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HOLY SCRIPTURE AND THE CREEDS.

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‘CHRISTIANITY is Christ.’ This is almost a truism of evangelical belief, even let us confess of Anglo-Catholic belief, not only according to that wider sense in which we are all Anglo-Catholics, but the narrower and more partisan; for so I read in the admirable reply to Father Vernon which has been published recently—

“The authority of the New Testament is the Person of our Lord and the guidance of the Holy Spirit working through His followers. . . . This guidance depends, not on their acceptance of the authority of the church, but on their loyalty to the example and the Spirit of the Lord Himself.”

If that be so, then we are indeed in essential agreement :

‘Christianity is Christ,’ and Christian Theology is just our attempt to answer the questions, the legitimate and indeed inevitable questions—Who then is He, and what does He mean to the soul, to the church, to the world? This it tries to do in the language of the day, and in response to the needs of each succeeding age. In very truth, He is the same throughout the centuries, Wonderful, Mysterious, Ineffable, but in our interpretation of Him inadequacy is unavoidable, and even error not impossible, if only for the reason that

*Words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the soul within,*

and, sometimes, the revelation they make and the concealment they effect are not so evenly distributed. Anyhow, ‘we have no celestial language.’ Political or economic creeds we can express more or less fully, but words are unequal, really, to the burdens which Religion lays upon them. No formula, therefore, it would seem, except perhaps the shortest, and what we call simplest, can stay permanently unaltered, for by its very nature it is inadequate to the truth of which it is the vehicle, and subject to such revision as new forms of thought, new grasp of truth, certainly new modes of expression may render necessary. Besides, as is declared in that very Protestant book to which I have already referred, there is always the danger that too much insistence on the doctrinal form may actually result, not in enabling men to understand our Lord, but in turning them away from Him.

Nevertheless, there is authority behind the Catholic creeds, not indeed to dictate, but to commend. In one sense they are a platform, as it were, on which we stand together: in another, a testimony addressed to them who are without—‘This is what we stand for.’ Historically they have, it may be, safeguarded rather than exhibited the ‘deposit,’ especially perhaps, the so-called

Athanasian: nevertheless they were necessary, if only 'to prevent belief trickling away into the morass of loose thinking.' At the same time, the search for truth is a duty of the church and of individual churchmen: yet, in all our thinking, and whithersoever our studies take us, we should be conscious of a background—perhaps I should rather say, foreground—whereon stands the Person of Christ, Himself the Truth, 'the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.'

Accordingly, if He be thus kept reverently in view, even if imperfectly apprehended, I am disposed to agree with Bishop Hall in thinking that the most useful of all books of Theology might be one with the title, *De paucitate credendorum*. Many a sceptic has declared the cause of his doubts and troubles to have lain in the fact that once upon a time he was asked to believe too much. 'I consider,' says Jeremy Taylor, 'there are but few doctrines that were ordered to be preached to all the world, to every single person, and made a necessary article of his explicit belief.' The oldest, simplest, shortest, perhaps best of all creeds is *Kurios Iesous*—a Life, a Person, declared to be supremely significant and utterly trustworthy for the things both of time and of eternity. A longer creed tends towards 'rationalising explanations,' things 'more plain than true.' Hence, in my own teaching, I set great store by the Catechism summary—it is more than a summary—of the Apostles' Creed, the last question in the same catechism (with its requirement of repentance, faith in God through Christ, and charity), and the Collect for the 19th Sunday after Trinity. True, there is no explicit reference to Immortality in any of these: that however, to us, is the corollary of our faith in God, and it is this on which we need, above all, to insist, and keep first, in all our thinking. The tendency of human nature, I fear, is not to rest quietly upon large central truth, but to move towards the circumference, in pursuit of 'curious and unlearned questions' to which the answer (as Aristotle said long ago) is, peradventure Yes, and peradventure No. There is, we may remind ourselves, no specific solution in *Job* to the problem raised: the only reply to doubts and questionings is, God is; believe in God. Contention about lesser matters, or about subtleties relating to those that are greater, we may regard (with Archbishop Tillotson) as inspired by the powers of darkness, to defeat the true ends for which the Son of God came into the world.

