

ARTICLE X.

HARNACK'S "HISTORY OF DOGMA."¹

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PROFESSOR ADOLF HARNACK, of Berlin, is the most prominent church historian living. It was, therefore, desirable that English readers should have his principal Work, in an unabridged form, made accessible to them through the medium of a translation. Harnack is not hard to translate: his style is comparatively simple. But he deals in this volume with many closely related types of thought, which renders it sometimes difficult to understand him even in his mother tongue. No one, however, can be clearer than Harnack when he wishes to be positive. His thought often flashes out with electrical brightness and surprise. That at other times one is left uncertain as to just what he purposes to teach, is probably not altogether unintentional on the author's part, though it is mystifying to the reader.

That this first volume covers what he has well called the most important period in church history will be seen by noting some of the topics. After introducing the work with a valuable Prolegomena to the Study of the History of Doctrine, he treats at first hand such themes as the following: "The Gospel of Jesus Christ according to his own Testimony concerning himself"; "The Common Preaching concerning Jesus Christ in the First Generation of Believers"; "The Current Exposition of the Old Testament and the Jewish Hopes of the Future in their Significance for the Earliest Types of Christian Preaching"; "The Re-

¹History of Dogma. By Dr. Adolf Harnack. Translated by Neil Buchanan. Vol. I. Pp. 364. Boston: Roberts Bros. 1895. \$2.50.

ligious Conception and the Religious Philosophy of the Hellenistic Jews in their Significance for the Later Formulation of the Gospel," etc. Of the monographs included in the appendix, that which treats of "The Different Notions of Preëxistence" is of special value in coming to an understanding of Harnack's historical method.

In the treatment of all these early questions, Harnack has no respect for authority as such. While he welcomes scholarship from whatever source, and while no one is more quick to recognize independent thought, and to use it, he pushes boldly back of councils, and canons, and of written documents, and seeks to have something to say of the world which he supposed to lie beyond the clear light of mere factual history. He makes it clear, however, that he is writing the history of dogma, and not of religion, or even theology. He recognizes and emphasizes the limitations of history in the work. These admissions of his, and his frankest and most generous acceptance of recent criticism in scripture and tradition—which must be a permanent cause of anxiety to those of conservative temper—must not be taken as necessarily his own views as to what can be believed. It is all he is willing to say is at present historically established. In fact he believes much more. Dogma grew, and it is the task of the *History of Dogma* to trace that growth. But the great work, after all, for which this is only to prepare the way, is the emphasis that beyond dogma, and even history itself as we can write it, are the religious elements that have produced the history and theology, viz., the great and unique Person of Jesus Christ, and the establishment of a spiritual religion in the world.

To one trained in the strong biblical faith of the American churches this volume will prove a surprise, both because of its bold pushing beyond accepted doctrines, and because of its spirit of faith and manifestation of religious fervor. If we are to be both truthful and fair, we shall find

it necessary to recognize both of these features in his work. In his historical method he is as remarkable in his cautiousness as in his boldness. While he rejects unhesitatingly the theories of Baur and Strauss, he yet shows such regard for their spirit that he leaves very much historically unsettled. He is certainly inclined to give full value to the influence of the 'human vessel' upon the divine treasure. It even seems sometimes that he has come to his conclusions about the New Testament not from a direct study of its contents, but from following out special lines of thought about these things, in which documents of secondary importance have been unduly exalted to a primary place. Harnack's thoughts, however, are as yet in too fresh and plastic a state to allow of very definite statements as to just what his real views are; and those who attempt to place him too confidently under exactly trimmed labels should not be surprised if they do not find him remaining beneath them. One seeks in vain for scientific statements as to the historical foundation-stones upon which he stands, and upon which he seeks to place the footsteps of his followers. He will never construct a symmetrical text-book for the study of the History of Doctrine as Loofs of Halle has done. And yet no scholar of the present generation will make his excursions into the field of early church history without having to reckon sooner or later with Adolf Harnack.

