

ARTICLE VII.

HISTORICAL FACTS AND RELIGIOUS FAITH.

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IN our age the "external" supports of religion are being scrutinized with rigor. Mere tradition and dogmatism are not strong enough for the permanent foundations of faith.

The teachers in our theological seminaries are able to appreciate much better than the ordinary pastor how sharp is the criticism of historical positions which our forefathers regarded as inviolable. These professors have seen many such ancient theories undermined. So, in their natural eagerness to find a basis for religion, they look elsewhere. Accordingly, not a few of our best teachers and most scholarly ministers find the impregnable support of their faith, either as mystics, through inward fellowship with God, or as prophets of the Divine Righteousness. Such professors and scholars deserve great credit for calling our attention to these abiding sources of faith. We honor them for their clear and brave defense of the inner citadels of Christianity.

But are not objective facts also of value to religion? Do they not strengthen our moral assurance? In our anxiety to establish religion upon the lasting inner supports, is there not grave danger that we underestimate the necessary part which historical facts, even so-called "external facts," play in religious development? Is there not a risk that some of our most thoughtful teachers and ministers may fail to see how important facts are as guides and aids to faith?

In recent conversations with leading theological professors, I have heard such expressions as these: "We must not allow our faith to become involved in any question of historic facts"; "The external supports of religion are gone." Grant that we would not rest our faith solely on any set of outward facts, lest these pillars crumble. But do not facts reënforce faith?

The poet Whittier combined two great qualities which we regard as fundamental. He had a rich inner life of fellowship with God; he was a "Friend." He was also a prophet of the Divine righteousness. *Both* those evidences of religion, which many in the modern school regard as *the* supports of faith, he possessed by nature and by training in a surpassing degree. Yet no one can read the life and study the poems of Whittier without being impressed by a distinct increase of his faith; a marked gain in buoyancy and serenity in the years of later middle life. The reason is evident. The triumph of freedom in the Civil War brought a manifest access of faith.

Now the victory of the Union and of freedom in the Civil War was a set of historical facts "external" to Mr. Whittier. It was the success of guns over guns, and armies over armies. Indeed much in the war was peculiarly repugnant and difficult for him to reconcile with his Quaker tenets. Yet this rough, crude mass of facts, having a definite historical place and result, brought so noticeable an increase in the poet's faith, that it fairly shines upon the pages. I admit, of course, that this mass of facts was spiritually discerned by Mr. Whittier. He brought to it personal faith in God, as mystic or prophet, by which he interpreted its meaning. I grant that he heard, behind the noise of battle, another voice. But still we ask the question, If the war

had resulted in a complete victory for slavery, would there have been with the Quaker poet that heightened note of serenity and triumphant joy?

So Tennyson sings of "One far-off divine event," and of "One increasing purpose." Doubtless this faith sprang from his religious intuition, but was not the poet's optimism aided by his knowledge of history?

No one would wish to make the success or failure of our own desires, or the limited range of our historic vision, the decisive test as to the existence of God. Every reader of Job, and every follower of the Crucified Saviour, knows how the soul has power to reach its noblest heights on the wings of suffering. Some of the rarest flowers blossom in the night. But, nevertheless, for the rank and file of mankind is there not a wonderful encouragement for belief whenever there has been a manifest forward movement of the Divine Providence in history? On the other hand, when the righteous have seemed to be forsaken, has not faith become more difficult? Does not even the religious genius need for a sweet, wholesome, well-rounded faith the support of historical facts? For the highest faith one needs to have not only the insight of the mystic and the moral earnestness of the prophet, but also the objective view of the watchman, who from his tower sees the progress of the Kingdom of God actually sweeping forward.

The influence of facts like the destruction of the Spanish Armada or the deliverance of Leyden has been incalculable to Protestant faith.

In our own America the character and work of the Pilgrim Fathers, the hand of God seen in the Revolutionary War, and, as we have already said, in the Civil War, have been mighty aids of religious conviction. Yet these are ob-

jective facts and can be tested historically. Imagine that in the succeeding centuries a strong movement should arise, doubting the historicity of the Pilgrims, gainsaying the supposed facts as to the Revolution, questioning the genuineness of the Lincoln-Douglas debates or the second inaugural, would not that movement inevitably weaken the moral power and incentives of those events and persons, as an inspiration to the men of a later time?

Lincoln referred to "this almost chosen people." He appealed, for reverence of the Sabbath and loyalty to the Union, to the example of Washington. But would that appeal have been practically effective to a generation that disbelieved in any chosen people or doubted the historicity of Washington?

