

THE PROLEGOMENA OF CHRISTIAN EVIDENCES.

BY THE REV. E. ABBEY TINDALL, M.A., Rector of Didsbury.

THE literature of Christian Apologetics, in volume and in pamphlet, flows copiously from the press. Much of it fails to gauge accurately either the nature or the extent of infidelity. The problem is many-sided. The worldliness of the soldiers who jeered in the judgment-hall, the apathy of the disciples who slept in Gethsemane, and the interested opposition of the craftsmen at Ephesus cannot be included in the same category. The doubts of Thomas, and the lukewarmness of the Laodiceans arose from different causes. The flippancy of Gibbon, the agnosticism of Spencer and Huxley, the bravado of the Hyde Park orator have little in common. The elastic word *unbelief* includes them all, but the moral and intellectual distinctions are great. Different methods of reply must be adopted according to the special circumstances of each individual disputant. Here our concern is solely with intellectual objections.

The conceit which craves for self-advertisement, the moral propensity which repudiates restraint, and discontent with the existing social environment produce the rationalistic society and the street-corner atheist. These are engaged in an open warfare with Christianity. The infidel argument is a weapon in the conflict, not the *casus belli*. Not the conviction of the intellect, but the conversion of the heart must be sought. Direct evangelistic testimony is the only answer. The guilt of sin must be exposed, and a personal Saviour presented. At the same time admission must be openly made that the visible Church is not perfect, that the laws of a Christian country are often dictated by the greed of the rich and the influence of the mighty, and that life has become a struggle in which the weak are too readily allowed to go under while victory is for the strong. The love which sympathizes will reveal the Love which bled, and make manifest the meaning of His Sacrifice.

The remarkable progress made in the Natural Sciences during the past hundred years, the constant succession of new discoveries, and the increasing ability to explain by ordinary causes the varied

phenomena which fall under human observation, have created a habit of mind which earnestly seeks for truth but is obsessed by a materialistic bias. This affords scope for Christian evidences. By plain reasoning we may hope to convince. But much caution is requisite.

An inappropriate rejoinder defeats its own purpose. The futility of reminding an unbeliever that it is proverbially difficult to prove a negative is apparent to those who realize the limitations of this proposition. "No sane person," says the writer of a recent evidential tract, "would undertake to prove that any particular small article is nowhere to be found in London, because an exhaustive knowledge of the entire contents of the metropolis would be required in order to know that any specific thing did not exist there. And London is not the whole universe. And the atheist believes that nowhere in the cosmos does God exist." Is God comparable to a "small article"? In this parish there are no day-schools, tram-cars, or resident medical practitioners. To justify this negative statement must I know what is being done in every house, to what use every vehicle is put, and by what occupation every person is supported? The fact is certain, and a small acquaintance with the neighbourhood is sufficient to ascertain the veracity of the assertion. So when the atheist argues that the existence of God should be easily demonstrable, there is force in his contention. The silence and patience of God in dealing with the evils of the day are mysteries to the Christian. He cannot be localized, as the author just quoted comes dangerously near to attempting. "Show me clear signs of his activity," cries the agnostic. "He is not inactive," pleads the believer. Both are puzzled. "Canst thou by searching find out God?"

The science of Apologetics has a history. In the ceaseless impacts of unbelief upon faith since the days of Celsus Naturalism has been frequently compelled to change its ground: nor has the task of Christian defence been always able to assume the same form. Dr. Mozley in his Bampton Lectures of 1865 argued that miracles are of evidential value as an external witness to the authority and reliability of revelation. "If it was the Will of God to give a revelation, there are plain and obvious reasons for asserting that miracles are necessary as the guarantee and voucher for that revelation." The author of *Literature and Dogma*, with the illus-

tration of a pen-wiper turned into a pen, replied with crushing effect that a lack of connection between the revelation and the miracle was destructive of the demonstrative value of the latter. Dr. Mozley's contention needed re-statement. The error was in conceiving the miracles as external to, rather than as integral parts of, the revelation.

Similarly at one time certain spokesmen of Science claimed that miracles are impossible as being violations of the orderliness and uniformity of Nature. A daring assumption is the foundation of this fallacy. The question-begging hypothesis of an anti-theistic origin of the universe is behind the plea. If there be a God, His ability to interfere is unquestionable. Accordingly the position has been modified. In the dual stronghold that miracles do not happen and that a mistake of the witness is more probable than the occurrence of the marvel, our antagonists are entrenched in a more formidable redoubt.

Logical proofs of the possibility of miracles are still frequently published. They are out-of-date before the printers' ink is dry. The improbability, not the impossibility, is now the issue. The Christian view that Divine revelation has been imparted more by historic action than by express declaration, meets the case. The miracles of Egypt were infinitely more than portentous confirmation of the truthfulness of Moses in proclaiming the approach of a day of deliverance. They were the means by which that deliverance was obtained. The hand of God accomplished what human skill could not achieve. The emancipation of Israel was a revelation of the Divine Will, not a mere fortuitous evolution of racial development. The miracles of Christ were no mere corroboration of the words of His preaching. They occurred because "God was in Christ Jesus reconciling the world unto Himself." They explain in His unique personality the power of His Atonement. The Resurrection of our Lord was not a simple testimony to His claims. By it certainly He was "declared to be the Son of God." But without it there could be no real redemption of mankind. It is an essential part of the Truth revealed, the prelude of the regeneration of the world. Thus revelation by historic fact requires occasional epochs of the miraculous. We accept the miracles, because we accept the Word of God, not vice versâ.

