

## ARTICLE II.

THE BEARING OF ONE'S PHILOSOPHY ON ONE'S  
CREED.

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PHILOSOPHY — if a true philosophy — may be defined as the rational explanation of the world. It aims to create a "universe." That is to say, it aims to reduce heterogeneity to homogeneity, to find for each isolated fact its proper relation to all other facts, to explain why it is, how it is, and whence it is, and thus to constitute a "system of things" coordinated through all its parts by law and dominated by intelligent purpose. The quest and goal of philosophy is unity. And unity means the presidency of Mind.

Philosophy interprets but it does not discover. And in fulfilling its function as an interpreter it balks at nothing. It both scales the heavens and "dives into the wells of Death." It seeks to know God and spirit as well as things purely physical and material. It aims to render such account of them to the reason as it can, and to determine their relations to whatever else is. Philosophy in this way becomes also a Theology.

"Flower in the crannied wall,  
I pluck you out of the crannies;  
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,  
Little flower — but if I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is."

One of the old thinkers used to say that "man is the meas-

ure of his universe" — and the saying is true. The remark of Sir William Hamilton is equally true, that no problem ever emerges in theology which has not previously arisen in philosophy. Thus closely related is one's theology to one's philosophy; in truth, the theology is dependent on the philosophy. Error in the latter will run out into the former, and you can tell what a man's theology is likely to be as soon as you know his philosophy. Doubtless one's creed will react on one's general system of thought, but the measure of its power in modifying that system of thought will not compare with the influence the latter will have upon his scientific formulation of the problems of religion and his interpretation of the Scriptures. For always the greater includes the less and dominates it; and theology is, after all, only a part of the wider and all-inclusive domain of philosophy.

To put the matter in another way: Every man has his own mental bias or personal point of view. No two men see the same thing in precisely the same aspects — nor can they, until they each occupy the other's place. Every man contributes something of himself to his interpretation of whatever problem is presented to him, whether it be one of science or religion. He who looks out on nature through green spectacles sees everything green; the wearer of blue spectacles, on the other hand, sees the same things blue. This is inevitable, and, unfortunately or otherwise, we are all the wearers of spectacles.

What then is the bearing of these facts on the making of creeds? How far has theology actually been influenced by philosophical prepossessions? To what extent has a previously acquired mental bias determined the quality or character of our New Testament interpretations? Far more, I am persuaded, than we are usually willing to admit. For it is never

either an easy or a grateful task to eliminate ourselves or to dispossess ourselves of our prepossessions. That means loss, and we are afraid that the gain perchance to come — and perchance *not*, as it may at first seem to us — will not compensate for the loss sustained. “The bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.”

The apostles and evangelists of the first century did not theologize. They were preëminently preachers — missionaries, evangelists, men who carried and proclaimed the “evangel.” But when they went forth on this mission the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies were already in control of the human mind in all the educational centers on both sides of the Mediterranean; and, sooner or later, Reason was bound to demand of “Faith” that it justify itself to the understanding. The needs of the soul led captive to the feet of Christ, as the only Saviour, some of the greatest men of the age — men brought up in the atmosphere of the Greek schools; and when these men began to coördinate into a system the scattered truths of the New Testament and to analyze their own religious experiences, and thus to construct a scientific theology, — when they sought to define and fix the place of each truth relatively to all other truth, — it was inevitable that they should have been influenced, in some degree, by those philosophical systems which they had already derived from the schools of Alexandria, Athens, and Rome.

To what extent were they thus influenced? And to what extent, also, has been similarly influenced the thought of those who in succeeding centuries shaped the creeds of the church?

It is much easier to read our philosophical prepossessions into the Bible than it is to read our theology out of it, and there is too much ground for the complaint of the great theologian whom Sir William Hamilton quotes:—

"Hic liber est in quo quaerit sua dogmata quisque,  
Invenit et pariter dogmata quisque sua."<sup>1</sup>

As a consequence, the sacred pages carry too frequently the finger-marks of pagan metaphysics and mediæval scholasticism. The creeds of Christendom are impregnated, more or less, with the musty odors of the cloister. We all know that the schoolmen of the Middle Ages were dominated by Aristotle. "The Stagyrite" was the real master of the *thought* of the church. Platonism had much to do with the shaping of the doctrines of Christianity during the first three centuries. In fact, Neoplatonism was a deliberate attempt, on the part of the early church fathers, to harmonize Plato and Christ. The greatest of them all acquired both his mental discipline and his metaphysical opinions from the greatest of the pagan philosophers. As things were, it was perhaps impossible but that the influence of these modes of thought and these philosophical conceptions should, to some extent, although unconsciously, affect the scientific exposition of Christian doctrine; and so it is scarcely too much to say that our formulated expressions of New Testament truths were cast in the molds of a non-Christian speculation.