'De paucitate,' however, is not enough. We must add *de magnitudine*, or some such word, to suggest Infinite Reality. And here, as indeed everywhere, we know only 'in part.' One of our classical sermons has for its title, 'The Ignorance of Man.' Hence, perhaps, the instinctive objection of the average man to statements that sound over-dogmatic, or even to 'dogma' of every kind. There is always what Bishop Talbot has called 'a great unknownness,' and therefore a right and Christian agnosticism. The Athanasian Creed seems to know too much. At the same time, however large (or however limited) be our credal statement, the

question still lurks behind, Is it true? We may be worshippers rather than philosophers, but of What? of Whom? Mysticism has its merits, but it is not always very strong at this point. Intuition may play a large part in the genesis of faith, but it has to reckon with intellect and reason later on. Besides, for us, history comes in. Certain things have happened on this earth, so arresting in themselves, so linked up to a long and deeply interesting series, so vastly significant to all serious-minded men that they have been driven to ask, What do they mean, to me, and to the world? Ours, in other words, is a historical religion—with 'values,' however, attached to its manifested facts, and spiritual convictions required: history *alone* will take no man into the Kingdom of God.

Note then—and here we come on the question of Scripture—the long historical preparation behind the revelation of the New Testament, recorded for us in the Old—a series of books of surpassing interest and value, though Christianity does not answer with its life for all the details therein recorded: then the tremendous experience encountered in the Ministry of Christ, which, with the Resurrection and Pentecost, made the Christian Church—without these, a kind of Judaism, I suppose, would still be the faith of most thoughtful men: then, the signal victories of the first age, Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Rome, all adding their witness: lastly, and, in the main, after these were won, a literary expression of the facts and their meaning. This, however, was not formal but occasional: legend notwithstanding, the apostles never met and said, We must have a recognized treatise on the Life of the Lord and His significance for the human race—a good thing, for we should have been chained to the written word almost as closely as if our Lord had written Himself. 'It seemed good to me also,' says one of our choicest literary benefactors by way of preface to his works. But there is power about his writings, about all the writings: can we doubt that, like the impulse to write, it too came from above? At the same time, for all their importance and value, these did not make the Church. The river was already flowing. Its source was in Galilee, but now it is becoming a broad stream, and these Books may be described as precious freights floated upon its breast, and charged with blessing wherever they are landed. But the River first, and, in our creed, belief in God first, as revealed in Jesus Christ: add, if you will, the society of believers, the home and workshop of the Holy Spirit, and say of the literary output of that great first age, "Blessed Lord, Who hast caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning." Be content to say that, for it gives all we really need say: the society, guided by the same Spirit, settled which writings should survive, and which should sink, if not to the bottom, at least below the surface.

But here, likewise, questions arise which ought to be faced, and have been, especially of late. Are the Books, historically, fact or fiction? If searched as title-deeds do they come out trustworthy? Do they, in other words, adequately exhibit the Life, manifest the Person, deliver and unfold the Teaching? These are legitimate

inquiries, for there is obviously a human element in the sacred literature: Hebrews *e.g.*, and the 1st Epistle of St. John, though inspired by the same Spirit, manifestly do not come from the same pen. Historical criticism, rightly understood, is not hostility, not sacrilege, but necessary, helpful, provided it be carried out in a spirit of reverent search. It has a bad name because so many have entered upon it with a bias or prejudice. This, however, where it exists, is unfair, nor does it reveal that scientific mind which sits down humbly in front of a fact, and learns from it what it can, or, in philosophy, as Plato says, follows the argument faithfully wherever it may lead.

Now to accept this position is to differ *longo intervallo* from the view taken, say, in the 'Westminster Confession,' where the supremacy of Scripture takes the first and dominating place. To use the analogy—not a perfect one, I admit—which I suggested just now, the Presbyterian divines lost largely the sense of the River, but fastened on the literary freights, and substituted an infallible Book for a Church which they did not believe our Lord ever meant to be infallible. No doubt, like the Quaker doctrine, the Confession has the proviso that it is authoritative only as it is borne home to a man by the testimony of the Holy Spirit: yet, as a matter of history, I fear it is true that it went far to make Christian people, like Jewry of old, the people of a Book, and to encourage a view of Holy Scripture which neither some earlier Reformers nor a majority of modern scholars have found themselves quite able to endorse.

