

## Christian Agnosticism.

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THE title of this paper might possibly be understood in a sense the very opposite of that which is intended. It might by some be understood to mean the agnosticism which a loyal Christian ought to *avoid*; the agnosticism which proposes to make the central verities of the Christian faith an open question and plays fast and loose with such fundamental facts as the Personality of God, the Incarnation, the Divine Sonship of Jesus Christ, and the reality of the Atonement. Whether such an attitude of mind could rightly be called 'Christian Agnosticism' may be doubted: that is not its meaning in the subject before us. What is meant is that measure of agnosticism which a thoughtful and prudent Christian ought to *cultivate*; the agnosticism which shrinks from dogmatizing respecting matters that have not been revealed, and which, while it may claim the right to form opinions about such things, carefully remembers that they are only opinions, and therefore shrinks from condemning those who are unable to accept them. However convinced an individual may be that his own view of these questions is the true one, and that he is bound to give it his support, he has to consider that this does not justify him in proclaiming it as 'catholic,' or in attempting to brand as heretics those who question or deny it. Even if he is much nearer to the truth than they are, the fact remains that many things are true which are not articles of faith, and that therefore Christians are not disloyal in refusing to believe them.

It will help to put us in the right train of thought for considering this subject if we take a quotation from three writers who may be regarded as philosophical leaders in Greek, Latin, and English theology respectively, and who cannot be suspected of having any prejudice against dogmatic statements as such.

We begin with one who is esteemed as one of the main pillars of dogmatic theology, Athanasius. He points out the direction in which the line which divides what is certain by revelation from what is problematical and disputable lies. God has revealed certain *facts* about Himself and His Son and His Spirit, and about His relation to His

creatures. These things are true, and we have the right to say that we know that they are true. He has seldom revealed to us the *way* in which they come to be true; and where He has not done so, it is presumptuous to profess that we have knowledge. Indeed, Athanasius goes so far as to deprecate inquiry as to the 'Why' and the 'How' of what has been revealed. *Οὐ δέι ζητεῖν, Διὰ τί; οὐδὲ πρέπει ζητεῖν, Πῶς;* Questioning of this kind savours of impiety; *τὸ τοιοῦτο ἐρωτῶν ἀσεβές ἐστι.* But it will be well to have the whole passage; it is in the second Oration against the Arians, § 36.

'And we must not ask *why* the Word of God is not such as our word, seeing that God is not such as we are, as has been said before. But, moreover, it is not right to ask *how* the Word is from God, or *how* He is the effulgence of God, or *how* God begets, or what is the *manner* of His begetting. For a man must be beside himself to venture on such questions, because he claims to have explained in words a thing which is ineffable and a special property of God's nature, and which is known to Himself alone and to His Son. For it is all one as if such people asked, *where* God is, or *how* He exists, and of *what nature* is the Father. But as questioning of this kind savours of impiety and argues an ignorance of God, so there is also a want of reverence in venturing to raise such questions about the generation of the Son of God and in measuring God and His Wisdom by the standard of our own nature and feebleness.'

Let us now listen to a leader among the Latin Fathers.

It is a commonplace in the history of controversy that converts are commonly bitter critics of the system which they have abandoned. There are some notable exceptions to this generalization, and among them are Saint Augustine and Bishop Butler.

For nine years Augustine had been entangled in the doctrines of the Manichæans. At last he became convinced that their teaching was disastrously erroneous, and he left them. He endeavoured to convert them as they had converted him, and this is how he writes of them in

the second chapter of his Reply to the Fundamental Epistle of Manichæus :

‘Let those rage against you who know not what toil is needed to find the truth and how difficult it is to avoid errors ; who know not with how much difficulty the eye of the inner man is freed from disease ; who know not with what sighs and groans it is made possible, in however small a degree, to comprehend God. . . . Let neither of us assert that he has found the truth ; let us seek it as if it were unknown to both of us. For truth can be sought with zeal and unanimity only in the absence of any rash assumption that it has been already found.’

And now a few words from our own great theological teacher.

