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The New Man: An Interpretation of Some Parables and Miracles of Christ

Maurice Nicoll

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The son of a celebrated Free Church minister in Scotland, Maurice Nicoll (1884-1953) studied at Cambridge, where he gained a 'First' in science. He qualified as a doctor at St Bartholomew's hospital in London and then travelled to Paris, Vienna, Berlin and finally Zurich where he became a colleague of Carl Jung. The psychological insights of Jung left a lasting impression on the young Nicoll. During the First World War, he served in the Army Medical Corps, and there revealed himself as a pioneering psychiatrist, being one of the first to recognise shell shock as a psychological illness rather than moral weakness. He returned to England after the war, worked in Harley Street and published many papers on psychological medicine. In 1921, he heard a lecture by the Russian philosopher P.D. Ouspensky which was to prove a turning point in his life. He became a pupil of the 'Fourth Way' teaching of the Armenian G.I.Gurdjieff and from 1931, ran his own study groups in England on the psychological and spiritual teaching that became known as 'The Work'. And all along, he combined his understanding of the Fourth Way with his understanding of Christian teaching in the New Testament scriptures. 'The Mark' and 'The New Man' are the books of his which most clearly explore this interest. In the main, 'The New Man' is a meditation on the relationship between knowledge and being in humans. Nicoll follows Plato in saying that a person must possess a certain quality of being before they can helpfully handle knowledge. To give knowledge to those unready for it leads to its misuse; in the wrong hands, knowledge and truth become weapons of violence, pearls before swine. To this end, Nicoll tells the story of ancient schools of learning which placed students in menial positions to test whether or not they were worthy to receive knowledge. If they pitied themselves, complained, were weak in their being, behaved maliciously, took advantage of others, were resentful or imagined themselves better than others, then they received no knowledge. 'The New Man' looks at incidents and stories in the Bible - and in particular the parables and the Sermon on the Mount - in the light of this relationship. It follows Jesus as he attempts to give people a new inward disposition of goodness, one that can helpfully handle knowledge. The teacher with great knowledge but inadequate being may impress with his complexity but he can take people nowhere. It is certainly a contemporary theme in our own information-obsessed society. For Nicoll, the aim of the Lord's Prayer, and all other prayer, is to reach a higher inward level. We are to seek first the Kingdom of God which is the highest possible level; a happy union between knowledge and goodness. But the journey must start with goodness. Concerning 'The New Man', Nicoll wrote: 'The intention is to indicate that all teaching such as that contained in the Gospels, and many teachings both old and new, in the short period of known history, is about transcending the violence which characterises mankind's present level of being. It affirms the possibility of a development of another level of being surmounting violence.'

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