

We may also encourage ourselves by the mottoes of Oxford and of London. Our ancient City has often of old times been our guide in political bewilderment and vacillation, as she has been more than once the palladium of our threatened liberties and of our hardly-pressed country. However menacing the unknown year may seem, we can proclaim with Oxford, *Dominus, illuminatio mea*; and we can pray with London, *Domine, dirige nos*.



### Christianity and the Supernatural.—I.

BY THE RIGHT REV. THE LORD BISHOP OF CLOGHER.

FROM the beginning Christianity presented itself to the world as a religion filled with the supernatural. The first Christian writings that we possess—those nearest to the events to which they refer—contain, if possible, more of this element than the later. St. Mark's Gospel, confessedly the earliest, records a far greater number of miracles than St. John's. St. Paul's Epistles of the first and second groups dwell with far greater insistence on the fact of the Resurrection of our Lord than the later Epistles. Compare the first Epistle to the Corinthians with that to the Ephesians. If we had to judge of St. Paul's presentation of Christianity from the latter alone, we might, with some show of reason, regard him as a great spiritual philosopher, to whom the Resurrection stood for a metaphysical conception rather than a historical fact. But the earlier Epistles set the Apostle before us as a teacher to whom the historical fact and the evidence for it were matters of primary importance, whose whole life and labour depended on their truth and accuracy.

Here the order is exactly the reverse of what our modern rationalizing theories require. Instead of finding that, as time goes on, miraculous details accumulate more and more round a saintly life and a noble doctrine, we find the life of Christ and

the supernatural inextricably united from the very first, and as believers reflect more and more upon the wonderful life, the doctrinal or theological element fills an increasing space.

In modern times the growth of science and of the rationalizing spirit has made it difficult to maintain a belief in the supernatural. A miraculous tale occurring in an ordinary history throws doubt on the whole narrative. It has become an accepted canon of criticism that accounts which involve such tales cannot be regarded as strictly historical, And the principle must be admitted. It is perfectly true, as has been often said, that miracles do not happen. They certainly do not happen in our ordinary experience : they are not the stuff of which the history of our own times is made.

And this is no new discovery. Rationalism was as powerful a force in the eighteenth century as it is to-day : it was, indeed, so far as we can judge, even more powerful. It had leavened cultivated thought even more thoroughly. Its triumph was greater and more perfect, for the current philosophies of the time had not that profound and reverent sense of the mystery in things which marks our own age.

Yet the names which have lived, and which for us now represent most characteristically the Christianity of the eighteenth century, are those of great thinkers and leaders who frankly and fearlessly, and in spite of the tendency of their age, held Christianity as a definitely supernatural religion : Butler, Berkeley, Paley, Wesley. In character, in mind, in work, these men were very diverse ; yet they owed their power to one great faith, which they all held and all maintained in different ways—faith in a supernatural Christianity. This was the inspiration of the philosophical thinker as well as of the man of action.

And when we look back over the last hundred years, with their amazing development of scientific knowledge, with their extraordinary record of advance in the mapping out of Nature on the one hand, and in the writing of its history on the other ; when we reflect upon the rise of the doctrine of evolution, with its great corollary, the continuity of Nature ; and when we con-

sider how these ideas have captivated the popular imagination, we cannot but be struck with astonishment at the power and variety of the religious movements which have taken place during the same period within the Christian Church, and at the enthusiasm with which Christian ideals have been applied to modern problems. And the most wonderful thing is that the Christianity which has displayed this splendid vitality has kept clearly in view that supernatural character which was impressed upon it at the very beginning of its history. In a world which is doing its best to deny the possibility of the supernatural, the most supernatural of all religions is showing itself the most potent of spiritual forces.

It is no exaggeration to say that Christianity is the most supernatural of all religions. Buddhism is, at heart, a philosophy. Mohammedanism is Theism, with a belief in future life. In these religions the supernatural element, when it is found, is not of the essence of the creed. With Christianity it is otherwise. To eliminate the supernatural is to destroy. In the face of much earnest thinking of our own time this may seem a daring assertion. There are many who think they can allow the supernatural to drop away, and yet retain what they conceive to be the essence of the Christian creed. But they have against them the experience of all the Christian centuries, and the creeds of all the Christian communities; and they have against them this extraordinary fact, that during the last two hundred years, while rationalism has been gaining a complete ascendancy in every other department of human life, Christianity has always been able to renew its vigour by a strong reassertion of its supernatural faith. Non-miraculous Christianity in its various forms may serve as a creed for certain select intellectual coteries, but it has shown no power to create any definite organic social life, nor to move the hearts of the many, nor even to excite the antagonism of the unbelieving.

More serious, from the Christian point of view, is the existence in the heart of the Church of a tendency to minimize or explain away that supernatural creed which is essential to

her being. While it is perfectly true that the old creed has held its own, and has always been able to renew its vigour by a reassertion of its supernaturalness, it is also true that the temptations created by the influences characteristic of the age are too strong for many individuals. Some admit our Lord's miracles of healing because science is beginning to recognise the possibility of mental therapeutics. But they deny or evade all miracles which cannot be so explained, and regard the Resurrection as a manifestation of Christ in visions to His disciples. Whether these visions were purely subjective, or were due to a real revelation proceeding from the Living Saviour is a question of great importance on which opinion is divided.

