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THE PLACE OF NATURAL RELIGION¹

A PROBLEM IN APOLOGETICS AND THEOLOGICAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA

THE witness of the Reformed Churches in the English-speaking lands has in these days of ours passed into an experience of obscurity and temporary eclipse. Not for the first time has this happened in its history. Truth, however, when struck down to earth has risen in power. It has found its vindication in bygone days. We believe that it will find the like again. Thus, though the tide has ebbed far out, we live in the confidence that it will turn and rise in full flood. With every effort to bring about the return of the banished Confession of our Fathers, which was indeed but an exhibition of the Faith of the Gospel, we are in cordial sympathy, and we hail any tokens that we see at home and abroad of the reviving of the good cause. Our sympathy, I need not say, goes forth to those who stand for its witness in other lands beyond the seas where the struggle to maintain it calls for strenuous effort, not to say in some places real peril. In particular the movement in the Continental Reformed Churches towards a closer adherence to the Reformed Confessions enlists our interest and hearty good will. The revival of our Churches may assume a form that may be either academic or popular. In whichever guise it comes it is welcome. When it asserts itself in the seats of learning it will tell in after days on wider circles outside. Thus the beginning of good may be no more than a cloud like a man's hand. Yet, it may be the forerunner of an abundant rain. If it assumes a more popular and less literary form it will assert itself in the state of the Church at large, and the needs of a quickened and refreshed Church will call for the vindication of its faith in the field of dialectic and principles.

I

The Revival of the witness for the Truth may come along both lines, the popular and the academic, and when it comes the friends of the Gospel will greet its advent. Meanwhile,

¹ Address delivered at the close of Session 1934-5 in the Free Church College, Edinburgh.

until it comes, those who stand by the historic Evangel are called upon to set it forth without a hesitant or dubious note. They are bound to defend it in its assumptions or groundwork and in its detailed application to the life of the Church. This work of defence tells of a warfare, and there has been a good deal of discussion as to the place in a Theological course that belongs to this side of the exhibition of the Faith in respect of its evidences and its word of authority. Some put it as a preliminary study whose place is at the vestibule of Sacred Theology. They hold that it has to face the initial task of justifying in the open forum of the thought of the World the claims that Christianity makes to be the religion of final authority. Others again put the study of Christian Defences in an altogether different department of Theological Encyclopaedia. They assign it its province and work in the field of Polemics. So doing, they regard it as the reasoned answer that from the standpoint of formed Christian conviction is given by the Christian Faith to the manifold oppositions that challenge its claims.

Of these two arrangements of the programme of Theological study the latter inclines in the direction of putting the Christian case to those who have already their place in the circle of the regenerate and, as such, have a discernment of those internal evidences which, to men who can appreciate them, are the most satisfying and convincing of all to justify the submission of our Faith to the Word of God. So far, it is a case of preaching, as the word goes, to the converted; and this is proverbially an easier thing to do than preaching to the unconverted. Yet when all is said and done, the questions that in this connection our Faith must answer in the region of Polemics are the same questions that face the Christian thinker in the realm of Apologetics. In each case the work has to be done in the field of Reason and of Reasoning. And there is only one such thing as sound reason. The Pelagians do not have a special brand of Reason any more than the Augustinians. The regenerate and the unregenerate have a common Logic, and it is with the weapons of sound Logic that the champions of the Truth are called upon to wage their warfare.

It is one thing, of course, to state a case and give a reason. It is quite a different thing that the other man should see your point and yield to your reasoning. And although the only alternative to the use of good sound reason is the employment

of bad Logic, yet, with things as they are in this world, the best and soundest reasoning will not of itself avail to produce a conviction that is worthy of the name. We cannot reason ourselves into such a conviction as will bear down all active and practical opposition and secure the control of the life. The heart has many influences at its call which help to modify and tone down the reasons that the understanding sees to be good ; and the upshot is that in conflict with an enlightened understanding a rebellious heart carries the day. Yet, in spite of all its oppositions, such reasons may be set before it as ought to command the cordial faith of a reasoning being. Of himself he ought to judge the thing that is right.

