

## To Rome and Back.

BY THE REV. A. W. HUTTON, M.A.

### III. THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY.<sup>1</sup>

**D**URING the last year or two a number of priests have seceded from the ministry of the Roman Catholic Church. They have not only left the ministry, they have left their Church altogether, and a large proportion of them have practically abandoned all belief in Christianity. There have always been such cases, but during the last two years the number has been larger than usual, and this is undoubtedly due to the Pope's condemnation of what is called "Modernism." In some cases there were probably other good grounds for secession; but, generally speaking it was this condemnation that brought doubts to a crisis; and, on reflection, men who saw that the condemnation touched themselves, decided that it was their duty to come out, and so they did. I have myself been brought personally into contact with six or eight of these men, and I can understand their position, and sympathize with them, more easily than others, who have not had a similar experience.

One of them, indeed, returned with little delay to the ministry of the Church of England, to which he had been ordained forty years ago. He, of course, is one of the minority who have not abandoned their belief in the fundamental truths of Christianity. On the contrary, I should say that his belief in these truths is now clearer, firmer, and more spiritually invigorating than ever it was before. Of the others, I entertain hopes that, in course of time, they will see their way to do as he has done; but they were never members of our Church, and it is more difficult for them to see their way to us, because our methods are all strange to them. Some of them will, perhaps, after a time, join some other Protestant community; others are likely to live the rest of their lives without any regular communion with any Christian Church. In many cases, perhaps in nearly all cases, a long

<sup>1</sup> For Parts I. and II. see CHURCHMAN, April and May, 1910.

time will elapse before they see their way to take any step in the direction of orthodox belief. And it is just this delay, this slowness to act, which puzzles and even vexes many Christian believers, who are their sincere well-wishers, but who cannot understand what reasonable ground there is for this dilatoriness, which strikes them as being neither wise nor reasonable, but distinctly culpable. They cannot be ignorant, these men, of the Gospel message; the Bible is not to them a sealed book; even if it were sealed to them before, it is not so now. Why, then, cannot they step straight out of the constrained habitation of the Roman Church (which they undoubtedly have left), into the "glorious liberty of the children of God," knowing Him, "in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life," and becoming the servants of Him "whose service is perfect freedom"? Of course I do not profess to be able to give a detailed answer to these questions in the case of any one of the men to whom I have referred. The secret of each man's heart is his own, and even he himself might find it very difficult to answer the questions at all adequately in his own case. Our lives are very complex, and our actions are often prompted by a variety of motives, some of which we hardly realize ourselves. But, as I was myself an example of long delay (fifteen years elapsing between my leaving the Roman Church and my resuming service in the Church of England), I may be able to give some general answer, that may partly explain the facts.

I think that the simplest and the truest, though not a complete explanation, is this: that when for years everything has been staked on authority, a fatal weakness necessarily follows when that authority is found to be illusory, or at least illusory in the form in which it has been presented and accepted. And, both among High Churchmen and among Roman Catholics, it was on authority that I had learned to base my belief. I do not say that experience (which is, of course, the basis of Evangelical religion) is made nothing of in either case. As it happened, both the clergyman whom I last consulted before I left the Church of England, and the

priest whom I last consulted before I left the Church of Rome, asked me the same question: "Have you no religious experience to fall back on, now that the arguments in support of our case seem to you so unsatisfactory and inconclusive?" But I made little account of the question, and did not even feel sure that they were asking it seriously, because it implied a point of view so different from that which I had for years identified with the religious teachers in question. And I may remark in passing that, as I now see the matter, I cannot but think that the most mischievous thing the "Oxford Movement" did, far more mischievous than its introduction of ceremonial or of penitential exercises into the Church of England, was its habitual disparagement of the value of experience. "Don't trust to your feelings; be sure of a clear and logical basis for Church authority, and then believe on the word of that authority"; such was, and is, the constant exhortation of the teachers whom I now have in view, and whose doctrine on the foundation of faith I have since learned to repudiate.

If you have staked everything on authority, and then, after a time, find that the authority itself cannot be sustained when its historical basis is carefully examined, you are like a climbing rose-bush after the stake that supported it has been blown down or removed. But more time is needed for the restoration of faith than is needed for the recovery of a rose-bush which the gardener has cut back. I am not denying that, in certain rare instances, a sudden and immediate inflow of the Holy Spirit may transform into a convinced Evangelical believer a man who has only quite recently come out from the Roman Church, even from the Roman priesthood. But such cases are rare. I cannot recall one within my own direct personal knowledge, unless it be the case of one very remarkable man, a great Hebrew scholar, who was really a devout Protestant long before he actually left the Roman Church, the keen interest that he took in his Biblical studies so absorbing his thoughts that for years he really did not notice in what an incongruous habitation he was dwelling. But in most cases much patience,

much consideration, is necessary. And this apparent dilatoriness is apt to puzzle and to vex Christian friends, who cannot make it out. Then rumours are spread abroad about "atheism" and "agnosticism," and all this makes far more difficult the position of men who find themselves thus labelled, and, perhaps, therefore, shunned.

