to the wisest, to him who does, not to him who knows." (195).

As we leave behind the old Earth-centric universe, we must leave behind the forms, and methods peculiar to their interpretations of the religious life. There is no place for a supernaturalism in the modern world. But not only is the world of humanity suffering from the confusion of religion with its accretions, from the transformation of products of faith, to objects of faith, but no less desolate is the outlook upon the world where science has

given away to dogmatic naturalism, and given us a closed completed mechanism whose life consists only in its changing forms. Now both the supernaturalists and the naturalists have held that the overthrow of supernaturalism meant the overthrow of religion. The fact is that the science of the humanist movement has shattered beyond repair all claims to supernatural religion. The humanist movement has overthrown the medieval artificial world, and re-established man in his position, true to the Protestant principle. But the man thus established is merely the man of sense, with his freedom, and his pleasure-seeking, sense-satisfying ideas. The Church has been in grievous error in basing its entire claims to the validity of Christianity, and even religion itself, upon the foundations of its supernatural origin. The Church has held that to overthrow the claims to supernaturalism, is to overthrow the claims to religion itself. The world is taking the word of the Church in good faith. Science has destroyed the validity of supernatural claims of Christianity, and, ergo, according to the logic of the Church, religion has gone with it. Man has come to his own world of science, but blinded by the logic of the Church, he is depriving himself of spiritual development. The problem now is to transform the man of sense into the man of conscience, fully conscious of his divine worth. In other words we must free ourselves from the deathly mechanism of materialistic naturalism. Our hope here rests in the personality religion. "The mission of man is to be neither brute nor God, but to become personality."⁸

Can the religion of Jesus prove of any value here? This is the question which the modern world is looking for the church to answer.

Thus having cleared away the intellectual dogmatic products of religious faith, as expressed in authority-religion or supernaturalism, and the dogmatic prepossessions of scientific naturalism, Prof. Foster addresses himself to the constructive part of his book. His method of procedure here as he tunnels his way through the dogmatic, and superimposed accretions to the essence of the

⁸ George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906, p. 273.

Religion of Jesus, he describes in these terms. The historical method serves to distinguish historical facts, and sift, and systematize the material. But there is one factor, the essential factor of the religion of Jesus, and of Christianity, which historical investigation, criticism, dogma, creed, sacrament can never reach. Religion is intensely personal, and aside from sifting and explaining the manifestations of the personal, one must get at, and reproduce, and recreate the personality of Jesus.

All in all, therefore, the task is not simply scientific, but moral, and thus belongs to man's larger vocation of forming an ethical personality through pain and struggle, perplexity and sorrow. Once personal, man must be free—free lord even of the essence of the Christian Religion. (324).

In chapter VIII, the problem of the sources of our knowledge of the life of Jesus is discussed. The synoptic problem is dealt with; every difficulty is met fairly and squarely, and the weaknesses of his position are by no means overlooked. As he approaches the end of this chapter upon the literary sources, he summarizes, taking as a basis of his statements Wernle's results of historical criticism.⁹

In answer to the question as to what we can know of Jesus himself, i.e., from an intellectual point of view,

On the basis of the earliest or oldest sources, we can write no biography, no so-called "Life of Jesus." This would ever have been possible, were Mark a strictly historical document, and did the discourse portions actually belong where Matthew or Luke has placed them. But the discourses in their source lack all temporal fixation, and Mark is only a complier of single traditions, which he first—so runs the hypothesis—unified to a whole. Mark, moreover lacks all personal knowledge of localities, and he equally lacks any clear knowledge of the temporal course of the life of Jesus. And in matters concerning which Mark as historian leaves us in the lurch, how can we know anything better today? It is only of a very few

⁹ Paul Wernle (1872-1930), a Swiss Theologian, published *Die Quellen des Lebens Jesu* in 1904.

words of Jesus, accordingly, that we know when and where they were spoken. (p. 389)

But the closer we get to Jesus in the tradition, the more does everything dogmatic and theological recede.

Thus we come to the final question, of getting as good a picture of Jesus as we can from the sources we have, with the view of getting at the heart of his life, and to discover what there is of his life, and his religion for the modern man.

"Time was," says Prof. Foster, when, at the mention of the name Jesus, many thought of church doctrine, of Christology, dogma, the old creed, which lay like a veil upon the personality of Jesus; they thought of the veil, of the wrappings woven by speculation, of the deity; of the "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary;" of resurrection, descent into hell, ascent into heaven; of return on the clouds; of miracle upon miracle, of the whole church belief in it massive formation with it materialism and its magic! Today we live in a world characterized by nothing so much as by the absence of any psychological soil in which these fantasies can find nourishment. If these things constitute the Christian Religion, that religion is already an antiquated affair, a relic that is worthless to the cultivated classes. Christological dogmas really signify for many children of our time a sarcophagus of the personality of Jesus and of his religion, and are responsible for the sad ignorance concerning Jesus and the essence of his religion. One casts aside the gold with the dross. One flees from Christology as from a ghost, without ever having seen Jesus. (408.)¹⁰

¹⁰ Earl Davis' page reference is incorrect. The quote is from pages 406-7.

