

and (2) in their relation to the whole. He shows how a careful *analysis* must precede a perfect *synthesis*: yet very rarely do we feel that his method is either forced or artificial. In the volume just mentioned, his outline sermons upon "The Shepherd and the Sheep" (John x. 27, 28), "The Secret of Hope" (Rom. xv. 13), and upon "Things Concealed" (Prov. xxv. 2) are excellent examples of the advantage of a clear and natural division of a subject.

For depth of spiritual insight, for wealth of thought, and for striking, yet felicitous, expression, probably Dr. Maclaren stands unrivalled. Such outlines as those upon "Dying Lamps" (Matt. xxv. 8, R.V.), "The Christian's Witnesses to Character" (3 John 12), or upon "Two Deposits and Two Guardings" (2 Tim. i. 12, 14, R.V.) reveal to us the real nature of helpful teaching.

In short, the three great requisites for expository preaching are (1) adequate knowledge of the material upon which we work, (2) deep insight into the needs of those for whom we work, and (3) the most careful and skilful use of the tools (*i.e.*, thoughts) with which we work. All these three requisites demand hard labour and much time profitably employed. The giving of these, without stint or grudging, is the self-sacrifice—the ultimate and final condition of success—of the preacher.



### "Christianity as a Natural Religion."

BY THE REV. I. GREGORY SMITH, M.A., HON. LL.D.

THE *Nineteenth Century and After* (No. 343) contains a deeply interesting essay by Mr. W. H. Mallock on "Christianity as a Natural Religion." The title of the essay is susceptible, obviously, of more than one interpretation, and I venture to offer a few comments on the sense in which it is taken in this essay. But before doing so, it is worth while to

notice that the assumption (about the canonical books of the Bible) which the writer imputes to Christians generally, outside the pale of the Roman obedience, is hardly in accordance with fact. Not many educated Christians now regard the Bible as the fabled Ancile of mythology, nor are ignorant that Christianity was existent before the crystallization of its tenets in the books which compose the New Testament. But this is a point which is only collateral to the main thesis of the essay.

If by “ a natural religion ” is meant that the teachings of Christ are in harmony with what is best in human nature, there is no need of argument. There must, of necessity, be a capacity of receiving, a fitness in the soil for the seed sown, an echo responsive to the voice, and, to use Mr. Mallock’s illustration, an appetite, a longing for the proffered nourishment. The writing is there already on the page, but it needs the fire-warmth to bring it out, to make it visible. So far we have only a truism of universal application. The Founder of Christianity Himself tells us that there must be the ear to hear, the eye to perceive, a willingness, a desire to know. In any other way a revelation, whether from God or man, is an impossibility. The more Divine the illumination, the more surely does it appeal to man’s higher nature, just as inspiration quickens and directs the faculties natural to man. The very meaning of the Incarnation lies in this fundamental truth, of God condescending thus to impart Himself to His creatures.

But the essay proceeds to a more contentious question. Treading in the footsteps of Professor Dill’s learned “ History of Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius,” and gathering instances widely from other quarters, the essayist finds some remarkable points of resemblance, ethical and theological, to Christianity in non-Christian systems of philosophy, and asks, Are not these resemblances an indication that Christianity, like other creeds, is of the earth earthy, not a revelation from heaven? But it must be remembered that Marcus Aurelius, though not a convert to Christianity, breathed an atmosphere strongly impregnated with its teachings, and that even in Seneca’s

time the same permeating influence was beginning to find its way into the Imperial Court and household. People are often influenced unconsciously ; mere contact with the beliefs and the practices of those around tells more or less forcibly on everyone ; and from various causes Christianity is specially penetrative in this way, like "leaven" or yeast in the fermentation of the world. The modern altruist in London or Paris often fails to recognise what he owes to the influences which surround him. It is for the archæologist to trace, if he can, the origin and growth of these similarities in the later Roman Empire.