Isolated statements in large numbers could be gathered out of this volume which, standing alone, seem to be wholly in the spirit of destructive German criticism, and which would not only be disturbing, but even confusing, to any one not familiar with the Ritschlian method. But to the acumen of Baur he has added the faith of Ritschl. In his Preface to the English Edition he has rightly objected to being classified from a 'point of view' instead of from his historical method.

"In a historical work there is no room to ask what is the 'standpoint' of the author, but the question is, whether the author is in sympathy with the subject about which he writes, whether he can distinguish original elements from those that are derived, whether he has a thorough acquaintance with his material, whether he is conscious of the limits of historical knowledge, and whether he is truthful" (p. VII).

And yet, if I mistake not, Harnack will generally be prized in so far as he has gone beyond the stricter limit of historical knowledge and become an apostle of religious realism.

The definite indefiniteness of Harnack's method may be seen pretty clearly in his treatment of some of the fundamental elements of Christian belief:—

1. The Person:—

"Jesus himself is Christianity, for the 'impression of his person convinced the disciples of the fact of forgiveness of sins and the second birth, and gave the courage to believe in and to lead a new life.' We cannot, therefore, state the 'doctrine' of Jesus; for it appears as a supra-mundane life which must be felt in the person of Jesus, and its truth is guaranteed by the fact that such a life can be lived" (p. 70).

2. But he will not allow the force of formal statements and dogmas here:—

"But it is in accordance with the mind of Jesus, and at the same time a fact of history [Christian Consciousness in the Church?] that this Gospel can only be appropriated and adhered to in connection with a believing surrender to the person of Jesus Christ. Yet every dogmatic formula is suspicious, because it is fitted to wound the spirit of religion. It should not at least be put before the living experience in order to evoke it; for such a procedure is really the admission of the half belief which thinks it necessary that the impression made by the person should be supplemented. . . . Faith assuredly is propagated by the testimony of faith, but dogma is not in itself that testimony" (p. 71).

But here seems to be not only a 'point of view,' but an exceedingly fundamental dictum. For, while the analysis may be wholly approved, and all cheerfully agree in emphasizing the primary place to be assigned to experience, not every one feels like saying that "every dogmatic formula is suspicious." Can there then be no reasonably sure teaching of any truth of religion? If we cannot know the

whole truth about anything, can we not know the exact truth about something?

3. He does not think it historically allowable to accept all that is said in the New Testament about this Person:—

"But though it certainly is the first duty of the historian to signalize the overpowering impression made by the person of Jesus on his disciples, which is the basis of all further developments, it would little become him to renounce the critical examination of all the utterances which have been connected with that person with the view of elevating and glorifying it" (p. 77).

The first impression will be that very little has been left over to be put down as the history:—

(1) Of the Virgin birth, he says:—

"Even the belief that Jesus was born from a Virgin sprang from Isa. vii. 14. . . Those who suppose that the reality of the Virgin birth must be held fast, must assume that a misunderstood prophecy has been fulfilled."

And quoting Dillmann, who considers Luke i. 34, 35, to be the addition of a redactor,—

"Of the birth by a Virgin [viz. of one who at the birth was still a virgin] the Hebrew text says nothing."

(2) What he says of Jesus in connection with the miracles ascribed to him, is worthy of special note in coming to an understanding of Harnack's method:—

"The historian cannot regard a miracle as a sure given historical event for in doing so he destroys the mode of consideration on which all historical investigation rests. Every individual miracle remains historically quite doubtful, and a summation of things doubtful never leads to certainty. But should the historian, notwithstanding, be convinced that Jesus Christ did extraordinary things, in the strict sense miraculous things, then, from the unique impression he has obtained of this person, he infers the possession by him of supernatural power. This conclusion itself belongs to the province of religious faith; though there has seldom been a strong faith which would not have drawn it. Moreover, the healing miracles of Jesus are the only ones that come into consideration in a strict historical examination. These certainly cannot be eliminated from the historical accounts without utterly destroying them. But how unfit are they in themselves, after eighteen hundred years, to secure any special importance to him to whom they are attributed, unless that importance was already established apart from them. That he could do with himself what he would, that he created a new thing without over-

turning the old, that he won men to himself by announcing the Father, that he inspired without fanaticism, set up a kingdom without politics, set men free from the world without asceticism, was a teacher without theology, at a time of fanaticism and politics, asceticism and theology, is the great miracle of his person : and that he who preached the Sermon on the Mount declared himself, in respect of his life and death, to be the Redeemer and Judge of the world, is the offense and foolishness which mock reason" (pp. 65, 66).