Bishop Butler, in his famous sermon on the Ignorance of Man, points out that, not only have many things not been revealed to us because we have not the faculties for comprehending them, but also many things have not been revealed which we could understand. He says :

‘As the works of God and His scheme of government are above our capacities thoroughly to comprehend, so there possibly may be reasons which originally made it fit that many things should be concealed from us which we have perhaps natural capacities for understanding ; many things concerning the designs, methods, and ends of Divine providence in the government of the world. There is no manner of absurdity in supposing a veil on purpose drawn over some scenes of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the sight of which might some way or other strike us too strongly ; or that better ends are designed and served by their being concealed, than could be by their being exposed to our knowledge. . . . If to acquire knowledge were our proper end, we should indeed be but poorly provided : but if somewhat else be our business and duty, we may, notwithstanding our ignorance, be well enough furnished for it ; and the observation of our ignorance may be of assistance to us in the discharge of it.’

This brings us to the point which we are seeking. There are in the Christian religion cases in which it is good for us to observe our ignorance, and to confess our ignorance, and to remember that it is possible that the acquisition of certain knowledge would do us harm rather than good. To profess to have knowledge in such matters cannot be right.

It is remarkable, and to the last degree lament-

able, that two of the most momentous schisms which have rent the Church of Christ have been about questions respecting the ‘How’ of revealed facts. Immense bodies of Christians have cut themselves off from other large bodies of Christians by excommunication, because the two parties could not agree about the answer to a problem which it is impossible for the human intellect to solve with any certainty. The dispute in each case has continued for centuries, and the time when each side will recognize the only reasonable conclusion seems still to be very far off. It is improbable that in either case any revelation will be granted to decide the matter, and the existing evidence is insufficient. Yet each side is confident that its solution is the only true solution, and neither is willing that the question should be admitted to be an open one, about which every Christian ought to be allowed to believe as he thinks right. Still less, perhaps, is there any desire that each of us should reverently lay the question on one side, with the humble admission that he does not know and does not desire to know, for he is unable to see that the knowledge would help him to become a better Christian ; which may possibly be the reason why God has not revealed it.

Such seems to be the condition of things respecting the great controversy which for centuries has separated the Eastern Church from the Western ;—the controversy about the Procession of the Holy Spirit. Is it possible for any human being to know which of the two rival statements is nearer to the truth ? Whether, The Holy Spirit proceeds from all eternity from the Father alone, as the Orientals strenuously maintain ; or, The Holy Spirit proceeds from all eternity from the Father and the Son, as we and other Western Churches are in the habit of affirming.

It is possible that some of you have been accustomed to believe that the Eastern Church does not object to the *doctrine* of the Double Procession. What it so strenuously condemns is the irregular way in which the statement respecting the doctrine was inserted in the Creed. It rejects the *Filioque*, not as being untrue, but as having been put into one of the Church’s Creeds without the Church’s official sanction. That is what I was taught, and I believed it until the summer of 1874.

In 1874 and 1875 two memorable conferences were held at Bonn with a view to promote the reunion of Churches. They were initiated by Dr.

Döllinger, then under excommunication for rejecting the Infallibility of the Pope. He secured the attendance of representatives of the Greek, Russian, English, and American Episcopal Churches, and got leading Old Catholics to meet them, and he presided over all the sessions himself. One of the questions discussed was that of the Double Procession. Dr. Döllinger did me the honour of asking me to assist him and Bishop Reinkens in preparing material for some of the sessions of the Conference. He said that he was convinced that the common belief that the Orientals accepted the doctrine, while they resented the manner of its intrusion into the Creed, was erroneous; they rejected the doctrine: and the debate in the Conference showed that he was right. The Orientals, whether from Russia or Greece or elsewhere, absolutely refused to admit that there was any truth whatever in the statement that the Holy Spirit proceeded from all eternity from both the Father and the Son. The Father was the sole Fount of Divinity. Anglicans, Americans, and Old Catholics frankly admitted that the *Filioque* had been inserted in Western Creeds without proper authority. This did not at all satisfy the Orientals. They wanted the omission of the *Filioque* as untrue. They would not allow that there *is* any truth in the Western formula; and they rather unwillingly assented to an expression which could be understood as implying that there *may be* some truth in it. The Conference perhaps brought us a little nearer to the position that a question upon which the whole Church has never given a decision ought, even by the most rigid dogmatist, to be regarded as open, and that therefore neither side has a right to anathematize the other for the form of doctrine which it maintains. It is difficult to see how knowing which of the two formulas is more correct would help us to lead better lives; and therefore a reverent confession of agnosticism seems to be in place.