This view offers much assistance in the difficult problems of

the Incarnation. Accepting Dr. Gore's verdict that the evidence "is not such as to compel belief," emphasizing also the silence of St. Mark of the earliest Apostolic preaching, and (if you will) of St. Paul and St. John, we yet hold that the appearance in the world in time of a Being, Who was at once Divine and therefore pre-existent and also sinless both in respect of hereditary failing and personal guilt, necessitated a miracle. To have put this from the first in a foremost place would have challenged the incredulity of mankind. But when a Church of believers began to run the risks demanded by their faith of speculation in a sphere in which ignorance was profound, Apostles and Apostolic men told what they knew from full and careful inquiry of the story of the birth of Christ. It was not the miracle which induced a following of Christ, but the Man Christ Jesus is Himself the miracle.

A clear differentiation of the Scriptural miracles from the legendary anecdotes of ecclesiastical annals is not only in itself desirable, but by the argument adduced is immediately practicable. The latter may be consigned to the ridicule of agnosticism and the regret of spiritual faith, for they do not bear the hall-mark of a direct revelation from God. Only so are miracles credible in the present condition of human thought.

The predictive element of prophecy has also been appealed to as an independent confirmation of the prophetic message. In this capacity its value has been weakened under the fire of our opponents. In consequence Christian writers have striven to eliminate prediction from the records, to argue that its literal fulfilment is not a vital matter, and to insist on the exhortative worth of preaching. The prophets themselves thought otherwise. Seven times in Isaiah xl.-lxvi. the fulfilment of prediction is claimed as evidential. By gifted foresight a statesman may foretell some event in the near future; but who can discern that which is afar off? God, to Whom the future is as clearly foredetermined as the past is sure, speaks with a knowledge which gives to His words a character which is impossible to men. The absence of prediction when He speaks would be a hiding of the Truth and a denial of any revelation. Still the predictions are not thaumaturgic. There is obscurity to our understanding. Faith in God stands first, and thence followeth credence in His word.

The uproar which the publication of the *Origin of Species* aroused

was not creditable to Christian intelligence. Agnostic and Christian both perceive the perpetual changefulness in all visible phenomena. They agree that these alterations are wrought in accordance with some plan. Paley's argument from design was valid until Darwin took note of method in Nature, and accounted for it by "natural selection" or the working of other natural forces. This was quite congruous with Christian theism, merely adding to the design the tools of the Designer. That God should employ intermediate agency ought not to astonish those who believe that in the greatest of all His works He used the mediation of the man Christ Jesus to accomplish our salvation. The real issue is whether Evolution affords a sufficient explanation of the universe, and whether its processes would continue at work without higher guidance.

An essential feature in the theory of Evolution is the importance it attaches to the principle of continuity. The Evolutionist, in order to work out his ideas, must assume as a starting-point some condition of the physical universe. His theory may begin *at*, but not *with*, the first creation. He cannot go so far as to deny a Creator. Nor is he able to bridge the gulf which separates the inorganic from the organic. Hypothetic suggestions of the possible origin of life only admit that the whole question is beyond his powers of investigation. The connection between the mind and the brain is inexplicable unless we recognize the existence of the spiritual apart from the material.

Materialism offers the gloomiest prospect of the future. "The theory of Evolution," says Huxley, "encourages no millennial expectations. If for millions of years our globe has taken the upward road, yet, some time, the summit will be reached and the downward route commenced." The resources of Nature are failing. The soil of the Earth wears out in respect of productiveness by its continuous contribution of food for man. Some element in each of the successive geological deposits which form the surface of the globe has become essential to the maintenance and comfort of man's life. But the supply is limited. "That all the labours of the ages," to quote the Hon. Bertrand Russell, "all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noon-day brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the débris of a universe in ruins—all these things,

if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand." There is a limit to the survival of the fittest. Hopeless irretrievable collapse is the fate of all alike.

But these dismal speculations are also contradicted in the name of Science. The materialistic tendency is rebutted as effectually from that side as from the theological. Lord Kelvin has utterly routed it by the convincing thought that inasmuch as every natural force is capable of being reversed in direction the world might conceivably be so turned backwards upon its former course that, if memory be a mere function of the brain, men would have the most vivid impression of all that was about to happen combined with no knowledge whatever of what had just taken place. So a Scientist refutes materialism. *Magna est veritas et prevalebit.* "In your patience ye shall win your souls."

Recent events have proved that the development of man is not accomplished by force. Sacrifice and suffering effect far wider results. Sometimes in death the goal is reached. Is that the end? Is all the greatness of man, all his spiritual selflessness to result in zero? No: Christian Hope spells re-assurance. "There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul: the last Adam (was made) a quickening spirit. Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural, and afterward that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from Heaven. As is the earthy such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly." Is this great faith truly tenable?