We often hear it said, "The religious value of such stories as Abraham, Moses, and Joseph is independent of their historic truth or falsehood." This remark is partly correct, but not wholly. Religious psalm and legend and parable have their tremendous power. The books of Ruth and Job and the parables of the Lord are of lasting influence. But drama and legend are not the full equivalent of biography and history.

We have wrought out before our eyes an exact comparison of the difference between biography and myth.

A few years ago Dr. Marcus Whitman was widely heralded as the hero who saved three states to the Union. His work and faith, proclaimed throughout the land, became an inspiration to thousands of Christian youth, and brought a large increase of friends and money to the College which bears his name, and the missionary cause he loved. Then came an era of criticism. Professor Bourne and others sharply questioned the truth of the story. Widespread doubt took the place of the earlier belief. It was now called

the "Whitman myth." What was the practical result? Immediately Dr. Whitman's friends found it impossible to use him as a model. Instantly most of the force of the appeal in his name vanished. The value of his life as a spiritual or financial asset to the College disappeared almost wholly in all those quarters where the judgment of Professor Bourne carried greater weight than the testimony of those pioneers or friends of Dr. Whitman who indorsed the claim made for him. And even those who still loyally believed in the main facts of the "Whitman story" found themselves at the greatest disadvantage. Now it might have been argued that the moral value of the Whitman story was in the ideal truth it contained,—the picture of sacrificial daring and patriotic vision. The friends of Whitman might have reasoned: Here is a portrait of what a missionary life should be; here is an ideal of moral purity, courage, and love of country which every youth ought to reproduce in himself. We have an ideal painted for us: the external facts are immaterial.

Yet the level-headed friends of Whitman realized that something else was involved. Was the story true history or largely myth? They recognized facts as a mighty element in the power of Marcus Whitman. Hence they sought proofs to show that the story was well grounded. To some considerable extent we believe they successfully combated the extreme denial of a decade ago.

Was not the method of the friends of Marcus Whitman the normal attitude for the Christian with respect to the Christian religion? The facts have a very vital place in the power of Christianity. I would not identify our religion with any special or narrow interpretation of the facts. As an honest man I would not seek to warp the facts to prove what I might

wish were true. But to hold that the "ideal" truth of Christianity can be of full and equal worth with that truth, embodied in definite historical events and persons, seems to us to forget the motives which animate men, and to ignore the weighty influence which facts, not less than ideal conceptions, play in forming character and sustaining hope.

Let us step forward in our argument to the question of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Not long ago a distinguished progressive theologian named, as one of the three essentials of the Christian faith, "A Living, Accessible Christ." After the address he was asked, "Do you hold that Paul had any other or better evidence for the resurrection of Jesus than we have to-day?" He replied, "Paul *thought* he had, sincerely but mistakenly." To that professor the determining evidence for the Risen Lord is to be found in the moral perfection of Jesus, and in our present-day communion with him as disciples. None would wish to minimize the value of such inner or moral evidences. But the inquirer could not help asking himself, Will that satisfy the plain men on the street? Common, everyday men and women have found a mighty reënforcement of their faith from supposing that Paul and the other apostles were living witnesses of a definite historical triumph of Jesus; witnesses who had "other evidence" for the reality of the resurrection than any which can be open to us to-day. Will not such average people say to the professor, If Paul, however sincerely, was mistaken in thinking that he had any other or better evidence for a Risen Lord than we possess to-day, how can you be sure of that "Living, Accessible Christ" which you deem essential to Christian faith?

To the great multitude of earnest disciples, the Christian religion has these main supports. (I do not say that the loss

of any one of them will be fatal. A milking-stool may stand on one leg, but a pyramid or cube is steadier.) They are: Belief in an Intelligence above and within the Universe; the inner fellowship of prayer; the ethical experience in conscience, and, not least, the mighty providential course of history. They have believed in a chosen people, a noble line of psalmists and prophets, a Christ, the culmination of history, in whom the Eternal God came into perfect fellowship with man. Their faith has gained a matchless support because they have seen in this Christ one who proved victorious over sin, and who, they believed, was manifested after the crucifixion as also triumphant over the grave. These definite historic facts have been of incalculable aid to personal faith.

But the objector will reply, We admit the moral value of plain historic facts, such as the Civil War, especially when spiritually discerned. But these facts as to the resurrection are disputed, perhaps doubtful, as matters of external evidence. We are not justified, therefore, in carrying over the analogy into the sphere of religious miracles. Still less does the fact that we might like to believe them, permit us to claim that they took place. And, indeed, some objectors might even assert that they found no moral value in any unique proof of the resurrection.

