

INTRODUCTION:

In the closing years of the nineteenth century a collection of theological essays was published, by a group of Oxford academics (three of whom were to become Bishops), under the editorship of Charles Gore, titled 'Lux Mundi'. (The Light of the World). The essayists faced the problems of the new ideas in science (Darwinism in particular) and critical biblical analysis head on. Their answer was a closely argued, exuberantly confident, liberal catholic viewpoint, which resulted in controversy and commendation amongst their contemporaries. Gore, first principal of Pusey House, Oxford, at the time (1889), contributed an essay 'The Holy Spirit and Inspiration' in which he questioned the literal historical accuracy of the Old Testament, blithely explained that it did not matter anyway, defended the 'substantial' accuracy of the New, but threw in, as if in afterthought, the thesis that Jesus of Nazareth, if truly human, cannot have been omniscient in His earthly life.

[Archbishop Ramsey, in his book 'From Gore to Temple', discusses the latter problem in Chapter Three – The Incarnation and Kenosis.

*"The doctrine of the kenosis (self-emptying) of the Son of man appeared in Gore's essay...somewhat incidentally, being there discussed not for its own sake, but for its bearing on the belief in the inerrancy of the Old Testament..."*¹

This last idea was anathema to the traditional Oxford School, whence Gore was sprung. Liddon stated in his Bampton Lectures: *'The knowledge infused into the human soul of Jesus was ordinarily and practically equivalent to omniscience.'*

Gore had been appointed to Pusey House by Liddon,² who was very hurt and angry. *'He has constructed a private kennel for liberalizing theology'* was his comment on the book.

He was absolutely right. The seeds sown by these scholars, sifted and nourished by time and events, provided shelter

¹ "He the Christ, the Son of God, was personally living, praying, thinking, speaking and acting – even working miracles – under the limitations of manhood." (C.Gore, *The Consciousness of Our Lord – Dissertations: 1895*)

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and inspiration for independent development in the Anglican paradigm. Many have very little time for what they see as the interminable finesse of shifting Anglican arguments and apologies. For many of the essayists, this is a mark of the church's vitality, not her demise – living debate and true progress being only possible in the hearts and minds of the living. The ability to evolve, to adapt to changing circumstances, to surrender imperfect thoughts for wiser, is a mark of strength not weakness. There must be a balance to the dogmatic traditionalism of settled institutions, (Protestant and Catholic) else those institutions – not excepting the Church of England – become lax, corrupt, and at worse, tyrannies.

In his later trilogy (1926) 'The Reconstruction of Belief' Gore devoted a chapter to the 'tests of legitimate development'. He rejected papal infallibility, literal biblical infallibility, individual infallibility, and Church infallibility. This clearly leaves a problem. His answer was the promptings of the Spirit of God – but working through acknowledged channels, historically well attested. One channel is indeed the authority of Holy Scripture, especially the documents of the New Covenant – where this authority is coherent, consistent, and at least implicit in the text. In other words, nothing should become a novel dogmatic requirement of the church, which is not 'at least implicit in the New Testament'.

³ Thus a great deal hinges on the definition of this hard-core. "Let the essentials of the Faith be limited to the fewest articles possible." *"Quae pertinent ad Fidem, quam paucissimis articulis absolvantur."* (Erasmus, D.)

For the essayists this fixed centre is the Christian Creeds. If they are false, they argue, the Christian Faith in its traditional form collapses.

But Gore was prepared to interpret the non-historical clauses of the Nicene Creed as metaphorical. This concession led inexorably to much more flexibility in interpretation. In *The Reconstruction of Belief* (1926), Gore writes as follows:

'Criticism of the destructive kind has for long years fastened on the early chapters of Matthew and Luke as upon the weakest point in the citadel of the Creeds. I think that those who believe that the historical citadel can be maintained should insist that the question of the birth (of Jesus) is secondary and not primary viz. That the question of faith in Jesus must rest still where it was made to rest from the beginning, on the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. On these, the faith stood, and still could stand.'(p. 279-80. Chapter XI).

Perhaps anticipating future controversy, a fellow essayist writes:

"The Christian Creed consists of three parts only; and all three are 'Belief in God.' Its shortest expression is in three words [which three words are one word], HOLY, HOLY, HOLY.' The definitions of the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds, none of them really travel outside of this." (The Incarnation as the basis of Dogma; LUX MUNDI 1889, Essay VI). R.C. Moberly.

But the living, breathing Church is the other vital channel of the Spirit. If the churchmen of the day cannot agree upon what is explicit, then Gore insists, there must be an ecumenical decision, before a development can be binding, as opposed to a matter for private conscience. Those things believed by all (the general Body of the Church, not select individuals), everywhere, at all times, might alone be counted the hard-core of Christian belief. '*Semper, ubique, ab omnibus*' [Vincent of Lerins, 434.A.D]. All else, including Biblical interpretation, should be open to informed debate³.

And so we reach the vexed question of the authority and credibility of the Bible.

In his preface to the tenth edition of *Lux Mundi*, Gore cites Huxley directly. : "Professor Huxley's article alluded to above is a somewhat melancholy example of a mode of reasoning which one had hoped had vanished from 'educated circles' for ever – that, namely which regards Christianity as a 'religion of a book', in such sense that it is supposed to propose for men's acceptance a volume to be received in all its parts as on the same level, and in the same sense, Divine. On the contrary, Christianity is a religion of a Person..."

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This comment prompted Huxley's acidic reply in draft, which he titled 'Educated Circles and their mode of Reasoning', which he must have intended to publish, but others entered the fray before him. He was the older man by far, and perhaps he had had enough of the battle. Nonetheless, he took Gore's essay seriously, carefully marking in pencil the paragraphs he considered noteworthy. Most of his copy of the book remained uncut.

In summary, Huxley's criticisms are fourfold.

The (historical) writers of the Bible give no clear indication of when they are to be taken literally and when metaphorically, or poetically, or mythically, except in the case of the parables. They write as though they are writing literal, historical truth. Christ quotes the Old Testament (His sacred scriptures) as though literally true.

If we are allowed to 'mix and match', according to contemporary standards of scholarship and sentiment, where precisely do we stop?

The credibility of the ancient texts is vital for our understanding of Christ, as there is no other commonly accepted historical witness to His life and work.

The debate continues to the present day unresolved, but with greatly enhanced historical and archaeological material. An excellent introduction to the state of critical Gospel research (especially in the United States) is contained in the book 'What are they saying about the historical Jesus?' (D.Gowler)

"Every generation must reconstruct the historical Jesus as best they can at any time and place...a dialogue with voices past and present which is not just possible, but absolutely necessary."(D.Gowler quoting J.D. Crossan's book: *The Birth of Christianity*; San Francisco, 1998).

H.F.T.