Another instance of the way in which attempts to determine the 'How' of a revealed fact has caused grievous schism in the Church is the bitter controversy which for centuries has raged round the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

There are few things more tragic in the history of Christ's Church than the fact that its central act of worship has for ages been, and still continues to be, a subject for the keenest contention, and that Christians have cruelly persecuted, and even put

to cruel deaths, other Christians, for not holding doctrines respecting the Lord's Supper which cannot be proved, and which possibly are not true. The Sacrament of Love and Life has been made an engine of hate and destruction, because men have insisted that they possessed knowledge which cannot be possessed, and upon explaining what cannot be explained.

We all of us are agreed as to the divine fact that in the Eucharist the faithful Christian receives the Body and Blood of Christ. To this doctrine Anglicans and Romanists, Lutherans and Calvinists, give ready assent. Difficulties, disputes, and dissensions begin when the question is raised, *How* is this divine result effected? It would be a painful, and perhaps not a very profitable, task to attempt to define accurately the various answers which have been given, and given with the utmost confidence, to this question, a question to which, without a special revelation, no certain answer can be given. The words of Scripture which bear on the question can be interpreted in more ways than one. The same may be said of the evidence of Church tradition. Human reason cannot settle it, for here the resources of philosophy and science are powerless. Nevertheless, there is nothing wrong—there may in some cases be real gain—in adopting one of the various theories respecting the manner of Christ's Presence in the Eucharist. If individuals find that their devotion to Christ and reverence for His Sacrament is promoted by one theory rather than another, ought any one to wish to deprive him of the liberty to believe it? By parity of reasoning, those who cherish a particular view ought to abstain from condemning those who in this matter differ from them. But perhaps those are wisest who do not even desire the knowledge of that which God has neither revealed nor enabled them to find out by means of the faculties with which He has endowed them, and are therefore content on this question also to profess a reverent agnosticism. In the first centuries Christians were content to use and enjoy this means of grace without attempting to define the manner of its operation. It would perhaps be our wisdom to do the same.

Before leaving the subject of the Eucharist it may be worth while to note a matter respecting which it is sometimes assumed that we possess knowledge, although it is difficult to believe that any one does possess it, namely, the manner and

moment of consecration. The *minister* in the Eucharist is not determined in Scripture any more than the minister in Baptism, and it is evident that in the *earliest* days of the Church of Corinth there were no appointed ministers. If there had been, St. Paul would have blamed them for tolerating the monstrous desecration of the Lord's Supper of which many communicants were guilty, and would have charged them to put a stop to it. On the other hand, it is evident that there and elsewhere a distinction between clergy and laity was made in the second half of the first century, and that in the first half of the second century the duty of presiding at the Eucharist was reserved to the clergy.

We are left in similar doubt as to the *words of consecration*. None of our four accounts of the Institution tells us what words our Lord used when He 'blessed' or 'gave thanks.' We infer from this that the exact words are not of supreme importance: it is having the mind of Christ and acting in His spirit that must be secured. Only the words which He used when He gave the bread and the cup to the disciples are recorded, and about these the four narratives differ surprisingly. The only words about which all four are agreed are 'This is my body,' and even in them there is a slight difference of order in the Greek. It is often supposed that these words are the words of consecration, and this view has prevailed in the Western Church. Our own Communion Service manifestly implies it. But even in the West eminent liturgiologists dissent from this view. It is manifest that these words, in all four of the narratives, are words of administration rather than of consecration; they follow the blessing. It is difficult to believe that the elements were not consecrated until Christ said, 'Take, eat, this is my body.' The consecration was effected when Christ gave thanks in words which have not been preserved. W. C. Bishop, a high authority, tells us that 'All liturgies of every type agree in bearing witness to the fact that the original form of consecration was a thanksgiving,' and that in the Eastern liturgies 'the words of institution were not recited as of themselves effecting the consecration, but rather as the authority in obedience to which the rite is performed' (*Ch. Quart. Rev.*, July 1908, pp. 387-392). In the main lines of Eucharistic teaching in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, as Dr. Darwell Stone points out, 'the moment of

consecration is associated with the invocation' (*Ch. Quart. Rev.*, Oct. 1908, p. 36). But here again there is some divergence; for some say that it is the invocation of God the Word, others the invocation of God the Holy Ghost, others again the invocation of the Holy Trinity, that is required. Cyril of Jerusalem gives both of the last two views. Origen says that the invocation of the Name of God and of Christ and of the Holy Spirit is the essential part of the consecration of the elements. In our own service there is no invocation.