Duty is one thing, and the power to obey its voice quite another. The response to the claims of duty may be a very unworthy one. Yet the claims are good and valid and here comes in the very sin of the impenitent and the unbeliever. Something higher and better than the resources of nature must be drawn upon that a worthy answer may be given to the challenge of Truth. It is the forth-putting of this higher power that makes all the difference between the cold assent of the understanding and the warm consent of the heart. In this respect the faith for which the Theology of the Regenerate calls is of a different quality from the submission or surrender in the region of the intellect that is the outcome of a merely dialectical victory. Yet this intellectual faith is ancillary to something that is better than itself. It is fitted to appeal to consciences, and as it leaves its mark upon the organ of our moral nature it may exercise the man who is its subject with such questionings and strivings as find their logical justification and happy issue in a childlike acceptance of the message of the Gospel.

II

It is but right that the Theology of full Christian conviction should lay stress on the beggarly bankruptcy of the resources of man in his estrangement from the life of God. Yet it ought not to lose sight of the duty that valid reasoning imposes upon us to do justice to the Truth which sound Theology sets forth and for whose defence it is set. For the obligation to do such justice does not rest on our moral and spiritual power adequately to appreciate its claims and treat it fairly. What sound reasoning

sets forth to prove, and proves, has an intrinsic right to command the homage of the whole man. Thus it comes about that in the logical order it is right that the study of Apologetic questions should lay the foundation on which the thinking of the Christian man is to proceed as he essays the formulation of his faith and its convictions in ordered sequence and harmony.

In this connection it is of interest that we should take note of the place that belongs to the study of Natural Theology. There has been a strong tendency in the contiguous circles of philosophers and philosophic divines to call in question the validity of the Theistic argument. This tendency has met on the part of these divines with a concessive spirit that gives up Natural Theology as an indefensible outwork and professes to concentrate on the teaching of special Revelation. This exalts Special Revelation at the expense of the justice that is due to the underlying truths of General Revelation. In regard to a valid Natural Theology we are safe in affirming that it has its definite bounds. It is insufficient. It has reached and scarcely got beyond the stage of learning to put questions and to raise difficulties. The difficulties it cannot meet, and the questions it cannot answer. This is so because it is only the part of a greater whole. Children may put questions that sages cannot answer. The very problems that it brings forward find their solution over the border in the department of Special Revelation. For Special Revelation comes with an express answer to such questions. In view of these problems, Natural Theology is insufficient, so it is unsatisfactory, while at the same time it has its uses.

III

We see in Holy Scripture how the writers and the speakers make their appeal to what the witness of Nature teaches and to the justice that it demands. We have only to read the statements made by Paul at Athens, or at Lystra, or in the early part of his Epistle to the Romans, to see what the teaching of Special Revelation itself is on this subject. It recognizes the cogency of the argument that is drawn from the things that are made and the course of providence. But the cogency of a compelling argument is one thing. Man's power to do it fitting justice is quite another. Our failure to do it adequate justice reacts by way of doing hurt to ourselves. It does not take away from the

inherent, the intrinsic, the inalienable right of relevant truth to be heard and to produce its proper effect. That right is independent of the welcome which meets its claims. Our failure to comply with these demands does not put them out of action. The obligation lying upon us to yield to them is unimpaired by our failures to honour it. Thus there may be a valid and a conclusive presentation of the case on behalf of a Natural Theology, however far it may be beyond the power of man to treat it as they should.

It is, then, an extreme and an unwarranted position to take up that there is no true Natural Theology. Such a negative cannot be defended, for there is such a thing, albeit it is not enough. It meets with an acknowledgment in the residuum of truth that even Deistic thought has not set aside. The tendency of Deism is in the direction of treating it as sufficient; and its sufficiency is then pleaded as a bar to the admission of Special Revelation. To make it out to be sufficient would be to render anything supplementary a mere redundancy, and so far an impertinence. It would be a mistake on the other side in standing up for the authority of Special Revelation to hold the ground that, though General Revelation is admittedly insufficient, it is therefore non-existent.

