

**HANDBOOKS OF
CATHOLIC FAITH AND
PRACTICE. BROAD
CHURCH THEOLOGY**

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Handbooks of Catholic Faith and Practice. Broad Church Theology by W. J. Sparrow Simpson

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BROAD CHURCH THEOLOGY

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W. J. SPARROW SIMPSON, D.D.

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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION. SOME OPINIONS OF BROAD CHURCH- MEN	v
CHAP.	
I CAN GOD BE KNOWN AT ALL?	1
II CAN WE RIGHTLY CALL GOD PERSONAL?	10
III THE HISTORIC ORIGIN OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY	23
IV SUBSTITUTES FOR THE TRINITARIAN CONCEPTION	31
V THE TRINITARIAN CONCEPTION AND PSY- CHOLOGY	51
VI THE FAITH OF THE CHURCH CONCERNING GOD	62
VII THE MODERNIST INTERPRETATION OF CHRIST	71
VIII THE APOSTOLIC DOCTRINE OF CHRIST'S PRE- EXISTENCE	92
IX CHRIST'S PRE-EXISTENCE AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO RELIGION	109
X HUMILITY BASED ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE PRE-EXISTING CHRIST	118
XI GENEROSITY BASED ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE PRE-EXISTING CHRIST	127

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INTRODUCTION

SOME OPINIONS OF BROAD CHURCHMEN

Revised 4-6-42 N. T. T.

FEW subjects deserve more serious attention than the theology of the Broad Church School. It penetrates far deeper than our ordinary controversies on ceremonial, or on certain modern forms of devotional expression. It is concerned with the very foundations of the Faith. To ignore it therefore and to confine our interest to other matters would be to lack a sense of proportion. It is supported by able minds. Its literature is steadily increasing.

And yet when we come to face it the peculiarity of this School consists in a decided element of uncertainty. It is easy to say what the Evangelical School represents. The Evangelical School stands for personal religion, personal devotion to Christ, and belief in the Atonement through Christ's Death. It is also easy to say what the Catholic School represents. It adheres to the corporate traditional faith of all the Christian centuries. It is Institutional and Sacramental. There is no difficulty in predicting what a member either of the Evangelical or of the Catholic School will believe. But when we come to the Broad Church

School this is not the case. It is not easy to determine with precision what its doctrines are.

This peculiarity is caused by the fact that the Broad Church School is based on the principle of individual independence. Doubtless all religious assent is ultimately an act of private judgment. For it is impossible to escape our individual responsibility. But the religious assent of the Broad Church School is distinguished by its rejection of authority. As a writer on the Broad Church School describes it: the Catholic begins by inquiring what is the teaching of the Church; the Broad Churchman asks himself first of all what his own Reason and Conscience can teach him.¹ Thus the Broad Church School is founded on the principle of the independence of the individual reason as against corporate authority. They agree in the general idea of individual independence. Accordingly freedom and liberty are their constant watchwords. Their bugbear is authority. The titles of their books are suggestive. One is *Freedom in the Church*, another is the *Gospel of Freedom*; another is *Anglican Liberalism*. Freedom appears to represent emancipation from the Corporate Traditions: the right of the individual to hold his judgment in suspense, or if need be so to contradict, in spite of affirmations either of the Creed or of the Scriptures or of the Universal Church.

This principle in the hands of logically minded and thoroughgoing persons is capable of reaching advanced extremes. Thus Reville, Protestant professor of theology in the University of Paris, says

¹ Symes, *Broad Church*, p. vii.

that Liberal Protestantism is distinguished by its opposition to authority. It is "opposed to all intellectual servitude and to all obligatory creed."¹ It resents the practice of imposing dogmas like that of the Trinity on the human mind. The liberal Protestant is independent of the authority of the tradition in the Church to which he may happen to belong.² He considers that the Reformers were extreme conservatives in dogma.³ He deprecates anything like a metaphysical doctrine concerning the Person of Christ.⁴ He would separate religion from dogma and from Sacraments.⁵ Thus when the principle of liberal Protestantism is logically carried out to its conclusions it will "include among its adherents men who profess entirely different philosophical opinions on theological beliefs, extending from those who retain various traditional dogmas to those who maintain a spiritualistic Pantheism."⁶ Indeed these comprehensive tendencies are rather in the direction of the unorthodox. For it is distinctly stated and restated that liberal Protestantism rejects the orthodox doctrines, whether Catholic or Protestant, concerning Redemption by the sacrifice of Christ, or the Trinity, or the metaphysical divinity of Christ.⁷ All these are simply philosophical hypotheses, and liable to revision.

It is well to realize the conclusions to which the logical Frenchman pushes the principle of individual independence.

¹ J. Reville, *Le Protestantisme Libéral*, 1903, p. 4.

² P. 6.

³ P. 15.

⁴ P. 47.

⁵ P. 61.

⁶ P. 65.

⁷ P. 72.

Obviously whether in logical France or in practical England, the principle must naturally lead to great variety of opinions, and indeed to serious contradiction on matters of profound importance.

But the diversity of the conclusions which this principle naturally creates makes it quite unfair to ascribe to the Broad Church School what an individual member may maintain. It will be found as a fact that certain individual Broad Churchmen reject the doctrine of the Trinity while others affirm it, and deny the divine Personality of our Lord while others maintain it. And with regard to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth there will be found within the School all conceivable variations of caution and reserve, of boldness and decision, of suspense and indecision, natural to the varieties of individual temperament.

Hence the only fair course to take in discussing them is to regard their statements simply as *the opinions of individuals*: to take them separately; ascribing the responsibility to the author alone, each individual being held responsible for his own essay and his own opinions, while we carefully refrain from assuming that the Corporate approval of any Broad Church Council rests upon any assertion in particular.

We take then a few specific instances.

1. Concerning the Virgin Birth.—The Broad Churchman will sometimes refrain from denying, but he will refuse to affirm. He will possibly say, "there is no denial in this treatise of the Virgin Birth,"¹ but he will go on to say all that can be

¹ Allen, p. vii.