(3) As to the popular views of the resurrection of Christ, he makes his approach from the side of history, and declares that it can never be cleared from historical doubt that the body of Jesus did not remain in the grave. But he especially emphasizes a spiritual resurrection. That Jesus Christ is alive is the one great central fact whose influence is everywhere felt. But his method here is so characteristic that it is worth while to study it from a full quotation.

"It is often said that Christianity rests on the belief in the resurrection of Christ. This may be correct, if it is first declared who that Jesus Christ is, and what his life signifies. But when it appears as a naked report to which one must above all submit, and when in addition, as often happens, it is supplemented by the assertion that the resurrection of Christ is the most certain fact in the history of the world, one does not know whether he should marvel more at its thoughtlessness or its unbelief. We do not need to have faith in a fact, and that which requires religious belief, viz., trust in God, can never be a fact which would hold good apart from that belief. The historic question and the question of faith must therefore be clearly distinguished here. . . . But, as even the empty grave on the third day can by no means be regarded as a certain historic fact, because it appears united in the accounts with manifest legendary features, and further because it is directly excluded by the way in which Paul has portrayed the resurrection (1 Cor. xv.) it follows : (1) That any conception which represents the resurrection of Christ as a simple reanimation of his mortal body, is far from the original conception ; and (2) that the question generally as to whether Jesus has risen, can have no existence for any one who looks at it apart from the contents and worth of the person of Jesus. For the mere fact that friends and adherents of Jesus were convinced that they had seen him, especially when they themselves explain that he appeared to them in heavenly glory, gives, to those who are in earnest about fixing historical facts, not the least cause for the assumption that Jesus did not continue in the grave. . . . The idea of the rising again of the body of Jesus appeared compar-

atively early, because it was this hope which animated wide circles of pious persons for their own future. Faith in Jesus the living Lord, in spite of the death on the cross, cannot be generated by proofs of reason or authority, but only to-day in the same way as Paul has confessed of himself (Gal. i. 16): 'That God was pleased to reveal his Son in me.' The conviction of having seen the Lord was no doubt of the greatest importance for the disciples, and made them evangelists, but what they saw cannot at first help us. It can only then obtain significance for us when we have gained that confidence in the Lord which Peter has expressed in Mark viii. 29. The Christian even to-day confesses with Paul, 'If in this life only we have faith in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.' He believes in a future life for himself with God, because he believes that Christ lives. That is the peculiarity and paradox of Christian faith" (pp. 85-86).

(4) As to the Trinity, he of course avoids definite expression; but he has some very definite statements to make as to the Dogma of the Trinity:—

"The Trinitarian formula is foreign to the mouth of Jesus, and has not the authority of the apostolic age which it must have had if it had descended from Jesus himself" (p. 79).

This is one of the proofs which he brings forward that the baptismal formula of Matt. xxviii. 19 is not a saying of the Lord.

It is interesting to see how far he goes in his conception of the Son, and where he seeks to arrest his thought:—

"The peculiar character of the Christian religion is conditioned by the fact that every reference to God is at the same time a reference to Jesus Christ, and *vice versa*. In this sense the Person of Christ is the central point of the religion and inseparably united with the substance of piety, as a sure reliance on God. . . . But just because the Person of Christ has this significance is the knowledge and understanding of the 'historical Christ' required: for no other comes within the sphere of our knowledge" (pp. 71-72).

"Behind the only manifested life of Jesus, later speculation has put a life in which he wrought, not in subordination and obedience, but in like independence and dignity with God. That goes beyond the utterances of Jesus even in the fourth Gospel. But it is no advance beyond these, especially in the religious view and speech of the time, when it is announced that the relation of the Father to the Son lies beyond time. It is not even improbable that the sayings in the fourth Gospel referring to this, have a basis in the preaching of Jesus himself" (p. 64).

