

Christian Literature and Living

"Was Blind, But Now I See!"

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International Online Monthly Journal

ISSN 1548-7164

5 : 9 December 2009

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Lloyd C. Douglas 1877-1951

A Minister and Novelist

Lloyd C. Douglas (1877-1951) was both a novelist and minister. His novels give importance to 'thesis' rather than 'action' and deal with the general rules that promote human happiness. They represent fairly well defined need of life, the rehabilitation of man. Douglas's novels argue again and again that man's only hope for betterment lies in the relentless examination of his own inner nature.

Lloyd viewed with concern American life and experience in an era that saw the rise of commerce and industry, resulting in wealth that affected immensely the mores, manners and morals of a great majority of American society. When he took up his first charge in 1903 as a pastor at the Lutheran church at North Manchester, he was a good shepherd to his congregation. In those days

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the pastors were looked upon as the actual representatives of God on earth. He was all the time preoccupied with the duties and attitude of a pastor.

He started making a scrap book which contained the newspaper clippings that spoke of him as a preacher. *More than a Prophet* was his next work. He was a regular contributor in 1909 to 'The Lutheran Observer'. Douglas was made Chaplain and Director of Religious Work at the University of Illinois from 1911-1915. His first book *Magnificent Obsession* was released in 1929, when Douglas was fifty years old.

Douglas was one of the most influential religious novelists in the world. Following in the tradition of Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur* (1880), Douglas' novels satisfied a reading public's demands for rollicking adventure and historical romance, combined with piety. Douglas, who retired from the congregational ministry to write, never pretended his novels were refined works of literature. He graciously suffered the attacks of reviewers, who found him loquacious and sentimental.

Yet he proved incapable of writing a book that did not become a best seller; the public loved his vintage narratives of decent characters who worked through problems to happy resolutions. In 1953, Henry Koster directed a major Hollywood film adaptation of *The Robe* which is still highly regarded. Douglas' continuing though diluted influence may be seen in books by Fulton Oursler, Taylor Caldwell, and Frank G. Slaughter.

Magnificent Obsession

"Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth" (Mathew 6:3). This Biblical saying is the main root from which this novel stems. It talks about the theory of sacrifice by extending alms, and not expecting anything in return.

Douglas makes an excellent case for the theory of extending personality and gaining moral power by doing good to other individuals. The most common of the encumbrances which block the way to the expansion of personality are hatred, prejudice, toxic frustrations, cancerous might – have – beens, bottled - up injuries. The motive behind this novel is, to prove modern man that even a selfish materialist could be rehabilitated through Christ's teachings. The novelist wants his readers to know that Jesus' message is simple, practical, workable for those willing to give it a fair trial.

Magnificent Obsession is an engrossing adventure, a moving plot that has captivated readers throughout the world. It is the story of philosophy – a philosophy that gives direction to the currents that disturb the lives of people in troubled times.

Forgive Us Our Trespases

Lloyd C. Douglas published his second book *Forgive Us Our Trespasses* in 1932. It is the story of rehabilitation of a girl who had committed sin. It was a great success, though written with an ethical purpose and described by the author himself as “old fashioned in which the characters are tiresomely decent.” (Browning D.C., p.198) After retiring from ministry, Douglas devoted his life to writing and lecturing.

Precious Jeopardy

Precious Jeopardy was written in 1933 and *Green Light* in 1935. It was later screened in 1937. The novel says that if one can free oneself from the burdens of frustrations and bitterness, he will get the green light. The bells of the Dean’s church in this novel chimed each Sunday, “O, God, our help in ages past, our Hope for years to come”. It is this message that rings clearly throughout the novel. The strength of the book lay in the personality of the benevolent, ever-approachable Dean, who could help for the progress of a life that had come to a stagnant pause.

Douglas also wrote a Christmas story – ‘Home for Christmas’ in 1935 for ‘The Cosmos Club’.

White Banners

White Banners was finished in 1936. It deals with the theme of peace and the perfection of man’s will in order to attain the values of the spirit. It is the story of man’s striving to achieve ‘poise’ and ‘perfection’ in his nature, in order to build a better society and to establish a perfect community.

Disputed Passage

Disputed Passage (1938), his fifth novel, is a warm, human document with a spiritual flavour. The story is shouldered by a young doctor who had firmly resolved to be a bachelor for the sake of his science. The theme of this novel fits the Whitman verse:

Have you learned lessons only of those who admired you
And were tender and stood aside for you?
Have you not learned great lessons from those who braced
Themselves against you and disputed the passage with you? (Dawson,

Douglas, p.294)

Invitation to Live

Invitation to Live appeared during the Second World War. It is a string of stories focusing on the character of Dean Harcourt, the Episcopalian Rector who had first appeared in the novel *Green Light*. In all six of ‘The Dean Harcourt Stories’, the solution to the problems brought by the characters in trouble is based upon the resolute faith that there is a shepherd who looks after his

children, and that the world is moving onward and upward no matter how imperceptible its progress is.

The Robe

Douglas published the next novel *The Robe* in 1942. It is a legend about the Roman soldier who won Jesus' seamless coat at Crucifixion. The possession of the robe sobers him, and he moves to such places like Capernaum, Cana and Nazareth, to know more about Jesus, from people who knew Him. This is the story of transformation from materialistic to spiritual plane.

