

RATIONALISM.

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WHAT do we mean by rationalism? It is quite plain that we are not using the term in a philosophic sense. We are not greatly interested in the distinction between the rationalist and the empirical theory of knowledge: nor should I be in the least degree competent to expound it.

Nor are we, I imagine, thinking of rationalism in its popular sense, as the complete denial of religion. We are all familiar with what calls itself the Rationalist Press, which attacks the Christian Faith from a scientific standpoint: and familiar also with the much less scientific onslaughts of the gentleman at the street-corner. It is an attack which we need not fear to meet, even on purely rational grounds: for atheism makes life irrational. The only alternative to God is a blind Necessity, which takes away all possibility of freedom, all possibility of right and wrong. And these are primary instincts which men will never surrender, in obedience to any theory.

But I cannot think that even this sense of the true rationalism is in our minds to-day. It is admittedly among our common foes: but it is the common foe of all people who make any pretence to religion. To the rationalist of this type we all present a united front, whether we call ourselves Evangelicals, or Catholics, or the most modern of Modernists.

It seems clear, from our general subject, which is that of unity among Evangelicals, that we are thinking of rationalism in a much more restricted sense: namely, that of revolt, in greater or less degree, against authority as hitherto recognized. There is among many Evangelicals, as there is among Anglo-Catholics, a profound suspicion of Liberal and Modernist tendencies: and among Evangelicals there is even a fear that these tendencies are spreading within the citadel itself. I suppose that, for practical purposes, the "Modern Churchman" expresses the kind of Modernism with which we are directly concerned. As for Liberalism, the term Liberal Churchman has been used with such meaning that few, if any, of us would care to adopt it. But many of us would certainly call ourselves Liberal Evangelicals: which is not the same thing. The general attitude of the Liberal Evangelical school—though we are not all committed to every detail—is fairly represented by the series of essays published under the title *Liberal Evangelicalism*. I do not think that they can be called in any sense rationalistic.

But there are two things which, in all fairness, we must not forget. One is that Modernism, like Liberalism, is a very vague term. I am not at all sure that all who call themselves Modern Churchmen would admit that they are Modernists, as the term is sometimes understood. Since their own Magazine, however, uses both terms alike, we may without offence do the same. Still, Modernism is not a definite creed, or absence of creed: and because

A and B meet together, and A says something rationalistic, it does not necessarily follow that B is a rationalist. For B may, and sometimes does, repudiate A.

And the second thing is this, that the word rationalism has its respectable, as well as disreputable, relations. It is a derivative of the word rational: and rational we most decidedly claim to be. We differ profoundly from the rationalist when he claims that reason is the only ground of knowledge: for we hold that reason is only one of the faculties with which God has endowed us. But we have none the less a wholesome respect for human reason, and cannot even pretend to believe anything which is plainly irrational. We are not at all prepared to accept the dictum—*credo quia incredible*. To us, that is not faith: it is high treason. As we study the Scriptures, and especially the prophets, we find the appeal to reason strongly emphasized. When Isaiah pours out his scorn upon idolatry, it is on the ground that idolatry is irrational. We cannot fail to observe the rational appeal of our Lord Himself to elementary truth, as opposed to artificial traditions. His doctrine of the Sabbath is typical. Nor can we forget that Protestantism—I use the term in its historic, and not its modern meaning: for all the great Anglicans were avowedly Protestant, until some of our moderns made it a byword of reproach—is essentially rational in its appeal. What is private judgment but the exercise of reason? We are indeed sometimes taunted with “Protestant rationalism.” We do not admit the justice of the charge. We do not talk of “Catholic rationalism” because some Frenchmen have denied the Faith. Yet it contains some small element of truth. Protestantism is not rationalistic: but it is most decidedly rational. And there is always a danger of the rational degenerating into the rationalistic. It is a danger which we deplore—the results often distress us: but it is a danger which we must perforce accept. And after all, as Professor Gwatkin says, “There is a deeper scepticism in the return to authority than in particular results, however sceptical, reached by those who seek for truth. We sin the sin of sins only when we make authority our refuge from the first duty of reasoning men.”