The late Bishop Wordsworth, in one of his addresses to the clergy of the diocese of Salisbury, desired them not to crouch over the altar in reading the prayer of consecration. I do not remember his reasons. But besides the fact that the crouching attitude, as seen by the congregation, is not very dignified, there is the fact that any change of attitude seems to assume that we know two things, which are unknown, namely, the exact moment of consecration and the exact effect of consecration. All that it concerns us to know is that the elements, when they are administered to us, are duly consecrated, and that, if we receive them duly, we receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

If what has just been said is anywhere near the truth, it follows that we ought to cease to talk about 'invalid' sacraments. God alone knows whether any sacrament honestly administered with the intention of doing what Christ ordained, is ever 'invalid.' If we must criticize, it is safer to speak of what is 'irregular.' Every organized communion must lay down rules as to how sacraments are to be administered; for to leave everything to the discretion of the minister would be disastrous. These rules differ in different Churches, and what is 'regular' in one Church may be 'irregular' to members of another Church. But we know nothing about the 'invalidity' of an irregularly administered sacrament, and it is rash to assert that to those who receive it devoutly it is not a means of grace. It might not be such to us, if we, in a spirit of bravado, violated the rules of our own Church; but we know nothing of its effects on those who receive it in accordance with rules which they believe to be adequate. If that is true, it is well to profess agnosticism respecting it, and abstain from pronouncing any judgment as to its efficacy. See Thirlwall, *Charges*, i. pp. 245, 246, 278, ii. pp. 251, 281; Ellicott on 1 Co 11<sup>24</sup>;

T. S. Evans in the *Speakers' Commentary* on 1 Co 10<sup>12</sup>; Hastings' *D.B.*, art. 'Lord's Supper'; Westcott, *Life and Letters*, to Archbp. of York, 8th October 1900.<sup>1</sup>

Seeing that the essential articles of the Christian faith are few, and that the opinions which can be formed about details are almost limitless in number, it follows that the sphere in which Christian agnosticism can be exhibited is large. But I will mention only one more example. It is connected with a subject about which we have heard a great deal of late, namely, the miracles recorded in the New Testament.

It has been urged that we ought not to draw a strong line of distinction between the miracles of the New Testament and the miracles of the Old. Yet there is this intelligible and important difference between them. The evidence for the miracles in the New Testament is in most cases strong; in some cases it is stringent. This is by no means the case with regard to the miracles recorded in the O.T. The evidence for most of these, namely, those narrated in the Hexateuch, was written down several centuries after the time of the supposed events. Even the evidence for the miracles attributed to Elijah and Elisha was not written until a generation or more had passed away. But in Epistles of which no sane critic now doubts the authenticity we have St. Paul's own testimony as to miracles wrought by himself and others; and it is incredible that, unless he had wrought them, he would make such assertions to people who knew perfectly well whether he had done so or not, some of whom would have been ready enough to expose him, if he had made a claim that was notoriously untrue. It is true that we have nothing of the kind written by our Lord. But the first three Gospels were in circulation at a time when many of those who had been witnesses of Christ's ministry were still living, and nowhere do we find that any of such witnesses protested that the picture of Christ, as given in the Gospels, was extravagant. On the other hand, we do find that the Fourth Evangelist, while he tacitly corrects some of the details of the Synoptic narratives, enhances rather than tones down the miraculous element. There is, therefore, sufficient critical

<sup>1</sup> 'It seems to me to be vital to guard against the thought of the Presence of the Lord "in or under the forms of bread and wine." From this the greatest practical errors follow.'

reason for drawing a line of distinction between the miracles of the Old Testament and the miracles of the New. The evidence for the latter is very much stronger.

But some of those who object to this justifiable distinction propose to make a distinction in the N.T. miracles which is less justifiable.