Big Fisherman

Big Fisherman (1948) is the story of Peter, how Peter wavers. The denial part of Simon Peter has been taken into account. However, Douglas did not attempt at presenting photographs of the New Testament stories, but rather portraits of them. The words he put into his characters are appropriate. A review from 'John O' London's Weekly' said: "One can almost feel the hot dusty roads of Palestine filled with thousands of pattering, sandalled feet, hurrying to catch a glimpse of Jesus".(Dawson,p.337) *Time to Remember*, was his last work, in which he looks back with fond memories his past life. He died the following year in 1951, leaving his autobiography incomplete, but his life story was continued by his two daughters in *The Shape of Sunday* (1952).

Three Periods

Lloyd C. Douglas, books can be grouped under three general periods. The books written in his early days are the professional ones for the ministers. The works that came next have sociological values in them with much of practical Christianity to say. And the last category contains the historical novels of Biblical times.

It is interesting to note that Douglas' novels, whether written for his profession, or for social purpose, or purely theological, they portray in them the theme of rehabilitation to a large extent. Douglas' ultimate concern was for the betterment of man, whether for man at his profession or in his individual life.

Rehabilitation through Counseling

In his novels, and as a Pastor, Douglas taught that rehabilitation could be effected through counseling. As Bacon says:

The greatest trust between man and man is the trust of giving counsel; for in other confidences men commit the parts of life, their lands, their goods, their children, their credit, some particular affair; but to such as they make their counselors they commit the whole – by how

much the more they are obliged to all faith and integrity.(Bacon,p.97)

Douglas was aware that his public would not accept spiritual counsel through a didactic essay. Therefore he produced novels which contain fine messages. The messages are well knit in the plots and Douglas does not seem to bother about his critics. His mission, he confesses, is “healing the bruised spirits rather than winning the applause of the critics”. That was why he brought out on novel after another to enable erring mankind seek a right path and progress steadily towards a great goal.

How Rehabilitation is Achieved?

Rehabilitation in the novels of Douglas is brought about by simple practices of everyday religion. Douglas’ theology is a homely kind – simple theories like doing secret good to others, thereby helping personality projection; maintaining a steady life, no matter what happens to interrupt the progress; reconstructing a family life that is at loose ends etc. His novels help to achieve integration in one’s daily life. There is always a guiding personality in everyone of the novels, to resuscitate the weak in spirit. And it is always that the master power persuades the weak soul to think and to decide the course of life.

Focus on Human Desire to Eschew Evil

Douglas tries to portray man in his betterment, man in his rise. He exalted man’s innate desire to do good and eschew evil. He tells us that there is only one thing a man can do for rehabilitating his life, and that is to have faith in his religion, practice it, and embrace it in his life. For religion is essentially practical. His novels plead for a reconstruction of a frustrated life by accepting a compromise that, if peace is to be had, it must be within oneself. Modern Christianity opts for a note of optimism in one’s lie for his future, for the kingdom of God is within and not without.

Lloyd’s Narrative Style

Lloyd’s style in writing is simple, deliberate and winning. He presents religious theme in a narrative framework. Though his writing is instructive, he makes it interesting by mixing poetry with colloquial prose. Every word of his novels is a ministry. It is intrinsically the language of the soul. Many of his scenes have emotional effectiveness. They have all the appeal of sentimental drama but in a warmer atmosphere.

Douglas is a writer who knows what he wants to say from the start. Although he drops his story from time to time, to lecture on the fundamental beliefs, the interest of the narrative does not flag or decline at any stage. His novels are said from the point of view of an omniscient narrator.

Often the author is not following any one character, but, standing back from all the characters, observing and reporting. He usually shows more sympathy with some than with others, and makes some, more important than others. These main characters learn by experience. There are

rewards, forgiveness, reconciliation and reactions of people to events and creation of events by people. Douglas's religion is a religion of strength, a religion of humanity.

The Chief Concern

The chief concern of Douglas' novels, is therefore, to present human life in getting a clearer conception and a more active admiration of those vital elements which bind men together and give a higher worthiness of their existence. Douglas believes that the fellowship between man and man is the principle of development, social and moral, the exaltation of the human.

During Douglas' lifetime there was a business depression called 'the Boom' at Akron, Ohio in 1921. The economic depression brought hardship and discomfort to many people and institutions. At such a time, as if the people were waiting for Douglas, his inspirational novels appeared, picturing Christian faith and morals. The temporary slowing up of economy had a steady effect upon the growth of man, and enabled him to give more time and attention to the soul.

The Present Gloomy Situation

The US is faced with a similar economic condition now. The dampening US atmosphere turns India too gloomier. The world feels the pressure of recession. Douglas' novels, as then, can revive people and start them to think, even now. They can reach deeply into people's everyday lives, and teach them a fuller realization of the possibilities of Christian living. It is not an exaggeration if we say that Douglas' novels can grant unto the hopeless a clear understanding where the vision has failed, the understanding darkened, where the ways of life seem hard, and the brightness of life has gone.

Pauline Das, Ph.D.
Department of English
Karunya University
Coimbatore - 641 114
Tamilnadu
India
paulinemd@gmail.com