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The Church in the World

THERE is, and can be, no end to religious controversy; but it is evident from what is said and written that some people who take part in the discussion are imperfectly acquainted with their subject. Not much value can be found in opinions which have no support from knowledge, especially a knowledge of history. The Christian Church has its own history, but it is also inseparable from the secular affairs of western man in the past two thousand years. Even before the Church was founded, events and ideas in the pagan world were like premonitory stirrings; and much that was valuable in classical thought was later to be drawn into Christian theology. The great periods and movements, from the first centuries to the present day, are shortly to be explained in a series of talks, details of which may be found on page 15. It is a remarkable story, and it could not be retold at a more suitable time.

The sceptical temper, which made itself felt under the impact of scientific discovery in the 19th century, is now shared more widely. Beneath the scepticism, however, may often be noticed the uneasiness and the confusion of values which seem to come inevitably when faith is in abeyance. Science has done wonderful things, but it cannot teach men how to live, and the need for guidance has never been more apparent than in a century of war and revolution. For the Christian historian, this is not a new situation. The Church has known other ages of doubt; it has always been in danger, and it always will be. It has survived persecution, the collapse of a civilisation, the internal stresses of schism and heresy, the temptations and abuses of worldly power, reformation and reaction, and always—in all places and at all times—the erosion of unbelief. What has happened in the past can happen again: the wheel comes full circle, and it does not cease turning. Christians are still

being persecuted, and in this century we have seen a barbarism far worse than the violence of Goths and Vandals.

The Church rests upon revelation; but it is a human institution, and its history therefore contains error and folly, even wickedness, as well as goodness and noble effort. There are times when spiritual experience seems to place intolerable strains upon its vessels. The believing man, unless he is a saint, must know that he is never free from evil: his way is always among hazards, so that he often feels as if he is separated from failure as narrowly as, in physical life, the thinnest membrane may hold him from death. There is no real security, no final and certain victory. And yet men do, in a miraculous way, pass through the dangers of commonplace living and come in later years to a stability which is at least the beginning of wisdom. In much the same way an institution which, although facing eternity, is served through the ages by men of human frailty, must have its times of strength and weakness, of vision and dullness, and be armed against itself not less than against the enemies outside. True, its collective wisdom, taken and saved from all that has been done and suffered, becomes a support with foundations wider than the earth. Yet the survival of the Church is surely the most significant fact in history. "Where there is no vision, the people perish." The Christian faith is not the only vision, and even within the Church it is seen and followed in different ways. But the differences are less disturbing when they are studied against the fundamental unity. *The Story of the Christian Church* will help us to understand this unity, to see how it has been established and preserved against the worst shocks of human experience, and to know more clearly what it can do for mankind in the next stage of a troubled journey.

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