For example, the difference between the Latin and Greek theologies cannot be fully accounted for, unless note be taken of the difference, in structure, between the Western and Eastern minds, and by remembering also that this difference was determined in large measure by the difference in the philosophical environments of each. Each breathed a different intellectual atmosphere, and moved in a world of different philosophical ideas.

No one has ever questioned the thoroughgoing orthodoxy of Dr. Shedd; yet he acknowledges the facts to which I am

<sup>1</sup>Lect. xv.

referring. In the chapter on "Philosophical Influences in the Ancient Church," which occurs in his "History of Doctrine," he speaks thus: "We shall see that Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero exerted more influence than all other philosophical minds united, upon the greatest of the Christian Fathers, upon the greatest of the Schoolmen, and upon the theologians of the Reformation — Calvin and Melancthon. And if we look at European philosophy, as it has been unfolded in England, Germany, and France, we shall perceive that all the modern theistic schools have discussed the standing problems of human reason, in very much the same manner as Plato and Aristotle discussed them twenty-two centuries ago."<sup>1</sup>

This is certainly quite an admission. But he continues: "The synthesis and poetry of Plato . . . at one extreme, become Gnosticism, while the analysis and logic of Aristotle, at the other extreme, become extravagant subtlety and minute Scholasticism. . . . In this way, Platonism, under the treatment of the New Platonics, degenerated into an imaginative theosophy; and Aristotelianism, in the handling of the later Schoolmen became mere hair-splitting — both systems, in this way, each in its turn, *contributing to the corruption of Christianity.*"<sup>2</sup>

And yet again: "The Augustinian view of the origin and nature of sin is closely connected with the Platonic view of the nature and endowments of the human soul. The doctrine of innate ideas harmonizes with that of innate depravity. In the other great controversy of this period, — that respecting the Trinity, — those theologians who exerted the most influence in forming and establishing the final creed-statement, had been disciplined by the Greek intellectual methods. Athanasius, Basil, and the two Gregorys, were themselves of Greek

<sup>1</sup> Book 1. chap. 1. p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 60.

extraction, and their highly metaphysical intellects had been trained in Grecian schools." <sup>1</sup>

Thus, besides the general statement first quoted, so eminent a writer and profound a theologian as Professor Shedd acknowledges that important doctrines — such as those of the origin and nature of sin, as held by Augustine; the doctrines of depravity and the Trinity, as they stand in the final creed statements — were shaped under the influence of those metaphysical prepossessions of the great fathers of the church which they had acquired in the schools of their time, and that their interpretation of Scripture was biased thereby. It was not strange that this was so; rather it would have been strange if it had been otherwise. But it should help us in estimating the true value of our traditional theologies, and save us from the mistake of identifying them with the very truth itself. They may be valued, and valued highly, as the mile-stones which mark the progress made in biblical interpretation; but they ought never to be regarded as hitching-posts where we tie up our horses, content at that particular point to terminate our journey.

The illustrations given above might be added to, if it were necessary. It could be shown that other great doctrines of the church, such as that of the Atonement, as elaborated by Anselm, in his "*Cur Deus Homo?*" (which Professor Denny says is the greatest work ever written on that subject), and by Grotius, carry, more or less definitely, the impression of their philosophical theories and speculations. But I forbear — after a single additional reference. A theological writer is condemning the dogma that humanity had an eternal existence in Christ, and that in him it was eternally beloved, elected, and redeemed; and he does so, in part, on the ground

<sup>1</sup> *History of Doctrine*, bk. 1. chap. 1. p. 70.

that (as he says) this dogma was "rooted in a philosophical speculation—the Platonic system of ideas," which he regards as wholly false, and subversive of both the moral government of God and the gospel of Christ.