IV

Not only is the value of the relevance of the witness of Natural Theology acknowledged in Scripture: such an acknowledgment also finds a place in our Westminster Standards. In fact the very first statement of the *Confession* sets forth the two sides of the truth to which we have adverted. The first of these is that there is a General Revelation. The other, which is its companion, is that this General Revelation is insufficient. It reads: "Although the light of nature and the works of Creation and Providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom and power of God as to leave men inexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God which is necessary unto Salvation" (*Conf.*, ch. I, 7). Thus it is that the *Confession* leads on to the subject of the Rule of Faith. Again, when it lays the foundation for the original obligation that is upon man to worship the one Living and True God in chapter XXI, 1, it says, "The light of nature showeth that there is a God who hath Lordship and

Sovereignty over all, is good and doeth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in and served with all the heart and with all the soul and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself", etc. Still further our Larger Catechism asks the question: "How doth it appear that there is a God?" and says that "The very light of nature in man and the works of God declare plainly that there is a God; but His Word and Spirit only do sufficiently and effectually reveal Him unto man for salvation." In words like these there is struck no doubtful note as to the truth of Natural Theology and the possibility that a man may in it reach a valid though not a sufficient acquaintance with his Maker and King. And this teaching is not peculiar to the Westminster Documents. It is one of the commonplaces of Reformed Theology.

V

It is enough that we should give two representative statements from Standard Documents in the Continental Reformed Churches and to show how the Overseas Reformers regarded it. Let us take first the *Catechism of Geneva* which dates from 1545. It asks the question, and answers it, why in the Creed God is described as the Creator of Heaven and Earth. The answer runs in these words: "He has made Himself known by His works: in these also He is to be searched for by us."¹ The words of the *Belgic Confession* are abundantly clear. It says that "the first way by which we know God is through the creation upholding and government of the Universe . . . all the creatures from the least to the greatest are like so many letters written from which the invisible things of God can be seen and known . . . all of which suffice to convince men and to leave them without excuse."² On this subject our Reformers spoke with the decision and assurance of men that knew their own minds.

¹ Or, as it is rendered in the old translation which was current in Scotland:—"Because He hath made Himself known unto us by His workes it is necessary for us to seek Him out in them", etc.

² "Nous le connaissons par deux moyens. Premièrement: Par la création, conservation et gouvernement du monde universel, d'autant que c'est devant nos yeux comme un beau livre, auquel toutes créatures, petites et grandes, servent de lettres pour nous faire contempler les choses invisibles de Dieu, savoir sa puissance éternelle et sa divinité, comme dit l'Apôtre Paul (Rom. i. 20). Toutes lesquelles choses sont suffisantes pour convaincre les hommes et les rendre inexcusables."

VI

It was one of the wayward and curious inversions and turnings of human thought that in that Theological age some at least of the early Socinians, who were so much inclined to magnify natural light and power, struck here a faltering and negative note. As they found so little else to be the matter of Special Revelation they ascribed the knowledge of the truth of God's being to this source. There have also been a few sufficiently positive Calvinists who tended to agree with them here. In this case the tendency worked in the opposite direction to what was true in the case of the Socinians. Yet they came to the same conclusion. These made as little of natural power and light as they could, and so they minimized the light of nature and the knowledge of God's being which may be derived from it.

In respect of their teaching on this subject these Reformed Theologians diverge materially from the doctrine of the great Genevan Reformer who is looked up to as the patriarch and the leading teacher of the Reformed Churches. In the first Book of his *Institutes* he devotes a chapter to the theme that a knowledge of God is naturally planted in the minds of men. In discussing this theme, the very first proposition that he lays down as one that is out of the range of controversy is that there is in the human mind even by a kind of natural instinct a certain sense of divinity, and, lest anyone should betake himself to the pretext of ignorance, God Himself has implanted a certain understanding of His own divine being, the memory of which He keeps alive by renewing it from time to time with fresh drops that He lets drop into the mind. In virtue of this, men became witnesses against themselves in case they do not worship their Maker nor consecrate their lives to Him.¹ This sense of Deity he teaches is insufficient, but he is definite on the matter that there is a universal seed of religion in the race.

So again in his Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans we find him saying of the Apostle as he speaks (Romans i. 19-21), "He clearly bears witness (v. 21) that God has presented the means of knowing Himself to the minds of all as He has manifested Himself by His works so that of necessity they must see

¹ Calvini Institutio I, c. 3. 1. "Quendam inesse humane menti, et quidem naturali instinctu divinitatis sensum, extra controversiam ponimus: siquidem, ne quis ad ignorantie praetextum confugeret, quandam sui numinis intelligentiam universis Deus ipse indidit, cuius memoriam assidue renovans novas subinde guttas instillat; ut quum ad unum omnes intelligant Deum esse, et suum esse opificem, suo ipsorum testimonio damnentur, quod non et illum coluerint, et eius voluntati vitam suam consecrarint."

what of themselves they did not seek to know, that there is a God.”

