

Rationalism.

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MODERN Rationalism had its origin at the Reformation. It is the liberty which was then asserted run to the extreme. Broadly speaking, the Reformation was a protest against the abuses of the Church of Rome. The right of private judgment must be recognized and allowed. It is true the Reformation was more than this; it was an assertion of the Scriptures as the ultimate authority in matters of faith and religion, together with a great revival of Evangelical and experimental Christianity. But when once the experimental religion and deep spiritual excitement which had carried on the movement to its triumphant issue began to subside, the principle of private judgment which had been vindicated began to run wild. Reason, let loose, ran off in the joy of liberty, and began to perform the wildest freaks and vagaries. But it is worthy of note that these vagaries of reason were not committed until the Evangelical impulse had declined, and the creeds of Protestantism had settled down into systematic and dogmatic forms. Then it began to be thought that, since reason had been used against Rome, why should it not be used against the Reformation, or against any religious system? Since reason had rejected the infallible authority of Rome, and since Revelation, the ultimate authority recognized by Protestants, must be authenticated and interpreted by reason, why should not reason be regarded as the supreme authority in all matters of religion? It was thus that that form of religious thought came into operation which is denominated Modern Rationalism.

GROUND PRINCIPLES.

The fundamental principle of Rationalism is the *supremacy of reason* in all matters of religion. In this ground principle the Rationalists are all at one. But this unity does not long continue. They differ as to that conception of reason which is

the final ground of certitude, one class making it personal reason or the reason of the individual, while the other would make it impersonal reason or a universally diffused and infallible reason which is said to regulate and determine the convictions of the human mind.

The Rationalists, adopting one or other of these views of reason, have proceeded to apply their system to the determination of truth. And here we may, for the sake of clearness, observe that they have adopted two modes of operation :

1. The *philosophical*, which may be regarded as generally constructive in its tendency, as it was directed to the evolvment of a creed based on the investigations of reason into the nature and laws of the universe. The result has been that they have landed either into Pantheism, Idealism, Positivism, or some other hybrid species of belief which they represent as both *philosophy* and *faith*, but which a practical and common-sense Englishman would not discover to be either one or the other. In some cases it resulted in a Theistic belief.

2. *Expository*.—The other way in which Rationalism has applied itself is the expository position. The former class reject supernatural revelation as superstition. They regard Christ as an enthusiast. But most of the Rationalists accept the Bible as containing important truth, but it needs to be explained and harmonized with reason. Their interpretation as relates to the orthodox Creed may be regarded as destructive, since its effect is to destroy so much. In fact, its effect is to expunge the supernatural element entirely from the Bible. They have said : “ We accept the Bible, and we are going to explain it.” This was good, but when they have explained it we have none or very little Bible left. We regard the Bible as containing inspired truth ; but by the Rationalist inspiration is explained away into genius or the natural insight of reason. We regard the Bible as containing important historical truth ; but when Rationalism has explained it, the Bible is not historical, but mythological. We have been in the habit of regarding the Bible as a direct revelation from God ; but Rationalism explains it to be a revelation

only in the same sense that science is a revelation. Whatever is true in it is Divine, but whatever is true in history is Divine also. Christ was either a myth, the personification of the ideas and aspirations of His age, or, if a real person, He was an enthusiast, a deceiver, or at least a lofty religious genius and a kind of Pantheistic Rationalist. He performed no miracles, but powerfully impressed the imagination of His followers, who invented the miracles afterwards. He uttered prophecies beyond the effect of His natural foresight; He accomplished no redemption except such as any great teacher or reformer may accomplish.

This is how Rationalism explains the Bible. I do not say each individual Rationalist, but this is the result when Rationalism as a whole has finished its explanation.

In considering this system among men we shall confine our observations to those of our own land. There can be no doubt that the Rationalistic spirit has taken some hold upon the people of this country.

I. ITS MEDIUM OF INTRODUCTION.

1. The habit of mental application required in many branches of skilled labour may be named as one medium. Attention being thus directed to the examination of mechanical and natural laws, and seeing that they produce beneficial results, a habit of depending on the conclusions of reason is induced.

2. Another medium is the literature imported from the Continent. It suited their taste, as it gave them an apparently more reasonable and scientific exposition of religion. It has been dressed up in the shape of poetry, fiction, and biography. This literature has influenced our own country, and it has descended upon the people and, to some extent, upon the working classes in the writings of several authors.

3. The teaching of some of the ministers of religion may also be reckoned as definitely furthering the same end.

4. The habit of debating without adequate knowledge and scholarship may have a similar result.

II. ITS OPERATION AMONG THE WORKING CLASSES.

It may be observed that, owing to the practical character of the working classes of this country, Rationalism amongst them is less speculative than on the Continent.

1. *Those in the Churches.*—Here it manifests itself in criticizing the miracles and doctrines of Scripture, and in reducing them all to the operation of natural laws. The result is, they give up the effort to reconcile the Bible with anything a professor of science may say. They give up the doctrine of inspiration.

2. *Those outside the Churches.*—Here it throws itself into two forms :

(1) *Indifferentism.*—The creeds are conflicting, say they. There is perhaps some good in all. Religion is one thing, creed another. Religion means a sense of dependence ; consciousness of God may be felt by the influence of nature better than by the teaching of the clergy. Creeds are the effect of circumstances or mental proclivities. There is no essential connection between them.