But does this mean that we have no final authority? On the contrary, our final authority is Christ Himself. Christianity is a revelation, and not a mere process of reasoning. To find Christ, to interpret Him, we will use every aid which reason can give: but when we have found Him, our hopes are built, not on reason, but on faith in Him. “Believe in Me” is the first and final principle of Christianity.

On that there will be general agreement. But our difficulties are not ended: they are only just begun. Christ lived on this earth nineteen hundred years ago. How are we to interpret Him to-day?

The Catholic answer is delightfully simple. The Church interprets Christ: and the Church is an infallible guide. Delightfully simple; but unfortunately too simple. How are we to define this

infallible Church? Is it the undivided Church, or the Church of Rome, or the Church of St. Magnus the Martyr, and such other Churches as are like-minded? For there seems little doubt that some among us have gone far beyond the old theory of Catholicity, and rest their faith on the unerring instinct of the so-called "Catholic mind." As reasoning men, we cannot accept this standard of truth. We do not believe that things are true because they appeal to a certain number of devout people. Our Reformers held the doctrine of justification by faith: but never that of justification by feeling. So far were they removed from the modern theory of Catholicity that they laid little stress even upon the old. Even General Councils, they declared, were composed of fallible men. Our reformers accepted whole-heartedly the Catholic Faith: but their acceptance even of the creeds was not on the ground of the Church's authority, but on the ground that they are a reasonable interpretation of the Scripture itself.

The principle of the Reformation, then, was to go back from the Church to Holy Scripture: and it remains to this day the fixed principle of the Church of England. We are above all a Scriptural Church. But what is the nature of the authority of Scripture? The successive generations of the Reformers were not entirely agreed. With all his dependence on Scripture, Luther was frankly critical. We all know his criticism—a very ill-advised criticism—of the Epistle of St. James. The successors of Luther declared for Scriptural infallibility. They substituted the infallible Book for the infallible Church.

The Church of England has laid down no dogma of infallibility. She has simply declared for the authority of Scripture. And her general position is fundamentally sound. As Gwatkin used to teach us, the appeal to Scripture is the appeal to antiquity. It is the appeal to the Historic Faith, as presented by our Lord's first witnesses.

There are, however, many Evangelicals who are not content with this historic basis. To them the infallibility of Scripture is an article of faith, the denial of which is pure rationalism.

But let us be quite sure where we stand. Take the New Testament. What ground have we for a dogma of infallibility? Obviously not our Saviour's authority: for the New Testament was not even written at His command. Nor yet the claim of the writers. When St. Paul wrote, "I speak as a fool," was he claiming infallibility? When he withstood St. Peter to the face, was he admitting the infallibility of the man whom he withstood? Can we fairly assert that St. Peter was fallible when speaking, but infallible on paper? St. Luke's Gospel claims first-hand information: St. John's Gospel claims truthfulness: but there is a significant absence of any claim to infallibility. As far as verbal infallibility is concerned, it is plain that *all three* Synoptists cannot be even verbally exact. Quite obviously, they did not deem it to be necessary: they were content to be substantially true. It is admitted that the Church, after prolonged controversy on the subject of the

Canon, gradually decided for a rigid infallibility. But we cannot have it both ways. We cannot appeal from Church tradition to the plain language of Scripture, and then appeal back again from the plain language of Scripture to the tradition of the Church.

God forbid that I should even seem to speak lightly of the authority of Holy Scripture. But authority and infallibility are not the same thing. And we have no right to call them rationalists who cannot claim for the Scriptures what the Scriptures do not claim for themselves.

But, it may be argued, unless the New Testament is infallible, what reliable guide have we? Precisely the same guide as the earliest disciples. Our Lord sent His apostles to bear witness. They still bear witness to-day, though it is on paper instead of by word of mouth. Spoken or written, their witness has precisely the same value. That was their purpose in writing, as we are quite definitely told. And as the Holy Spirit bore witness with them, so He bears witness to-day. Above and beyond the historic basis of the New Testament, which is itself sufficiently strong, each successive generation has found in the Scripture life and light. Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles?

It is at this point that we come into conflict with some of our Modernists. I say "some" advisedly: since all who are called Modernists are not alike, and there is some complaint—probably with reason—of misrepresentation. We should be sorry to misrepresent anybody: but it is natural that we should deal with the views with which we do not—and cannot—agree.