Waiving, however, this possibility, if not probability, of the pagan philosophy having borrowed, consciously or not, from Christianity, can it reasonably be argued that these coincidences of Christianity and some other religions prove that the Gospel promulgated by Christ is not a Divine revelation? To an unbiassed mind they may rather seem to prove the contrary, as indicative of exceptional efforts, corroborating the great announcement of righteousness from the lips of Him who "spake with authority," not in faltering, questioning tones. Were not all the noblest of men everywhere before the dawn striving eagerly for fuller light, "groping"—it is St. Paul's word, *ψηλαφῶντες*—after the Deity, "if haply they might find Him," till "in the fulness of time" Christ came? The essay speaks of "those who hold that no other religions except Christianity were a revelation from God" (p. 498). It would be very rash, to say the least, to make any such assertion. The Revealer came to gather into Himself all the hitherto unsatisfied seekings after truth. The parhelions bear witness that there is a sun in the heavens.

After all—and surely this is vitally important, if one is not holding a brief on one side or the other, but honestly seeking the truth—it is not of much use to compare Christianity with a philosophy. The parallel is of necessity partial, incomplete. For the Christian religion is not an academic system ; it is a life, if it is anything, and except to those who try to live the creed, it is savourless, good for nothing. Not His teaching,

however heavenly, is by itself the credential of Christ, but His personality, the self-sacrifice of Himself for men. He claims to be Incarnate God ; He promises life, the only true life, to men. The claim and the promise stand or fall together. Is the promise fulfilled? The experience of almost twenty centuries answers. The philosophic musings even of a Marcus Aurelius are sterile, infructuous. Christ brought a new life into a decaying world : He fought on our behalf against the evil forces at work against us ; He was wounded in the fight, but He prevailed.

A great deal has been done of late years by the explorings of travellers and by the researches of students in the region, as of comparative philology, so also of comparative religions. The result of these investigations seems to show that in almost every tribe or race there is a kind of embryo sense of an object of worship, of a Being superior to man—in short, a kind of religion—and that this sense of a Higher Power rests for ultimate basis on a sense, however imperfectly developed, of a responsibility and a duty on the side of man. It is, in fact, a recognition unconsciously of Kant’s “categorical imperative”; it is the acknowledgment, very often feeble and crude, very often distorted and debased, of that inward “I ought,” which was to Henry Sedgewick one of the surest proofs that man is free to will. It cannot be repeated too often nor too earnestly that, though Christianity imparts new life to morality, expanding, elevating, deepening the scope of its dictates, quickening and purifying them by a new and unselfish motive, still Christianity makes its appeal to the conscience, and derives thence its final assurance.

It may be, and it has been objected, that this very fact, this concord, this harmony of the Gospel with man’s noblest aspirations, makes it probable that Christianity is of human invention, the outcome and the product of man’s own imaginings, a something which he has himself devised to satisfy his own cravings. But surely the marked contrast which it presents to the various types of natural religion which are found over the surface of

the globe stamps it as a revelation, and a special one. It is paradoxical to say that a religion which controverts selfish longings, however potent, which wages war against the gratification, however tempting, of selfish appetites, and which demands from its votaries (would to God that we all would face the truth practically!) self-surrender to God's will, absolute self-sacrifice, can really be a mere anodyne, a thing of man's making for his own convenience.

After all, natural religion by itself, although a stepping-stone to something higher, is inadequate; it is the glimmering before the dawn. A thoughtful person looking round on the natural world as it is cannot but own that it abounds in strange and inexplicable contradictions. On a fine day, to a mind at ease, all things visible—blue sky, green earth, flower, fruit, foliage—may seem to speak of benediction and peace, beneficence; but the thought comes of the havoc and destruction wrought ever and anon by wrathful elements, and of the deadly warfare, which never ceases, among the beasts of prey, of one against another, of all against man. The revelation of God in Christ enables a Christian to wait patiently for the solution of all such anomalies, telling him that this life is only a rehearsal for the real life, and that at present we only see "the wrong side of the carpet," not yet the pattern devised by infinite Wisdom and Love. Butler's great treatise on the "Analogy between Natural and Revealed Religion" was what was needed in his day as an answer to the Deists, and is of imperishable value for all time, *because of his admirable temper and method in arguing*. But what we call natural religion, placed by the side of the Christian revelation, testifies by its very incompleteness to the truths which Christ came down to earth to proclaim.