This objection is in part valid, and should be carefully judged. We do not claim that analogies from the sphere of admitted historic facts, morally interpreted, can be carried over fully into the sphere of contested historic events or into the region of the miraculous. Still less should the supposed moral worth of an alleged fact make us believe it in disregard of historic evidence. That would be dishonest.

But we do assert something different and we believe im-

portant. The man who is accustomed to weigh the influence of facts upon history, and who appreciates fully the effect of concrete events and real definite persons, will be a fairer judge of what actually took place in the past, than the man who is satisfied simply with ideas or with conceptions of truth. The investigator who values the objective, and, if one pleases to call them so, the "external" events of history, may be a clearer judge of what has occurred than the man who is contented with the subjective. We do not wish to excuse special pleading in behalf of what we want to believe, but, on the other hand, it seems to us that students who measure slightly the ethical worth of facts may be far too ready to surrender events which really took place in the past, and so may be unfair historical judges.

Furthermore, even in the realm of the miraculous, if facts have such a tremendous place in the development of faith and in the progress of the Kingdom of God, is there not greater reason to believe that God may have actually introduced into this world a new and surpassing fact in the personality of Christ, and in making manifest to men the reality of his resurrection?

Many of our time-honored beliefs are being called in question. We ought to honor the scholars who, in time of peril, emphasize the inner citadel of prayer and the right will. But because these teachers, in the quiet of the study, value so highly such moral supports of faith, are not some of them in danger of not prizing enough those reënforcements of objective historical religion with which the common minister deals? I would not make a sweeping charge against our theologians; because all of them are worthy, sincere men, and many of them are doing the finest constructive work for our faith. But I listened recently to the kindly

reproaches of the ministers, made by a somewhat radical theologian, in which the churches and the ministers were blamed, as not being free in our expression of truth, and, blamed, also, by implication, for not resting the content of our preaching almost solely on the "inner supports" of faith, since the "external" ones were so precarious. Immediately afterwards it chanced that a class of men of good ability and thoughtfulness were asked by their pastor what they considered to be the evidences of immortality. He tried to set forth the whole range of evidence, from philosophy, from the moral character of God, the worth of the human soul, our need for a future life, and similar reasons for belief. Yet the entire class, without exception, and in spite of the effort of the pastor to suggest other lines of approach, felt that *the* evidence of immortality was the resurrection of Jesus.

They acknowledged the other reasons, yet they turned again and again to be the resurrection of Jesus. To them it was a definite, attested, historic fact. They would not, of course, have divorced the testimony of eye-witnesses from the moral presumption or assurance raised by the sinless character of the Master. But they said of the various general or abstract arguments for immortality, "These are all wrapped up in Easter." Would they have felt the same assurance of immortality if they had believed that Paul had "no other evidence" of the historic fact than they themselves enjoyed?

Now the pastor would not argue for any one single test of the resurrection; as, for instance, a bodily resurrection. Nor would he wish to set the feelings of a group of thoughtful laymen against the findings of an expert historical student. But that incident brought freshly home to the pastor, in a way that might not come so readily to the attention of

the theologian, how vital a part the historic and objective play in the making of the common man's faith. The pastor wishes to be honest with himself and with his people. He seeks to emphasize the inner and moral content of Christianity. But he values the concrete element in his faith. If thorough and well-balanced investigation should prove (as he hopes and expects that it will not) the main historical events as to Jesus' life and the evidences of his resurrection to be untrustworthy, then the pastor, like any honest man, will seek to adjust himself to the disappointment and disaster as best he may. But while the investigation is being made, and with the belief that it is likely finally to strengthen rather than weaken *all* the "supports" of his religion, the pastor raises earnestly these questions:—

1. Has not the time come for a new and much higher emphasis to be placed upon the historical and objective as important factors in reënforcing faith?

2. Will not a larger appreciation of the moral influence of definite facts upon personal character, and a fuller recognition of the effect of events upon religious faith, aid our theologians and students of research to become fairer, truer, and, in some cases, more constructive historical judges of what occurred in the New Testament?

3. Finally, since facts do play such a tremendous part in human faith and progress, is it not likely that God in his Providence would make full use of their power? Since historic events have such signal influence upon mankind (witness the moral movements and triumphs of history) is it not reasonable that God should reveal himself in the supreme fact of the Lord Jesus Christ, and should even furnish to those who knew him unique evidence that he was indeed conqueror over sin and death?