It is almost necessarily a baneful thing to attempt to force the great living, regnant truths of Scripture into purely metaphysical molds, forgetting the life and energy that are in the Scriptures as they stand, and treating the evangel of Jesus Christ as though it were primarily a philosophy, instead of the manifestation of a divine Life in human history and the introduction of a new spiritual force into the world. "Spiritual truth," says the author of "The Light and Life of Men," "bearing as it does chiefly on the conscience and moral nature of man, is among the last things on which the terms and laws of formal logic can be tried with safety"; and he adds, with reference to the danger of doing this, that "those who have been trained from infancy in a theological system not only may easily read the New Testament in accordance with it, but they may find it nearly impossible, without long and hard effort, to accept any other interpretation. This is too frequently the effect of those arbitrary, technical definitions of Scripture terms which have been so largely introduced into a region where, of all others, it is vitally important that the mind should be preserved perfectly free and unbiased." The same remark would, of course, apply as well to a philosophical as to a theological system.

We ought never to become guilty of the error of confounding philosophy with life, or of allowing the former to obscure the latter while professing to be its exponent. Care needs to be taken lest a truth get hidden under the law of its coördination and exposition. A scientific statement—or what passes as such—is not necessarily the truth. A definition of

a truth is, possibly, not exactly the truth itself: it is only its attempted explanation — the truth *as it seems to us*. “The truth as it is *in Jesus*” is not necessarily the truth as it is in John Calvin or Martin Luther, in John Wesley or Roger Williams, or any other great leader of the church. Nevertheless, the formulations of men have not seldom been accepted for the very truth itself; and our creeds have, in our intellectual conceitedness and self-sufficiency, been labeled with that sacred title, and sometimes forced on the acceptance of men under threat of eternal perdition or of ecclesiastical disability. But these creeds have, in fact, been nothing more than the expression of what certain scholarly men, with all their philosophical prepossessions clinging to them, have conceived the truth to be. The language in which their conceptions have been cast is metaphysical and, in this respect, far enough removed from the language of the Scripture. The Athanasian formula may be referred to as an instance of this. The metaphysical relation expressed in the Latin term *persona* and the Greek term *hypostasis*, and the distinctions between *homo-* and *homoiousios* as applied to the mode of the divine existence as a Trinity, are such as make it doubtful whether all of the bishops of the Council did themselves clearly understand, and which certainly the common people could not be expected to, but which all the same they were required to believe or — as care was taken to affirm — “without doubt perish everlastingly.” Thus for ages — aye, even down to our own times — eternal life was made to depend upon a piece of abstruse metaphysical theology which, in fact, had usurped the place of the truth it professed to define and to defend. But “the truth” is not any series of dogmatic propositions, and never was or will be: it is the living, personal Christ himself, who lives and reigns in the affections, and controls the conduct, of those

who love him ; for men are not saved by their intellectual opinions, but by their personal attitude to the personal Christ. This is by no means to say that what opinions one may entertain, what one "believes," is a matter of no consequence ; it only affirms that the one is not to be made a substitute for the other.

The philosophical doctrine of Dualism which has had general acceptance in these modern times was recently challenged by the distinguished president of a theological seminary, who in a series of scholarly papers advocated (or seemed to advocate) the theory of Monism. Monism argues that there is no essential distinction between matter and spirit — that both have their unity in God, who created them both. What "matter" really *is*, and what "spirit" *is*, who knows? Is God the synthesis of his universe? Are the Creator and his creation, in the last analysis, one and the same? Do all things "consist" in him? The Bible tells us that God is Spirit, and it everywhere differentiates him from his creative work. Our faculties also differentiate them. But are our faculties infallible? They do not always penetrate to the core of the problem. Monism seems to lead us directly toward Pantheism: it makes the Creator and the creature one. Therefore a distinguished theological professor immediately assailed the argumentation of the president in favor of the current dualistic conception. But we all knew that the president was no more a pantheist than was the professor. The incident of this controversy is called up here only to show how inevitably philosophy connects itself with theology, and how it must necessarily modify theological opinion.