And, first, we are told, as a fundamental principle of Modernism, that God does not reveal Himself through the abnormal, but through the normal. If that really means anything, it is the old denial of the possibility of a special revelation. It is true that the writer explains himself by saying that God does not work by miracles which are *contra naturam*. But that is begging the question. Who wants to affirm, at this time of day, that miracles are *contra naturam*? To us, not less than to any Modernist, the supernatural is not the unnatural, but the exercise of powers beyond our understanding. If God be a personal God, we must believe in His liberty. His actions cannot be irrational or immoral, for He cannot deny Himself: but there is no other limitation. With God all things are possible. Who are we, to say that He must reveal Himself in the way familiar to us, and not in some other way: that wonders beyond all our experience—that a Virgin Birth, if it be His will—are outside His working? Such an attitude is not merely lack of faith: it is primarily irrational. For even we men claim to be free agents: even we discover, and make use of, powers hitherto unsuspected. Are we free, and God bound?

The denial of the miraculous naturally leads to a non-miraculous Christ. But, as a matter of fact, when it comes to the actual history, Modernists as a whole do not seem to stand rigidly by the principle. Some frankly admit the miraculous, as being woven inextricably into the Gospel story. The Resurrection especially is accepted,

even where the miraculous in our Lord's Person is—to say the least—not strongly affirmed. And indeed without the Resurrection the origin of the Christian Church is inexplicable. Some firmly believe in the Incarnation, but challenge the Virgin birth. [There are probably many more people—not usually reckoned among Modernists—who do not deny the Virgin birth, but to whom it actually means very little.] We are told that the Virgin birth is not a necessary corollary of a true belief that God was in Christ : that St. Paul and St. John, who especially emphasize the deity of our Lord, say nothing of His birth of a virgin. As a matter of historical fact, that is perfectly true. Without surrendering our belief in our Lord's miraculous birth—which is Scriptural—we can admit quite frankly that the belief that Christ is God was held before the belief that He was miraculously born, and is to that extent independent of it. But the general tendency of Modernism is to the purely human Christ—purely human even if divine, since we are told that perfect humanity is Deity under human conditions. The climax is reached in the theory—which most Modern Churchmen themselves repudiate—that “Gentile Christianity transformed the original tradition of the man Jesus by assimilating it to the traditions of the Saviour-Lords of the mystery religions.”

On this last I need not comment. I agree, for once, with the *Church Times* that we Evangelicals have far more in common with Anglo-Catholics than with Modernism of this type. For we do at least share with them the fundamental belief of Christianity, that in Christ God was made man. We do not admit that this theory is even reasonable. Where is this original tradition of the Man Jesus to be found? In the Synoptic Gospels? As was said by a contributor to the Cambridge Conference of 1921, “In by far the largest portion of the Synoptic Gospels our Lord is very nearly the Christ of traditional belief.” Moreover, the Epistles of St. Paul are earlier, and not later, than the Synoptic Gospels. Are we to believe that St. Paul transformed Jesus, and that there existed, side by side with St. Paul's teaching, a very different and more primitive tradition, presented years later, in a more or less historic form, by the Synoptists? And was the early Church so uncritical that all this passed without remark? It is notorious that St. Paul's liberalism was bitterly opposed: he was throughout his life a suspect to Judaistic Christians. Are we to understand that he preached a doctrine of our Lord's Person which was a direct challenge to the monotheism of his colleagues? And that his critics were so complaisant that they had nothing to say: or such dunces that they never recognized it?