Here, again, I must plead for charity. During the last twenty-six years I have moved a good deal among men who have been thus labelled, and I should say that in this country atheism (in the sense of a direct denial of the existence of God) is very rare, indeed, so rare as to be practically non-existent. No doubt there are men who would say, "I cannot accept your idea, or your definition of God"; but that is not atheism. The first Christians were by the pagans described as atheists, because they denied the divinity of the pagan gods, and refused to offer sacrifice to the Emperor. And, similarly, in our own day, a man whose conception of God is very spiritual, would probably be suspected of atheism by another man, whose ideas about God are frankly anthropomorphic, and nothing more. So that such denunciations of men as atheists are often cruel and unjust. That men who leave the Roman Church often go through a period of agnosticism is undeniable. But agnosticism is not a denial of God, it is a suspense of judgment, which is perhaps the only position that a man can take up in the interval between his being robbed of his crude faith, and his being breathed upon by the breath of God—that is, by the Holy Spirit, who will ultimately guide him into all truth.' I have known, and I know, many agnostics, but they are not (anyhow, not as a rule) hard and proud men, contemptuous of the faith which others profess; they are often enough "holy and humble men of heart," who shrink from making professions which they cannot (at the time) make in the strength of profound convictions. But they are waiting upon God, and you may depend upon it that not one of them is out of God's sight, or excluded from His love. Of course you will understand that I have not in my mind the practical atheism or agnosticism (whichever it

may be) of the self-indulgent, good-for-nothing idle throng, "whose god is their belly, who mind earthly things." I am thinking only of sensitive souls, who (as it seems to me) are really, all the time, putting their trust in God, "who is not far from any one of them, for in Him they live and move and have their being," though meanwhile they dare not publicly confess Him, not for any fear of being put out of the synagogue, for, indeed, such a confession would win them approbation and applause, but because their convictions are as yet weak, and they know it.

I have said that a period of fifteen years elapsed between my leaving the Roman Catholic Church, and my resuming work as a clergyman of the Church of England. And it may be of interest to add a word as to the external life which I was leading at this time. After an interval, which was necessary for mental rest and recollection, I found occupation as honorary secretary of the Bethnal Green branch of the Charity Organization Society, and I also served on the Committee of the same Society in Whitechapel. A little later I was appointed Librarian at the National Liberal Club; and this post I held for some twelve years; in fact, until the time came when I saw my way to resume clerical work. During the earlier years of this period, I lectured occasionally before Ethical Societies in various parts of London, and all this work was, I think, of value to me, as keeping before my mind the gravity of the social and moral problems with which we are confronted. I cannot say that I hit on the solution of any one of them. But it would, I think, be also true to say that it became increasingly clear to me that none of our problems are really to be solved without the infusion of religion. Most of the people with whom I was associated at this time were more or less influenced by religious ideas, though perhaps not one of them was, in the strict sense, "orthodox." And this leads me from this brief but sufficient account of the framework of my life (from 1883 until 1898) to what is of much greater importance—viz., the spiritual pilgrimage which meanwhile I was slowly making back to beliefs such as

are familiar to you as forming the very life of your lives. I have nothing of a sensational character to narrate. The process was slow, and probably those who saw me daily knew nothing about it. If I were asked to fix on any hour or moment when the conviction possessed me that my life, which had been, more than a quarter of a century earlier, devoted to the Christian ministry, ought to be again actively consecrated to that service, I think I should say it was on the occasion of Mr. Gladstone's funeral in Westminster Abbey in May, 1898, when, more especially, the singing of his two favourite hymns, "Rock of Ages," and "O God our help in ages past," impressed on my heart and mind the supreme value and the imperishable character of the Christian faith. But here it will be best to drop anything of an autobiographical nature, and to inquire generally what it is that in our own day either leads men back to religion, or confirms them in it, in cases where it has always been their possession. Briefly, it is the attractive power of Jesus Christ and of Him crucified which draws men back to God, even in this age, which has largely ceased to regard godlessness as a serious evil. Each man who feels this attractive power perceives (but perceives gradually, such is my own experience) the unique value to his own soul of the revelation of God manifest in the flesh, which revelation he finds in the records of that life that have come down to us, substantially unimpaired, in the pages of the New Testament.

