

Religion and Theology.

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PARADOXICAL as it may seem, a great many of the religious difficulties of our day do not really affect the substance of the Christian religion at all. They affect *Theology*, not *Religion*. Theology is to the great truths (*i.e.*, facts) of the Christian Faith what Natural Science is to the facts which confront us in Nature. Theology is not Religion any more than Natural Science is Nature. No man of understanding would for a moment confound the Universe in which we live and of which we form a part with our *explanations* of some of the phenomena which we observe in that Universe. Yet not a few men of much ability do confound Theology with Religion. The mistake in each case is the same. Theology, as we have said, is not Religion; it is merely our attempt to explain the facts upon which Religion is based and to co-ordinate them with one another and so systematize our knowledge of them. Just in the same way Natural Science is not Nature but only our way of stating what we conceive to be some of the laws which operate in the material world and affect matter. So also Mental Science is the summary of the laws which men think they have discovered to underlie the operations of the Mind, or, to put it in a slightly different manner, men's theories about the Mind's method of working. As Nature and Mind exist quite independently of the correctness or otherwise of our theories about them—that is to say have an actual existence in no wise dependent upon Natural and Mental Science—so the Christian Religion has a very real existence quite apart from the Science of Theology. It is possible for a man to doubt some or many of the statements of physicists without his having the very slightest inclination to follow Bishop Berkeley in his philosophic doubts about the existence of the material world—the existence

of which, by the way, it may be admitted, is clear enough to us, though incapable of actual demonstration. A man may honestly and reasonably dispute much of Bain's "Mental and Moral Science," many of Bentham's "Principles of Morals and Legislation," and yet have not the slightest hesitation in admitting the great fact of the existence of "the Moral Law within," as Kant terms it, and the reality of the other subjects dealt with by these and other philosophic Scientists. It is well known to every student of Western Philosophy that, from Thales to Hegel and even Eucken, one School has succeeded another, each disputing many of the statements and theories of its predecessors. This has occurred in the East also, as the six great "Orthodox" and the two chief "unorthodox" Schools of Indian Philosophy—not to mention hosts of less important ones—amply prove. We find much the same thing in China. Yet all this by no means proves that there is nothing in Philosophy, and much less does it demonstrate that the *facts* upon which all these speculations were based have no real existence. No amount of difference of opinion regarding the proper Theory of Legislation can affect the fact that legislation exists and in some form always has existed.

If we turn back to Physical Science the same thing holds true. In Astronomy the Ptolemaic Theory once held undisputed sway. Ultimately it became largely discredited and gave way to the Copernican. That again in its turn has been much modified by Kepler, Newton, and later Astronomers. The Science of Astronomy, like every other true Science, is changing almost every day, because it is progressive, and progress implies change. Without change, without questioning and testing the conclusions of previous observers, no advance can be made in any branch of Science. But the modification of some Astronomical theories and the total overthrow of others, in favour of more accurate ones, rendered necessary by advance in observation and knowledge, by no means renders doubtful the existence of the Sun, Moon, and Planets, and of the vast Universe of which our Solar System forms such an infinitesimal

part. Whatever errors may yet be detected in our present Science of Astronomy, yet the Universe exists and will continue to exist. The Laws of Motion are quite independent of our successful or unsuccessful attempts to formulate and explain them.

Science may be said to be human knowledge founded on the observation of certain facts, whether these facts occur in the material, the vital or *zoic*, the mental, the moral, or the spiritual world. If the facts are wrongly ascertained or erroneously correlated to one another in our way of treating them, then errors must necessarily occur in the Science founded thereon. As all Science as such is of human origin, it must always be defective and imperfect, and must therefore always be capable of correction, improvement, and development. This applies to the "Mater Scientiarum," the highest of all Sciences, that of Theology, as well as to every other.

There have been and still are different Schools of Theology as well as different Schools of Mental and Moral and even of Physical Science. No School has exhausted the subject, no School has had a monopoly of the truth. Error may be detected in each, and hence every theologian worthy of the name has to master the leading theories of each distinctive School of Theology, and test for himself their correctness. He will probably find truth in some form in all, something he can learn from all, yet none that can be honestly accepted *in toto* as perfectly accurate, no theory incapable of improvement and so clearly stated as not to give ground for misunderstanding. This will be evident if for a moment we consider only a few of the different theories which have been held on such important matters as, for example, Freewill and Necessity, the methods and limits of Inspiration, the way of Salvation, and, perhaps above all, the multitudinous Theories of the Atonement. None of these does it fall within our present province to discuss, but we may take the last subject to illustrate what we are endeavouring to show.

When any *theory* (of the Atonement, for instance) is rendered

doubtful or overthrown, the *fact* does not fall with the *theory* started to explain it. Facts remain while theories pass away.

“Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of Thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.”

The *fact* of the Atonement is proved by Christ's own teaching and that of His Apostles, to say nothing of the spiritual experience of Christians during nearly nineteen centuries. On the truth of the fact theories have been framed to enable us the better to grasp it and the better to bring it (to our minds) into harmonious correlation with other great facts and with the rest of our theological system. The *fact* of the Atonement is the common basis, the *datum*, the premise, of each theory. Yet a man may (1) either have no definite and precise *theory* of the Atonement, or (2) may have an imperfect or even more or less erroneous theory of it, and still he may be quite certain about the Atonement, may be resting his spirit on it and working on it and in the strength of his faith in it. Just in the same way a man may be an admirable miner and yet know nothing of geology or metallurgy, a great linguist and not be at all acquainted with philology, a truly earnest Christian and not a theologian. Alas! he may be an admirable theologian and yet not be in any true sense a Christian at all. “Correct knowledge is not saving faith.”

Of course this in no wise lowers the value of Theology as a Science; it merely distinguishes between theory and fact in Religion. Any serious error in theory may have a very serious effect on belief and practice. An erroneous theory, especially if insisted on as identical with the truth of the fact, may repel people from believing the latter. This is as unwise as it would be to deny the existence of the Solar System because we now know that the Ptolemaic Theory is in great measure wrong, and that the Sun does not go round the Earth, and never did. This consideration, let it again be said, while encouraging us to test and perfect our Theological theories, should at the same time

lead us to be on our guard against confounding them with the *facts* they are intended to state and explain.

The object with which Theology busies itself is God Himself. He can be known only as He has deigned to reveal Himself to man in (1) the Universe, (2) Reason, (3) Conscience, (4) Revelation (including the inspired consciousness of Divinely chosen men), and, above all, in (5) Christ. On the facts about God thus revealed Theology is based. As God "changeth not," so the facts of true Christianity can never alter. Hence the few main doctrines of the Faith—those, for instance, summed up in the Apostles' Creed—are unchanged and unchangeable. This should be noticed, lest we yield to the unthinking modern outcry against "dogma." Dogma is doctrine, and doctrine is teaching. A "Christianity without dogmas" is therefore unmeaning and unthinkable. If the expression meant anything it would signify Agnosticism. What those who use the phrase mean, if they mean anything, is to protest against hard and fast theological *theories*, of whatever School, being considered as of the essence of the Christian Faith. In this, as we have seen, they are right.