(2) *Secularism.*—The spirit of Rationalism among the working classes has chiefly taken the direction of speculation on social reform. This is pressed upon them by their position in the social scale, the natural desire to rise, and the idea, true or false, that they are unjustly deprived of their rights. Here we find the rationalistic spirit in alliance with the natural desire for social elevation, and we find it taking a twofold form of manifestation, each of which is antagonistic to Christianity.

1. It assumes that the popular mode of presenting Christianity is not the true mode. Christ, it is said, was in favour of the elevation of the masses, but the popular theology is all against it. It is, and has been for ages, the chief barrier against the progress of science. Christ loved them, and sought to benefit them. Science actually does benefit them, but the theology of the Churches tells them to be content with what they are, and look for something better in another world. It is therefore an

obstruction to progress, and a misrepresentation of Christ and Christianity. Christianity is misrepresented by the clergy and ministers of religion. Christ allied Himself with the poor, but the parsons ally themselves with the rich. Christ was opposed to the oppressors of the poor, but the parsons ally themselves with statesmen, and lend themselves to be instruments of tyranny. Christ was benevolent, but the parsons are selfish. He was humble and lowly, but they are ambitious, and seek nothing so much as their own aggrandizement. Christianity is misrepresented by the Churches. Christ intended the Church to be a brotherhood, but she is nothing but a mass of conflicting sects. The Church was to bind classes in one family, but there is no place where class distinctions are more marked than in the Church. Christ intended the Church to be an organization for the amelioration of the social and material condition of the poor; but she never attempts to accomplish this, but only lectures them about their souls, conversion, hell, etc.—things which their reason cannot comprehend. Thus, it is said, theology, ministers of religion, and the Churches generally, misrepresent the spirit and objects of Jesus.

2. It assumes that Christianity is opposed to social progress, and seeks to support the assumption in this way :

(1) Our first rational duty is to attend to what we know, but Christianity is a system of dogmas about what we do not know.

(2) This system of dogmas about a future life has developed in the way in which it necessarily must from the nature of man, so that theology and the Churches could not be anything but what they are.

(3) But Christianity and the Churches have always been opposed to science and to social progress. Christianity therefore is untrue.

This is the secularistic rationalism which ends in sheer infidelity. Such views as these are propounded by lecturers to working men in public discussions on social and religious questions, and in the workshops and clubs of our large towns.

III. ITS EFFECTS.

The effects are deplorable. It destroys first of all certainty of moral subjects. It weakens also the sense of responsibility. It destroys as well the great motive to benevolence—Christian love. It ignores the region of spiritual experiences. It keeps the human spirit down on a very low level, imprisoning it, so that it cannot rise to that higher plane where it can enjoy communion with the Divine Spirit, and get the wider outlook on life. Then, again, it leaves the passions without a restraining power. Thus it may result in vice, wretchedness, and social degradation.

Thus it is that the secularistic rationalism of the working men of this country will be found by practical tests to work its own destruction. It cannot be otherwise. We deeply need certainty on moral subjects, and the sense of responsibility strengthened instead of being weakened. The great motive to benevolence must also be preserved intact, and the passions checked by a restraining power.

IV. THE DUTY OF THE CHURCH IN RESPECT OF IT.

There are two methods to be adopted :

1. *The Intellectual-Argument.*—This is to meet it on its own ground, and is the legitimate method. Let the true sphere of reason in matters of religion be clearly explained to them.

Let it be shown that the doctrine of the supremacy of reason is a false assumption, and that it projects the operations of the intellect into a region beyond its legitimate sphere.

Let it be shown, as it can be, that Rationalism results in nothing but a chaos of conflicting speculations.

2. *The Moral.*—This system is not to be eradicated by a mere intellectual process. Man is more than intellect, and there is much in human nature that lies beyond the sphere of argument. There is a moral nature in man the state of which acts on the intellect, and gives it a particular tendency. In such cases the Rationalistic spirit is only a symptom of a deeper

cause. Where such is the case mere argument does not go to the root of the matter. There is often formed among men a deep-seated vanity which prevents the subordination of their intellects to the arguments of those whom they do not love, together with a strong antipathy to the restrictions of Christianity, and this is the result to which they see your arguments lead.

The working classes must be made to love Christianity, and it should be remembered that the Church is the divinely appointed medium of presenting it. When the Churches shall have become a living embodiment of the spirit and principles of true religion, they will become an irresistible power against every form of error, and will go forth in their career of victory "clear as the sun, fair as the moon, and terrible as an army of banners."

1. If we as Christian people are to be preserved against Rationalistic heresy, let us preserve our *spiritual* life. A man never becomes heretical so long as he preserves an experimental religion. We must cultivate the spiritual life, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The moral must be touched by the Spirit of God.

2. If we are to repulse Rationalism it must be by the practical exhibition of Christian virtues. It will not be done by controversy—not by books. There is a mightier logic than that of the intellect—a logic which appeals to the observant faculties of men, a logic which can be wielded with equal force by the most intellectually strong, a logic which bears the stamp and sanction of Divinity itself, and which will tell more on the conscience and hearts of others than all the books in Christendom—it is the logic of a holy life. "Let your light so shine before men that others seeing your good works may glorify your Father which is in heaven."