"Through the curtain to the sun, from the dogmatic picture of the Christ to the historical picture of Jesus,"¹¹ that is our journey. What do we find?

1st. As a child of his time, Jesus held to popular views of the world which are no longer held.

(2) He believed in demons, and their responsibility for disease, also in angels.

(3) He believed in miracles, which we no longer believe in.

(4) He believed in a being called the messiah, and probably regarded himself as in some way connected with that being. Perhaps he identified himself with the messiah. We no longer hold these things.

(5) He believed in the immediate termination of the world, and the return of the son of man in his glory. That hasn't happened yet.

Intellectually, then, we are not, and cannot be, on common [ground] with Jesus. He held to ideas, the truth of which there is no evidence either subjective or objective, to substantiate.

In moral conceptions he apparently made modifications, due to the influence of his messianic ideas. But at least so far as moral submission is concerned we are not bound to some of his teachings, because of changed relations. See especially his negative attitude towards state, and our positive.

But these very differences of opinion, not only do not separate us from the personality of Jesus, but bring us the nearer to him. For our relationship to him, and to each other, is not fundamentally dependent on intellectual conformity, but upon the responsive sympathy of the will. The will to do the will of God. The will to live the good life that is the heart and essence of the religion of

¹¹ George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906, p. 407.

Jesus. "Not my will but thine be done."¹² The Garden of Gethsemane is the supreme moment of his life, so far as the revelation of the essence of his religion is concerned. But how did Jesus' faith in God come to be what it was? How did it happen that Jesus believed in a living loving forgiving God?

What was certainly new was the disposition and self-consciousness of Jesus. From these there gradually sprang up in his soul a value judgement that was new also, namely, that not *things*, not even *sacred* things, but that *persons only*, are worthful. Faith in the infinite worth of the human personality in the sight of God—if there was anything new in the thought of Jesus it was this. Jesus felt the worth of man as man, and dared to hope that man could become the home of the moral values and the religious blessedness which he felt in himself. He cherished this hope for publicans and harlots, for outcasts and prodigals, for Samaritans and gentiles, for his enemies and especially for children, in whom he experienced the true essence of man.¹³

...

His faith in God was born of the conviction that the power which sends rain, and causes the sun to shine, which clothes flowers, birds and men, which lets them live, and lets them die, has the same sense of the worth of man, the same joy in man, which he himself had and which he required of others. He could say nothing higher of God than what he required of man, namely, that he was kind to friend and foe alike, to the good and the evil. God is like man as man ought to be. God is Father, man is child. And if man knows how to give good gifts, God does too. ... Because Jesus was merciful, he thought of God as the merciful Father, who seeks the lost sheep until he finds it. ... No school doctrine, no preaching of repentance even like John's, but the glad message

¹² Luke 22:42.

¹³ George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906, p. 481.

that the disposition and bearing of the Eternal Will toward man are like those of the merciful, pleading, Nazarene—this is the best that we dare believe. (494).

...
God is like Jesus! (495).

The religion of Jesus is not an affair of the intellect, but of the will. To will to do the will of God, to will to work for the realization of the highest, tenderest, most loving ideals, of which the human mind has ever conceived. To believe God as the expression of the best that is in human aspiration. To root our convictions in our faith in God, and to be as true to our convictions in our world, and amid our moral problems, as Jesus was true to his convictions in his world, that it is to be a Christian, and a follower of Jesus.

On the one hand to avoid supernatural Christianity because it is intellectual, and is based upon knowledge rather than will. On the other hand to avoid naturalism for the same reason, and to fix one's self in the religion of personality, the world and man and God interpreted in terms of personality, and judged teleologically, this is the Christianity which Prof. Foster presents to us as a final religion. It is the religion of Personality based upon the philosophical proposition of Divine Immanence. The intellectual apparatus, and interpretations of the religious experience are products of faith, and not objects of faith. Not in his birth, not in his Baptism, not in stories of miracles, not in his teachings or in his deeds as such, is the essence of the Religion of Jesus, but in the will of Jesus that willed to do the will of God. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the height of religious consecration is reached. The stories of the gospels, the creeds of Christendom, the forms, the sacraments, are the products of the religious life of Jesus and his followers, are witnesses to the spiritual impulse of personalities; they have no authoritative value for us, and their worth consists in this, that they bear witness to the power of human personality, and point us towards a conception of its infinite worth. They are the smoke, produced by the flame of the spiritual life. Of seeming importance, as they pour forth from [the] flame, but they vanish in time into thin

air, and new smoke comes to take their place. But the burning flame of the personality is eternal. This idea, this faith, is the "eternal Garden of Gethsemane" in which we say, "Not my will, but thine be one."