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On December 22, 1918, death claimed
one of the most outstanding figures
among the teachers at the University of
Chicago. Professor George Burman
Foster came to the institution in 1896
from McMaster University, where he
had been professor of philosophy, to be­
come associated with Professor George
W. Northrop of the Divinity School in
the department of systematic theology.
At once the brilliancy and originality of
his thinking attracted attention, and
students thronged his classes. After
some ten years he was transferred at his
own request to the department of phi­
losophy of religion, in which field he
worked until his death. Hundreds of
men owe to him an intellectual and
spiritual awakening which has been a
permanent asset in their life and work.

It is possible, in the case of some men,
to separate their professional from their
private life. Not so with Professor
Foster. For him there was only one in­
terest, and that was to explore religious
experience with utmost thoroughness.
The most important part of his home was
his study. He came to the classroom so
full of the thorough work which he had
been pursuing in that study that the lec­
ture was only a continuation of his per­
sonal meditations. It was this which
gave to his teaching such extraordinary
power. In the classroom he was en­
gaged in the inspiring task of personal
spiritual creativeness. Often it was less
what he said than the peculiar moral and
religious emphasis of his testimony that
gave value to the hour. His was a singu­
larly unified life. If one visited him in
his home, the conversation would turn on
the profound themes which had been
engaging his attention. A walk with
him meant eager and stimulating discus­
ion of the topics which are supposed to
belong to the classroom; and the casual
conversation was as full of serious insight
as the professional lecture. He gave to
his students that best gift of a teacher—
his inner personal life.

Professor Wernle, in a book intended
to serve as a help to theological students,
emphasizes the difference between reli­
gion at first hand and religion at second
hand, and urges students to become
acquainted with the former kind. For
most men religion is already provided in
standardized form. Creeds are at hand
to be believed. Churches are there to be
joined. Rituals are provided for the
nourishment of the religious life. To
accept gratefully these expressions of
religion and to enjoy the fruits of accept­
ing them constitutes all the religion
which some men have. The teaching in
a divinity school is too likely to be con­
cerned with these matters, largely be­
cause they are so easily accessible and so
readily discussed. But there is also the
religion of men who know God and live
with God in their own way, sometimes
almost in independence of these stand­
ardized external forms. Such men bring
to others more than information about
God. They suggest the living reality of
God in the soul of man.
Professor Foster's religion was distinctly, consciously, enthusiastically, a religion at first hand. He prized this first-hand possession of communion with God so highly that he was constantly depreciating the creeds and rituals and churches which seemed to him to stand for religion at second hand. In one of his books he wrote: "The great trouble with us is that our God is no longer ours. He is the church's. We inherited him. . . . We have him only by tradition. He was original before he became traditional. But our God must be original to us as the church's God once was to the church." For this originality of religious experience he constantly sought. He was impatient of anything which might be substituted for it. Like all great mystics, he seemed to those whose responsibilities led them to a higher estimate of the value of creeds and rituals to be taking away from men the supports divinely provided for their comfort. But he did this in order that they might know the joy of standing alone in their strength without the need of props.

This critical attitude made him seem like a destructive spirit in the eyes of those whose religion consisted in positively sharing the contents of organized religion and who were troubled by no doubts. There was always a certain almost childlike simplicity in Professor Foster's estimate of other men. He assumed that of course they must be troubled by what had troubled him, and that they would welcome, as he did, a religion which stood in no need of external authority. Soon after a controversy, which had occurred between himself and various Baptist ministers in Chicago because of a paper which he had read before the ministers' conference dealing with the authority of Scripture, he remarked to a friend: "I was never more surprised in my life than I was to find how those ministers received my paper. I supposed that they were troubled over the problem of authority, and I wanted to help them. But what I said made them angry with me." Because of this singlemindedness, he was a rare source of inspiration to those who craved a thorough analysis and criticism of any problem; but for the same reason he was a source of dismay to those who dreaded being disturbed in their faith.

What was it that Professor Foster found to be more fundamental than the traditional and external supports of faith? To use a technical term, it was value which he declared to be supreme. Not all the explanation in the world can take the place of a direct feeling of value. To repeat one of his favorite illustrations: The scientist may tell how the colors of the rainbow are produced, and may show their physical constitution. But to feel the beauty of the rainbow is another thing; and this feeling is the most important thing about the rainbow after all. So in religion it is more important to appreciate how men feel when they call God, Father, than it is to prove the existence of God by philosophy or demonstrate it by scriptural prooftexts. The word "function" was characteristic of his later writing and thinking. To find out how any given reality or any particular hypothesis "functioned" in man's experience was his aim. If it was such a welcome and helpful factor that life was the richer and the better for its presence, that was abundant proof of
right to a place in our philosophy of living.

This eager quest for values led him during the later years of his life into fellowship with representatives of various obscure and often distrusted movements. If men were banding themselves together for the sake of some ideal, there was a value there to be understood. With an extraordinary power of sympathetic interpretation, Professor Foster would often state the cause of some unpopular group or movement better than it was stated by the advocates of the movement itself. He loved to experience in this sympathetic way human values. Yet when one wished his judgment on the movement, it would embody such searching criticism and such unsparing exposure of the weak points that one wondered why anyone should for a moment be misled into following it. Nevertheless criticism of any morally honest movement was given with the most kindly intentions. It was only when he felt that private interest was masquerading behind a program that his criticism voiced bitterness.

A case in point is his attitude toward the Great War. At first he was an outspoken advocate of peace; for war seemed to him too brutal to serve any spiritual interests. But when he became convinced, as he soon did, that without an armed protest German militarism would destroy the dearest values of humanity, he was a vigorous defender and advocate of American intervention. His youngest son died in the service in February, 1918; and although his death was a crushing blow to the parents, it meant a deeper consecration to the cause for which he laid down his life. But, after all, it was the possible social reconstruction of the world following the war which was of most interest to him. To stop when Germany was “beaten” would be to stop at the threshold of real opportunity. His thoughts during the days after the armistice were concerned with the organization of a new world-order which should make possible democratic values in the place of the old world which had organized special privilege.

His great work was as a teacher. He published two books, The Finality of the Christian Religion and The Function of Religion in Man’s Struggle for Existence, besides numerous articles in periodicals. But his thinking was so ceaselessly creative that he was always revising his previous work. Thus no published message gave a just account of his position. Those who heard him in the classroom or in the pulpit gained the truest impression of his real character and purpose; for here the inmost convictions of the man revealed themselves with power to kindle other souls. His voice is now silent, but his stimulating personality will long be a creative force in the lives of those who knew him best.