No man could be clearer in his teaching than Calvin was with regard to the ill-use that men make of the witness of nature, and their need accordingly of being taught with a high hand that they may know God to some purpose. Of themselves they are destitute of and incapable of reaching that knowledge of Him that is saving and profitable. But in regard to the material evidence which furnishes a natural acquaintance with His power and Godhead he is clear, unhesitating and positive. There exist about us and in us the materials that warrant us in arriving at certain conclusions in regard to the Supreme Being which, when put in their proper setting, are an ordered Natural Theology. This is enough to leave men dumb in self-defence when they are brought to a reckoning. It shuts them in to the fact of God, to the fact of their own sin against Him, and to the further fact of their consequent exposure to His righteous judgment. It does not tell how sin can be put away or how the sinner can be set free from its guilt and cleansed from its pollution. But it is a body of connected truth that is fitted to teach reasonable beings what a desirable thing it is that such a message as the Gospel brings should come to their ears and find a lodgment in their hearts.

VII

Dr. John Duncan could speak of himself as a philosophical sceptic who had taken refuge in Theology. Such was the record of his mental history, but in giving such a description of himself he does not do more than indicate the course that his own thought had followed. He did not call in question the valid character of Natural Theology. Indeed, he used to acknowledge his indebtedness to Dr. Mearns for leading him to the acceptance so far of its truths. There is no question among Evangelical believers about the chief source of their acquaintance with God. But the tendency shown in some modern returns to the Reformed Theology does less than justice to the sufficiency of the witness of nature to leave men without excuse in judgment.

It is good to recognize the divine authority with which Special Gracious Revelation is vested, but there is a risk in Academic circles that there should be a recurrence of the *felo*

de se of Mansel's intellectual Agnosticism which despaired of Rational certainty and betook itself to Faith as a source of knowledge. The faith to which he appealed can hardly be said to have been one that gives an account of its matters. But the faith of the Gospel is open-eyed and it challenges investigation. There is undoubtedly a primary faith on which our everyday practical certainty and sense of security proceed. It is our faith in our cognitions and intuitions, in the witness of consciousness and of self-consciousness, and in the elementary axioms which all must accept. It is in the working of such a faith that man in general and speculative philosophers with their fellows look upon the familiar facts of life and are assured of their validity. But the screw of Agnostic thought which would confine man's thought to relative truth and excludes a positive acquaintance with the infinite puts men in an intolerable bondage.

VIII

No man in his senses, limited as he is, would put forth the claim that he comprehends fully and has attained to an infinite knowledge. But a true knowledge of the Infinite such as is reached by creatures in their creature measure is a reality. It is not a comprehension which embraces the fulness of the Infinite. Rather is it an apprehension which lays hold of the Infinite as a fact while it disclaims any ambition to take in its fulness. The very law of contraries, as it would recognize the truth of our bounded and finite knowledge, finds room over against its finitude for a contrasted infinitude. And what is more, we are too apt in thinking on these subjects to let our thought run in the category of size to the neglect of that of quality. A quantitative as distinct from a qualitative Infinite engages our mind; and men forget that to taste a drop of sea water on the tip of our finger gives us a true idea of the salinity of the great sea. Its quality is one and the same in the whole seven seas, and we need not sail them all nor drink them all up to be sure that the sea is salt. As we can reason from the particular to the universal, we can reason from the finite to the infinite.

It is but so much verbal fencing or mere logic chopping to deny us a true acquaintance with the Infinite because we have not an infinite knowledge of it. It is surely an undue restriction in the definition of knowledge to confine it to comprehension.

The questions that are debated on the borderland of Philosophy and Theology at times give colour to Goethe's scoffing gibe at Theology that it is a study of words and their application. A full knowledge of the Infinite is the exclusive prerogative quite obviously of Him who is alone Himself the Infinite One. Our creation, however, after His image and in His likeness makes it possible for us in our creature measure to have a true knowledge of Him and of His works and of His ways. It is cowardly for Christian thinkers to capitulate to Agnosticism or to come to terms with its despotic demands, for Agnosticism with its leaven of scepticism is the very paralysis of true thought.