Another school of thought seeks to avoid the whole question of the supernatural by taking refuge in the conception of the religious consciousness. Religion and science, it is maintained, can never come into conflict, because religion is not concerned with matters of fact, only with the ideas and emotions which belong to its peculiar sphere. To ask whether the doctrines of the Christian creed are true in the scientific sense is, we are told, absurd. The correct question is, Does the religious consciousness demand them? If it does, then they are true for religion—as true as anything can be. Should it happen that science came to regard them as untrue, the fact need not disturb us; for science cannot invade the sphere of religion, nor religion the sphere of science.

Such modes of reconciliation as these cannot prove satisfactory. They have essentially the nature of a *pis aller*, and either mark the last step on the road to negation or indicate the attitude of one who, though beaten in the conflict, determines not to yield.

There is, however, no reason why Christians should adopt such an attitude. It is true that miracles do not happen. If they did they would not be miracles. But no new evidence has come to light to prove that they did not happen at the greatest turning-point in human history. The evidence for the wondrous life stands firm. Neither the witness of St. Paul's Epistles, nor

that of the Gospels, nor that of the Church, has been impaired by modern criticism.

And, further, we are learning more definitely than ever before the power of intelligence to control natural law without breaking it. Science herself is finding out that purpose guiding towards an end and physical law in all its inexorable certainty are not antagonistic principles. Biology is now discovering both at work in the development of living forms. And what is this but the operation of a principle which is familiar in our ordinary experience? Man, by the use of his intelligence, is able to combine physical causes so as to produce effects which the regular course of physical causation could never have brought about, yet no natural law is broken. Relatively to the succession of material causes, here is the supernatural. The truth is that in all our dealings with the world about us we are exerting a power which, when compared with the operation of purely physical causes, may be described as supernatural. So it is that man controls the laws of Nature for his own ends. And are we to suppose that the Infinite Spirit is more limited in His relation to the material world than the finite? Does the Almighty labour under a disability from which His creature, man, is free?

Or, put it thus: We may divide scientific activities into two branches. There is the science which seeks to understand the material world, its laws and processes; and there is the science which seeks to control material forces and bend them to human purposes. These two kinds of science are, of course, closely united. The latter depends upon the former: we must know something of the laws of Nature before we can bend them to our will. But the distinction is important; for one reason why so many are puzzled when they think of religion and science together, and endeavour to reconcile the two, is that they confine their attention almost entirely to science in the former sense of the term. When they begin to reflect on the teachings of science they picture to themselves the whole world as a system of laws controlling all events, and absolutely independent

of human or personal intervention of any kind. And then the question arises, How can we possibly reconcile this view of the world with that providential dispensation of things of which our religion assures us? Are not the two ways of looking at the world altogether opposed?

Let those who have such thoughts in their minds consider science in a larger way, and they will find the solution of the problem. The answer to the question, What are the laws of Nature? is only one half of science. The other half is the answer to the question, How are these laws to be controlled for the benefit of men? how are they to be subordinated to certain definite human purposes? The wonderful thing is that, in spite of their unbending character, these laws can be so subordinated. But, indeed, this is a very imperfect statement, for the truth is that it is just because the laws of Nature never fail, because they are absolutely trustworthy, that man can use them to effect his purposes. Upon this fact depends the power of the spirit of man over the forces of Nature. And are we to suppose that the very characteristic which thus subordinates natural law to human will renders it independent of Divine will?

It is no objection to this argument to say that our experience does not show us a Divine control of natural law going on in the world about us, for, in the face of the vastness and the complexity of the universe, it is absurd to suppose that a Divine control of natural law must take place so near the surface of things as to come under human observation.

And this consideration leads us at once to a view of the relation of the miraculous to the supernatural in general. The supernatural may be everywhere in the world about us, and yet not be manifest to our faculties. But miracle is the supernatural designedly operative in such a way as to become manifest. Its purpose is revelation. It is for a sign. Therefore miracles are exceptional: they do not belong to the regular course of history. We are not, then, to be surprised that they should occur at the greatest of epochs and then vanish from the earth. Yet, all the while, unseen, except by the eye of faith, a Divine

and truly supernatural Providence is controlling the development of the material universe, shaping the forms of living organisms, guiding the processes of history, dealing with the infinite variety of human experience, answering the prayers of the faithful, and bringing in the kingdom of God.

It is hard to define the supernatural. The course we have so far pursued has led us to thoughts which amount to a relative and preparatory definition. For the rest, we must leave the idea to shape itself as our minds deal with the facts and doctrines presented by the Christian revelation. The purpose of the present effort to discuss this difficult question is, however, not so much to arrive at a consistent philosophical doctrine as to show that Christianity satisfies human needs just because of its supernatural character, and that for the same reason it supplies us with the best possible treatment of those vast problems which in all ages compel, and yet elude, the grasp of the mind of man.



### **Canons of Historical Criticism: their Application to the Four Gospels.<sup>1</sup>**

BY THE REV. CANON GIRDLESTONE, M.A.

**I**N studying several books of a more or less sceptical nature, written during the last half-century, I have been struck by the absence of any preliminary inquiry into the rules or canons of historical evidence. On what grounds are we persuaded of the general truth of past history? Whence have we drawn our chronology? How are we sure that certain authors wrote certain books? Great historians such as Muir, Grote, and Mommsen generally give an account of their materials and of their methods. Niebuhr was a familiar name in my youth; so was Sir George Cornewall Lewis, whose "Credibility of Ancient History" was a standard work, though it had certain

<sup>1</sup> A paper read at the Midland Clerical and Lay Union, Derby, and at the Clergy Home Mission Union, London, 1905.