There is difficulty about defining a miracle; but each person who has thought about it has a fairly clear idea as to what he means by the term. I should describe my own meaning both negatively and positively. *Negatively*, a miracle is not a violation of law. For God is not a God of disorder; οὐ γὰρ ἀκαταστασίας ὁ Θεός (1 Co 14<sup>33</sup>): we cannot think of Him as constructing His universe in accordance with law and then violating the law Himself. Granting that He could do so if He willed, it is difficult to suppose that He ever would will to do so. *Positively*, a miracle is an exceptional and wonderful event which cannot be explained by any known natural law; and one of the conditions of its occurrence is that it should effect a beneficial result.

According to this view, which may or may not be correct, what is a miracle in one age may cease to be a miracle in a later age, because, in the interval, natural laws have been discovered which enable us to explain the wonderful occurrence, and which enable highly gifted persons to produce similar results. Many of the miracles wrought by Christ and His disciples would not be miracles now. We have discovered natural laws respecting the marvellous power which, in certain circumstances, mind has upon mind, and mind has upon matter, even when the acting mind and that upon which it acts are separated by considerable distance in space and time. Facts which are now well established respecting faith-healing, hypnotism, thought-reading, telepathy, and the like, enable us to explain, in some cases completely, in others partially, many of the miracles recorded in the N.T. They were rightly regarded as miraculous then, but, although still marvellous, they are not regarded as miraculous now. Most of the miracles of healing, whether of sick people or of demoniacs, and of knowing the unspoken thoughts of men, can wholly, or at least to a large extent, be explained through our increased knowledge of medical and psychological laws.

But there are other wonderful acts attributed to Christ which cannot be thus explained; such as

His satisfying thousands with food that would have sufficed for only a very few, His walking on the water, stilling a tempest, and raising the dead. These things are as fully miraculous to us as they were to those who witnessed them. We as yet know of nothing analogous to them. We know of no natural laws, by following which any human being, however gifted, could do the like. Here, therefore, there is a distinction in the N.T. miracles which may be reasonably made. There are the miracles which our present knowledge enables us to explain either wholly or in part, and there are those which at present we cannot explain at all. So far, we are on sure ground.

But, when we are asked to go further, and declare that the former are credible, because they are in accordance with known laws, but that the latter are incredible, because they are violations of known laws, we are asked to make a distinction for which we have no sufficient justification. How do we know that the latter are violations of law? They may look like violations of laws which we know, but they may be illustrations of laws which we do not know. We cannot, without presumption, make the assertion that they are violations of law, until all the laws in accordance with which God works in His universe are known to us. It is probable that even now we know only a fragment, and a small fragment, of them.

To take a single instance. It seems possible that before long some of our existing beliefs with regard to the constitution of matter will have to be revised. The discovery of radium, the increase in our knowledge of the nature and powers of electricity, and other dawning possibilities, are pointing the way to deep mysteries in nature, the probing of which may lead to a complete revolution of our convictions as to what is possible and what is impossible in the material universe.

Be this as it may. There is at any rate this momentous consideration. For those who in any real sense believe in the Incarnation, for those to whom Jesus Christ is an absolutely unique Personality, there ought to be grave hesitation and deep reluctance, if not positive refusal, to state, with anything approaching to confidence, what was impossible for Him in reference to the world of matter and of mind. We do not know the limits of our own powers, which of late have been found to be far greater than had been supposed; and it is indeed rash to be very positive about the limits of

His. His birth was the entrance of a new force into the world, analogous, to a very limited extent, to the first introduction of artificial fire. How incredible its powers must have seemed to those who had never seen it, and had hitherto had no experience of anything that could give intense heat and light other than the sun! Christ was, it is true, in the fullest and most real sense, man; and therefore there must have been limitations. But He was not a mere man. He was the Word of God made flesh; and therefore His birth, whether we accept the gospel account of it or not, was supernatural, and He Himself was unique. Neither before nor since has there been any being like Him. Are we, then, in a position to state, with anything like certainty, the conditions under which so unique a Personality would work in reference to the material world? We really know very little about such conditions. We have only imperfect knowledge of the conditions under which we ourselves work. As has just been intimated, the last half-century has taught us that our own powers are much larger than they had been believed to be, and limitations which had been supposed to be universal and stringent have been found to be non-existent. It appears to follow from this that it is presumptuous to draw a hard-and-fast line of division between the miracles which have been attributed, on good authority, to our Lord, and to say that some, though marvellous, are in harmony with our experience, and are therefore credible, but that others are contrary to our experience, and are therefore incredible. Here also we seem to have a sphere in which it is wise to profess a reverent agnosticism, and to say that we do not possess the knowledge which would justify us in asserting, 'It is impossible to believe that Jesus Christ did these things.'