In view, then, of these facts and their implications, what are we to do? Shall we cast aside our creeds as worthless? Shall we wholly distrust our reasoning powers, and no longer

reason at all? Surely we ought to do some honest thinking; and every man who thinks will have his creed. The danger of a creed lies in its becoming either a fetter to intellectual activity or a temptation to intellectual duplicity, whereas it ought to be simply a register of intellectual progress. I pity the man of middle age who has not outgrown the creed of his youth, and who will not also change his present creed before he reaches his life's end. The man who has no creed is an imbecile; the man who ties himself up to a creed is a supernumerary. But in answering the question as to what we should do in view of the facts set out in this paper, it seems to me that we shall be constrained in the direction of four things:—

1. Of *tolerance*. No one has yet seen Truth in all its fair proportions and in all the beautiful symmetry of its parts. We have not yet seen Truth as it is. Much less have we come into the full possession of it. Truth is a continent the bounds of which lie far beyond the limits of the few acres we call our own. Perhaps our neighbor's acreage is as good soil as ours, and may have as fair an aspect toward the sun; and if, perchance, some of his vines run over on to our ground, or our vines on to his, we need not become angry about it—nor need we even be surprised. It is a way vines have—if they have any life in them.

2. Of *open-mindedness*. The exhortation to be "given to hospitality" should also be held to include hospitality to new truth—or truth that is new to us. The new opinion that comes knocking at one's door may, for all one knows at first, prove to be "an angel unawares"; therefore let not the door be slammed in its face, but at least let the stranger tarry long enough for us to become sure of his identity and to find out whether or not he have a message for us from the King. For.

for some reason, Truth comes often in strange disguise and not with its name conspicuously written on its forehead. It was not expected that the Messiah would come to Bethlehem as a babe; and when he came there was "no room for him in the inn," which was found to be already crowded with guests. It is much the same with our intellectual prepossessions, which too frequently crowd out the truth which is seeking entertainment at our hands. Children are the chosen types of the Kingdom of Heaven, and it is the happy condition of childhood, standing as it does at the threshold of Knowledge, to be open-minded towards it, whereas we who are older must needs often retrace our steps and divest ourselves of much that we have acquired and have prized. But this is always difficult, and to some men impossible. Luther did not settle everything; John Calvin did not explore the entire territory of divine revelation; and even we ourselves may have yet some things to learn and some to let go of, if we can only become sufficiently childlike and teachable. We have not yet done with the shaping of creeds.

3. *Of constant appeal to the New Testament.* The watchword must ever be: "Back to the Book!" With all the earnestness I possess, and in behalf of every real interest of the Kingdom of God, would I urge a painstaking, reverent, and open-minded study of the New Testament at first hand. The important thing — and indeed the vital thing — after all is this: What did the Master say? and not what did the Church Fathers, or John Calvin, or the Westminster divines, or John Wesley, or anybody else, say? Otherwise we become guilty of the fault Christ condemned, namely, that of "making the Word of God of none effect by our tradition." Our effort should be, as we turn the pages of the most wonderful Book that was ever written, to divest ourselves of all our prepos-

sessions, no matter from whom derived, and in the simplicity of little children to let the Master himself speak to us from its pages. It is hoped and believed that the greatest of Teachers will condescend to speak to us if only we are in the listening attitude.

4. Of *insistence upon the fact, already suggested, that we are not saved by our theological opinions but by our personal attitude to the personal Christ.* It is Christ who is "the Truth" — as he himself said; and to be in a friendly relation to him, to love him, and to be ready always to do his will — this is the main condition of understanding him, and therefore of knowing the Truth. And to know him and, through him, the Father who sent him, is the eternal life (John xvii. 3). It must become with us, in our attitude to Christ, as Longfellow pictures the attitude of Agassiz toward Nature. In beautifully simple lines he tells of the great physicist's childlike, open-minded receptivity to Nature as his teacher, which also was the condition of her teaching him:—

"And Nature, the old nurse, took  
The child upon her knee,  
Saying: 'Here is a story-book  
Thy Father has written for thee!"

"'Come, wander with me,' she said,  
'Into regions yet untrod;  
And read what is still unread  
In the manuscripts of God.'

"And he wandered away and away  
With Nature, the dear old nurse,  
Who sang to him night and day,  
The rhymes of the universe.

"And whenever the way seemed long,  
Or his heart began to fail,  
She would sing a more wonderful song,  
Or tell a more marvellous tale."

In these lines let us, for Nature, substitute Christ — or the New Testament as the record of his word and will — and the verses will as fittingly indicate what our relation to him must be if we are to know him and to understand him, and if we are to advance, from year to year, in this knowledge and understanding.