Harnack's cautiousness here, against dogmatic statements,

seems to leave little that one can depend upon in either Peter, John, or Paul, in their wonderful emphasis of Jesus Christ.

From these extended quotations it is easy to see how different the feelings are which Harnack's writing arouses. In order that we may not do him injustice, it is ever necessary to distinguish his own spirit and aim from what we believe may come to be the effects of such a free method. We should judge him amiss, as we have seen, if we should allow ourselves to rest too confidently upon isolated, literally interpreted statements. When he destroys one familiar and revered form of belief after another, at the dictates of what he calls the historical spirit, it is not because he has gone over, bag and baggage, to the camp of the destructive critics. His historical method is severe, and for this very reason he himself goes ever beyond it in his own faith. He comes very decidedly to a 'point of view.' He is not disturbed when formal facts cannot be indubitably proved, because the one Unique Person in human history is not less, but greater, than the human impressions of Him, and before Him he trustingly bows. The imperfect knowledge which he finds left by the first witnesses does not prevent him from having a perfect religious faith.

While it is easy to understand why conservative circles in Germany believe that such transcendental leadership is not safe for the young men,—and we ourselves have our own serious fears that the next generation may stop with Harnack's doubts and never gain Harnack's faith,—yet Harnack himself, in spite of it all, is to be thought of as honestly seeking to be an Apostle of Religion.

As furnishing even a better illustrative glimpse of the man in the use of his own method from another source, I venture to add a quotation from a recent address¹ of his:—

¹ Now translated and published under the title of "*Christianity and History.*" London: Adam and Charles Black. 1896.

"The man who reads his Bible in a homely way is wont to treat all the characteristic features which he encounters in that book as above and beyond time. He sees and feels such things only, as he takes to form the true kernel of the narrative; things which concern himself: and it was by these that the Christian doctrine was formerly established by the church. But the historical way of looking at them may not, and will not, overlook the concrete features in and by which the life and the doctrine were actually fashioned in their day. It seeks for points of connection with the Old Testament and its developments, with the religious life of the synagogue, with contemporary hopes for the future, with the whole intellectual and spiritual condition of the world of Greece and Rome: and it finds that the evidence of such connection is unmistakable. The consequence is, that the sayings and discourses of the Lord, and the image of his life itself, not only take their colour—and it is a very definite colour—from the history of the time, but they are also seen to possess certain definite limitations. They belong to their time and their environment: and they could not exist in any other. But they lose no particle of their power and validity, unless it can be shown that the main lineaments of the personality of Christ, and the sense and true point of his sayings, have been altered. I cannot discover that historical criticism has effected any such change.

"The same is true of the testimony which he gave of himself. I admit that if historical research had proved that he was an apocalyptic enthusiast or a visionary, whose image and utterances were advanced to the level of pure aim and lofty thought only by the refining influence of later times, it would be another matter. But who has proved that, and who could prove it? For besides the four written Gospels we possess a fifth, unwritten: and in many respects its voice is clearer and more effective than those of the other four—I mean the united testimony of the first Christian community. It enables us to gather what was the prevailing impression made by this personality, and in what sense his disciples understood his words and the testimony which he gave of himself. It is true that his clothes—the outward form of his doctrine—were part of the heritage; but the great and simple truths which he came to preach, the personal sacrifice which he made, and his victory in death, were what formed the new life of his community: and when the apostle Paul with divine power described this life as a life in the Spirit, and again as a life in love, he was only giving back light which had dawned upon him in and through Jesus Christ his Lord. This is a simple matter of fact, which no historical criticism can in any way alter. All that it can do is to place it in a clearer light, and so increase our reverence for the divinity which was revealed in radiance in a Son of Abraham, amid the wreck and refuse of a narrow world. Let the plain Bible reader continue to read his Gospels as he has hitherto read them: for in the end the critic cannot read them otherwise. What the one regards as their true gist and meaning, the other must acknowledge to be such" (pp. 54-58).