The words of God the Word Incarnate spoken on earth, touched the hearts of some at least of His hearers, because they were inspired; and those to whom they afterwards repeated the words were also inspired to perceive the vital and eternal significance of those words; and that is how God's Word written comes home to us now. But it does so only when we ourselves are in a sense inspired to perceive its value and its meaning for us. I mention this point thus briefly in passing, though a much fuller exposition is needed to make the point clear, because it serves to remove a difficulty which many feel about Biblical inspiration. The letter of the Bible is but an earthen

vessel, and various portions of it vary very much in spiritual value. But it contains a treasure—it contains the Word of God; yet, even so, to appreciate this we must ourselves be spiritually-minded men, otherwise its messages will leave us unaffected. And I do not think that all that Biblical criticism has done, or ever can do, makes, or will make, much difference to the Bible's testimony to the attractive power of Jesus of Nazareth. Putting it on the lowest ground, there He stands, the central and the most wonderful figure in the world's history, His unique personality and character clearly mirrored in the literature of the New Testament, while the literature of the Old Testament forms, so to speak, the necessary pedestal for the majestic Figure. Let men do what they will or can to escape from the attractive power of this gracious personality, they must none the less admit that there is no one in the world's history more interesting, or more worth attentive study.

And this attitude of interest and of study leads, as the first disciples were led, to an attitude of friendliness, which again develops into reverence, and so the process goes forward, not hurriedly, indeed, but by stages, such as those through which the first disciples passed, until a conviction, a soul-stirring conviction, is reached of the immense value to ourselves of the teaching and the death and the risen life of this sweet and solemn Master; and almost unconsciously we find words rising to our lips, such as rose to those of other men 1,800 years ago, men who were favoured by personal knowledge of His actual appearance, and of the very tone of His voice, knowledge such as we cannot have: "Never man spake like this man." "Truly this was a Son of God." "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." "My Lord and my God." And in this religious experience, of which, as being a thing within our own direct personal consciousness, we can be perfectly certain, more certain than we could be of any external revelation obtained by submission to a teaching authority, we perceive that we have attained to the knowledge of God, that knowledge which is "everlasting life." This is surely the more excellent way, to

come to God by the inner way, which is Christ Himself, being enlightened so as to find that way by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the soul.

What, I think, must strike everyone who has perceived the simplicity of the Gospel message, and the assurance which it gives to those who have accepted it, is the great difference between this "holding of the Head," to use St. Paul's phrase in the Epistle to the Colossians, and that submission to "a visible head of the Church on earth," which is of the essence of the Roman system. This latter is so mechanical that merely to name it seems to discredit its lawfulness in the religion of Christ, which is a religion of the Spirit. But I do not want to go back to anything controversial. I should prefer to ask for generous toleration towards all who "name the Name of Christ and depart from iniquity," even though there are many points in which they differ from your own conception of true Christian orthodoxy.

In our beautiful "Prayer for all Conditions of Men" there is contained, incidentally, a definition of the Catholic Church, which we do well to make our own when we are disposed to criticize denominations other than our own. The Church, we are there taught, includes "all who profess and call themselves Christians"—not one of them is to be treated as if he were outside; but yet we know that certainly not all the varying views which this great multitude holds can simultaneously be true, so we pray that they (and in this prayer we include ourselves) "may be led into the way of truth, and hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life." It is a very comprehensive as well as a very beautiful sentence, for it implies that, in spite of many divergencies of opinion on minor points, all who believe and call themselves Christians do "hold the faith"; they stand on the one Foundation; they are all our brethren. When the eunuch, whom Philip converted by preaching to him Jesus from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, desired by Baptism to be formally admitted into the Church of Christ, it was a very simple confession of faith



that he made in order to qualify for the privilege. "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." And, although there are indications that point in the opposite direction, I believe that, a hundred years hence, all really spiritual believers will find some such simple formula as that enough to bind them together. Not in the chanting of elaborate creeds, not in subtle accusations of heresy, nor in any harsh methods of excommunication will the strength of Christian orthodoxy ultimately be found. If we are disciples of Him "who went about doing good," and "preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven," we shall find that "we pass from death unto life when we love the brethren." The service of the poor is the truest imitation of Christ.



## Some Chapters in the History of the Early English Church.

BY THE REV. ALFRED PLUMMER, D.D.

### II. THE SOURCES ; LIVES OF SAINTS.

**I**N studying the Lives of Saints which have come to us from very early ages down to comparatively modern times, we must remember that for centuries they filled a place in literature which is now filled quite otherwise. They were the *novels* of all ranks of society.

There never was an age which devoured more novels than ours does. And, if consumption may be gauged by production, there is no nation which reads so many novels as the English do. A glance at Mudie's catalogue or that of *The Times Book Club* will show the difference between the amount of fiction which is in circulation and the amount of solid literature. And the thoughts to which such a fact gives rise are not altogether cheering.

Can we imagine ourselves transferred to a state of society in which there were no novels? Of course, if we were transferred,