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# GEORGE BURMAN FOSTER

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GERALD BIRNEY SMITH

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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 become 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 philosophy 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 interest, 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 lecture was only a continuation of his personal meditations. It was this which gave to his teaching such extraordinary power. In the classroom he was engaged 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 singularly 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 discussion 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 religion 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 accepting them constitutes all the religion which some men have. The teaching in a divinity school is too likely to be concerned with these matters, largely because 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 standardized 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



its 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 unsparring 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.