IX

The risk of coming to terms with a foe of this kind is greater in the case of the cloistered academic life than in that of those who live in the open air and are face to face with the everyday real problems of the world. There may also be a conceit that is fostered in academic circles that bids men take a line of their own, lean to their own understanding and seek a self-sufficiency in their own resources. The practical as distinct from the speculative life faces up to evidence and is better disposed to do justice to it. When speculative thought on the wing has wearied itself in the greatness of its way in the range of physical being, it comes as near attaining to the Infinite as it may ever expect to come, and, though dead-beat by its effort, it is as far as ever from comprehending the Infinite in its magnitude. Sobered by its very weariness, let it reflect on the primary truth that it is but the thinking of the creature of a day and that over against its finitude is the boundless infinitude of eternity and immensity. The bonds of finitude we may never hope and we should never seek to burst. So the old question comes back to us: "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty to perfection?"

It marks out the fountal being, whose it is to bestow derivative being, with all the fulness of unbounded glory, that He is the source of the being which owes its being to His Fiat. With the question of whence the Universe comes we are up against its dependence on its Author, and the Author who bestows being on others is Himself a fathomless fountain of ultimate and underived being. He has His being in Himself and of Himself and is in

no wise dependent for being or for blessedness on any or on all His creatures. In resting in such a Being as the goal of its quest, Natural Theology is not guilty of making unwarranted or illegitimate assumptions. We are face to face with fact; and fact shuts us up to faith in the Living God as the one source of all being about us.

It is a course, then, that is out of keeping with the best traditions of our Reformed Theology that it should abandon the outworks and confine itself as a besieged prisoner within the walls of its citadel. The Oriental Cosmology or Cosmography which makes the earth rest on the back of an elephant and the elephant in turn upon a tortoise is said to find foothold for the tortoise on a point of interrogation. The teaching of an aggressive school which looks askance at a valid Natural Theology might be said to be cast in something like the same mould. Suppose you invert the point of interrogation and hang the Universe upon the inverted hook, you start with hypothesis that is beyond the reach of verification. With nothing more substantial as your initial position, no one can tell how far your abstract thought will carry you.

X

A worthy old divine contrasted his earlier days with his later by saying that when he was young the larks built their nests upon the ground and laid their eggs in them. Now, however, that he was old, it was their fashion to build their nests in the clouds and there lay such eggs as they laid at all. Aristophanes in the *Clouds* spoke of *Nephelococcygia*: some such cloud-cuckoo-land is the realm of the speculative Theologian or Philosopher. He may ask for himself a place in the sun and find that he gets in its stead a place in the moon. His heart need not be unduly exalted or cheered when he achieves such a result. It is not good to have anything less substantial than the rock to build upon, and Christian faith builds on the faithfulness of the Living God as He makes Himself known in the fabric of nature and in the revelation of supernatural grace.

It is the vice of academic thinking that it is so ready to build on the yielding unsubstantial clouds of a bare hypothesis, and this is the danger in regard to the movement back to Calvin and the Reformed Doctrine of a Sovereign God who carries out His will

in the providential control of the Universe. Those among the followers of this tendency who are but speculative in their thinking will inevitably and soon betray how flimsy their cloud-land constructions and systems are, but the movement has a more positive side, and those who belong to this wing of the tendency whose thinking is serious and believing, and so of a more solid and valuable character, will be forced by the necessity of their situation to find a sufficient ground for their faith in the authority of an authenticated Revelation which they learn to acknowledge to be of God not only in its substance but in its form. When the present-day movement with Barth as leader has found harbour and anchorage in Holy Writ accepted at its own valuation, there will be none to extend to it a heartier welcome than those who have stood by the old Reformed Theology in sunshine and in storm. But things will not be well with the Church at large until she washes her hands of the unbelieving stain that coquetting with loose Infidel criticism has left upon them. Then she will be content to treat the Holy Books of the Old Testament as our Lord and His Apostles did ; and she will learn to receive the New Testament Scriptures as the abiding legacy which the Head of the Church has left her, in and by the hands of His Apostles who are the final witnesses and teachers of the Word.

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