The significant fact is this, that among all the controversies of the New Testament, there is no Christological controversy. We admit quite freely that there are wide divergences—possibly even developments—in the Apostolic presentation of our Lord's Person. When St. Peter said at Pentecost, “Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you,” he was not using the later language of St. Paul, “Who, being in the form of God,” nor of St. John's

Gospel, "The Word was made flesh": nor even the language common to both St. Peter and St. Paul, "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." The difference does not distress us. "From the day of Pentecost onward," said Canon Glazebrook at the Cambridge Conference of 1921, from which we have already quoted, "the ever-increasing band of early disciples were irresistibly impelled to explain their wonderful experiences to themselves and to others, and each generation felt the same need. In attempting to describe Jesus, the object of their faith, they were plainly limited by the language of the current philosophy: for they could not go beyond it without becoming unintelligible." We can accept that statement. It does not shock us to be told that even our creeds—that even the Apostles themselves—do not exhaust the truth as it is in Jesus. St. Paul, I think, would have been the first to say that the knowledge of Christ, like the love of Christ, passeth knowledge. We are not opposed to any men—whether they call themselves Modern Churchmen or by any other name—who endeavour reverently to explain our Lord in terms which their own age can understand. But we cannot have Him explained away. We Evangelicals, whether Conservative or Liberal, stand fast by the old doctrine that in Christ God was incarnate. "No theory of Christ's person," says a writer in the book, *Liberal Evangelicalism*, "is adequate, which makes Him less than God under the limitations of human nature."

The doctrine of the Atonement has already been discussed at length. Both Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics are agreed that any theory of the Atonement which regards the Cross as a mere appeal to men is quite inadequate. The Cross has its Godward, as well as its manward, side. It may remain a mystery beyond our understanding: but we cannot, and must not, ignore that aspect of the Atonement. At the same time, the history of strange theories—and some have been very strange—should be a warning to us. Let us be content with the language of Holy Scripture. For instance, when the Scripture speaks of man being reconciled to God, why should we invert the order, and speak of God being reconciled to men? Obviously, we must not contradict Holy Scripture. We must not talk about "appeasing the anger of God" (I am quoting from a well-known treatise, Nowell's Catechism), when the Scripture says definitely "God so loved the world." We must not allow the doctrine of the justice of God—true and necessary as it is—to overwhelm our still deeper sense of the love of God. Nor must we call men rationalists who will not subscribe to theories which seem to them not only unworthy, but plainly repugnant to the Word of God.

We have been considering rationalism in doctrine. But we must not lose our sense of proportion. The real test of faith is not in doctrine, but in life. Our Saviour would seem to teach us that the greatest danger to faith is not the danger of intellectual unrest, but of love growing cold. Rationalism is the denial of the supernatural: and if the supernatural is not openly denied to-day, it

is commonly treated as something which can be safely ignored. When I see the worship of God neglected, week by week, not through open unbelief—for the worst offenders would warmly repudiate such a charge—but in pursuit of pleasure : when I see Good Friday, the most solemn day of the Christian Year, treated as a mere holiday : when I find that even on Easter Day, because the weather is so glorious, professed Churchpeople take out their motor-cars instead of coming to Communion with their Risen Lord : then I know where the real danger of rationalism lies. Yet not all the abandonment of public worship—not all the spirit of the world—can crush out of men's hearts the conviction that man does not live by bread alone. There is a real craving, in this as in every age, for the supernatural. It is the secret of success in such cults as Spiritualism and Christian Science. It is likewise the secret of success (and I mean no offence by mentioning it in the same breath) of Anglo-Catholicism. Where Anglo-Catholicism lives—and it is admittedly a live force—it is not because of its extravagances, but because of the supernatural Gospel which it proclaims.

To the same human need—the eternity which God has put into man's heart—we Evangelicals also minister. And we also have the eternal Gospel to proclaim—a presentation of the Gospel which is certainly more Scriptural, and (we maintain) also more truly Catholic. Yet it is perhaps a weakness with us that we are so afraid of superstition as to lay, at times, too little emphasis on the supernatural. For instance, I cannot but think that we have made too little of the divinely-appointed service of Holy Communion. Our denial of any material Presence must not make us fail to lay emphasis on the reality of Christ's spiritual presence, in that Service certainly not less than wherever two or three are gathered together in His name. The weakness of all Protestantism—though original Protestantism, be it always remembered, was affirmative rather than negative—has been a tendency towards mere negation of what is untrue. But men do not live by negatives. To challenge the doctrine of other people may be a painful duty ; but our own progress will never be made in that way. Not by mere argument have we ever advanced, nor shall we advance ; but by the vitality of our own spiritual life, by obedience to the Faith as we know it. And we have our Master's own assurance that if any man will do the will of God, he shall know of the doctrine.