Before concluding, it may be worth while to make clear what is not urged in this paper and what is.

It is *not* urged, with regard to religious truth, that in all cases in which certainty is unattainable it is our duty to abstain from forming an opinion and having a belief. That is a question which each person must decide for himself. For many people it might be beneficial to have a belief, and to cherish it as a guide to thought and conduct, until it has been proved to be untenable. A belief carefully and patiently reached would be likely to be an approximation to the truth. For other

people it might be wise not to perplex themselves with insoluble problems. Let each person be persuaded in his own mind.

What *is* urged is, that in all cases in which certainty is unattainable it is our duty to abstain from condemning other Christians for not thinking as we do respecting them. Our ignorance ought to be known to ourselves, and, when occasion arises, confessed to others. Religious truth is a very large thing, and none of us grasps more than a fragment of it. The fragment which other people grasp may be very different from our own, and yet, for all that, they may be justified in believing that it is true. As John Henry Newman

has reminded us, there are regions of thought in which something that we know to be false is the nearest approach that our minds can make to the truth.

The recognition of this fact, namely, the largeness of the field in which Christian Agnosticism can be exhibited, gives full justification to the comprehensiveness which is one of the great glories of the English Church. In it Low, Broad, and High can all find a place, and hold it with a good conscience, because the points respecting which each individual differs from his brethren are questions about which neither reason nor revelation gives any sufficiently certain decision.

## Literature.

### JOHN SMYTH.

It is a multitude which no man can number that has gone and goes by the name of John Smith. No wonder if one of them should drop out of sight. Browne and Robinson succeeded in holding their place among the Pilgrim Fathers, but Smith (as he spelt his name at first) died early and was forgotten. It is only within quite recent years that industrious and loyal historians like Shakespeare and Burgess and Burrage and Whitley have recovered him his true place in the conquest of America and the calendar of saints.

Dr. W. T. Whitley is not only the latest and greatest of John Smyth's biographers; he is also the editor of his works. The title is *The Works of John Smyth, Fellow of Christ's College, 1594-98* (Cambridge: At the University Press; 2 vols., 3rs. 6d. net). And the works will do more than all the biographies to give their author a place in literature and in our regard. Dr. Whitley's introduction is fine biographical work, the Baptist and the scholar being most happily harmonized in him. But the biography is Dr. Whitley's; the works are John Smyth's own. We shall remember the editor by the one, the author by the other.

With what surprise do we recognize the originality and insight of the exposition of the Lord's Prayer, which occupies nearly two hundred pages of the first volume. When Dr. Nestle wrote his article on the Lord's Prayer for the DICTIONARY

OF CHRIST AND THE GOSPELS, he made a great effort to record all the literature; but he did not know John Smyth. Dr. Whitley has rescued it from one or other of the libraries where it has lain unstudied all this time. How Nestle would have relished the quaint discussion of the words 'After this manner pray ye.' Smyth says: 'The meaning of which words must needs be one of these things following, that is to say; Pray either

1. These words onely: or
  2. This matter onely: or
  3. In this method onely: or
  4. These words and matter: or
  5. These words and method: or
  6. This matter in this method: or
  7. These words, and this matter, in this method.'
- Now, which does he conclude it is?

### HOMER AND HISTORY.

In calling his new book *Homer and History* (Macmillan; 12s. net) Dr. Walter Leaf tells us that his desire is to make the study of the Homeric poems a contribution to history. He is not to be engaged with either æsthetics or literary criticism. He tells us, in short, that he is returning to his old pet theme and hoping to prove that 'the poems really do depict, as contemporaries, the Achaian age, as they profess.'

Dr. Leaf starts, as all historical criticism of Homer must now start, with the discovery of