Faith is no peculiar prerogative of religion. Reason is of the greatest assistance in the acquisition of knowledge, but students frequently find it incumbent upon them to cast to the winds the fundamental rule which prohibits arguing from a particular case to a general assertion. A few observations and calculations induced Newton to announce the theory of gravitation and to formulate the laws of motion. A long series of tests has strengthened his position. The results are accepted by every investigator, but rationally proof is wanting. An infinite number of experiments

would be needed for complete demonstration. When Reason refuses further help, Faith steps in. Its ability to determine is unquestioned. Probability is an admitted guide in life, and probability is an aspect of faith.

The Christian advocate asks no more than is conceded to his scientific rival. But his faith submits to a scrutiny from which the other recoils. Acceptance of scientific laws demands a passive acquiescence, but consent to the theological proposition requires the active surrender of a life to its control. In the one case reason returns in the invention of new machinery for the exploitation to man's advantage of each discovery: in the other the output of energy is still governed by faith. The aim of religion is to uplift mankind morally and spiritually. The test of its truth is found in the measure of its efficacy. The foundation of the Church, its rapid extension, its triumph over persecution, its constant struggle with internal imperfection, illustrate upon every page of ecclesiastical history the power of a faith which, though often corrupt, always weak, generally resisted, and everywhere disputed, has gone forth conquering and to conquer.

The power of faith springs from the truth of that which is believed. Faith in vaccination has done more to eliminate disease than all the faith-healing which has no definite objective. Belief in military force did not fulfil the aspirations of Napoleon, nor secure world-domination for Germany. The false creeds of heathendom have not promoted the benefit of their adherents. The spurious accretions and superstitions of Christianity have not co-operated in the fight for liberty, the abolition of slavery, or the emancipation of women. The record of true Christian faith is fraught with glorious achievements. Faith is the link that unites us to the true God, or its victories are unaccountable.

The doctrine of survival after death is inseparable from the teaching of Christ. Its omission would be fatal to the whole of His message to the world. For purpose of proof it is not to be placed in a department by itself. The analytical method is out of place here. The detachment of the body from the spirit otherwise than as it is accomplished in death forbids a real examination of the issue. Water is composed of oxygen and hydrogen, but the properties of water will not be investigated by experiment upon each of the two gases which form it. Life is a mysterious com-

bination of material and spiritual elements. Science may explore the body, but life defies her skill. The Christian revelation must be treated as a unity. Belief in a risen Saviour commenced an evangelization of all peoples which has often been hindered but never stayed. The historical witness to Christ shows that in Him is the power of Truth. Accepting Him, we accept His word. Because Christ is true, we believe in the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting.

Elucidation of the historical testimony to Christ is the supreme task of evidential polemics. The difficulty is increased by the ever-present intermixture of evil with good alike in the Church and in the individual. The tares have been sown with the wheat. The perpetual struggle of Christianity with the world is not parallel to a warfare between the armies of the nations. For evil must be eradicated from the heart, and in this life the process is never completed. Biography and history are the mines from which useful argument can be obtained, but the precious ore is enveloped in sand. The discerning perceive how the contest continues. But victory is coming for faith. Daily experience attests that Christ prevails over every form of self-will, and that He keeps in perfect peace those whose minds are stayed on Him.

The hindrances of Faith are no less than those of unbelief. They must be met with the same candour, the same confession of our inability to understand all things, and the same appeal to our experience in Christ. As an example reference may be made to the subject of prayer. Assurances that prayer will be answered cause disappointment when apparently it is not. If two persons desire opposite and contradictory boons, how shall both receive? If prayer is a determining force, does it change the mind of God? Replies to such questionings are often felt to be unsatisfactory. The suggestion that prayer is communion with God tending more to change our minds than to alter His is quite sound, but does not explain the promise, "Ask, and ye shall have." The reproof that the heart of the petitioner is not right with God savours of hardness. If the required answer necessitates a divine intervention, this, being akin to miracle, may be anticipated to convey also a fresh revelation of the divine Will. Perhaps attention is so focussed upon the expected form of reply that God's purpose is overlooked. Prompt obedience in following His guidance would lead to a better

understanding and truer appreciation of His kindness. And yet the difficulty is not wholly removed.

Ultimately we must rely on that experience of Christ which is the basis of all Christian evidence. Conversion, the new birth, the passage of the soul from death unto life is the beginning, witnessed unto us by a great cloud of witnesses in the saints of every age and land. Confidence in the promise of pardon, the reality of the daily help received for the resistance of temptation, deliverance from the sinful habits of the former life are facts which assure us that His message is true and His work effectual. There is misunderstanding and mis-apprehension. "Now we see as in a glass darkly." The mists of ignorance are the more perceived because we live in the dawn of that day when the Sun Himself is about to rise. In patience we await His coming to make all things clear. Eagerly we look forward to the time when Faith triumphant shall bring us into the explaining Light of His Presence.

E. ABBEY TINDALL.