Where now exactly does the Church of England stand in regard to these two—Creed and Scripture? It regards them as interdependent. Of the latter it says that it 'containeth all things necessary'—*containeth*, shall we say, rather than *is* the word of God, for 'is,' in proportion to its size, is fat and away the most difficult word in the English language! 'Containeth' comes, I believe, from the Council of Trent: if that alarm you, set over against it the fact that it is used, more than once, in this connection, in Butler's *Analogy*.

Of the Creeds our Church says that they may be 'proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture.'

Now if our doctrine of Holy Scripture be really a little wider than that with which we are sometimes credited, then I submit that the word 'proved' must not be taken in any narrow or too literal sense. There are proofs *and* proofs. It has been proved to most people's satisfaction that the three interior angles of a triangle are together equal to two right angles: can you deal with matters of faith that way? To me, so-called 'Scripture Proofs' have their value, though nowadays they are a little unfashionable. We need not less Scripture but more, though words and phrases torn from their context will hardly do, but, rather, the complete and essential witness given there to Him Who is, after all, *the* object of Faith, Jesus Christ our Lord. Though, in popular language, we believe in the Creed and believe in the Bible, we do believe absolutely only on Him. Whatever imperfections may be alleged against it,

the Nicene Creed with its strong emphasis on His Person will, I suppose, in any Christian Reunion, be taken for a sufficient statement. For one thing, it has only one (but highly significant) negation in it, as opposed to the Athanasian twenty-one—'begotten, *not* made.' In its account of our Lord, it goes (and rightly goes) beyond the Apostles' Creed, and makes His Saviour-hood explicit—'for us men,' it says. On the other hand, thanks to the exercise of men's curious and subtle wits, as Hooker calls them, it introduces language, *e.g.* about 'substance,' which is not scriptural in the strict sense: but then, like the redness of a Devonshire stream, it bears witness to the colour of the soil through which it has passed, and its terms were selected to express securely in the language of the day—dare I add, of our own?—the Scriptural doctrine of our Lord's Being. But 'proved'—is it quite the word? I do not think it is. Can you 'prove' the existence of God? Does the Bible? No, it rather assumes it. Many things point that way—instinct, reason, conscience, need, experience: faith, however, is not the result of a logical process, otherwise 'babes' would have but a poor chance: it is rather, on the Divine side, the gift of God, on the human, a venture. Nevertheless, we read the Bible—nothing like it to strengthen faith: we study the Gospels and Epistles, for the glory of One Supreme and adorable Person shines over and above and through them all. At the same time we require and appeal to sound Biblical learning. Evangelical scholars are badly needed: what distress one has felt before now at hearing our case presented with earnestness and conviction, but in a way which to thoughtful people must have been quite unacceptable, or supported by arguments that would not really hold! But we study the New Testament, at least I hope we do. 'Read your Bibles, young men,' Bishop Ryle used to say in his plain, gruff manner to his ordinands, for so will the essentials come to stand out like peaks, and the non-essentials be left in the shadows and obscurity of the valley. What, after the most painstaking and careful study, cannot be said to be 'contained' there, or to be in manifest line with the mind of Christ, as therein revealed—the *Jus Divinum* of the Papacy for instance—we shall reject; and we shall not be rigid about episcopacy, for we do not find that Holy Scripture itself is. But we shall not waver in our adherence to the doctrine of our Lord's origin—He 'came down from Heaven'; though when articles of the Faith like the Virgin-birth or the Empty tomb are called in question, we shall in our defence of them take a hint from Holy Scripture, from St. Peter's sermon, *e.g.*, on the day of Pentecost, and ask, Was it some ordinary person who is declared to have been so born, or a man who proved *extraordinary*, 'approved of God by mighty works'? Was it the Resurrection of a sinful body, like our own? Far from it. Put the emphasis, then, as Holy Scripture does, on Him, His Personality, His sinless character, and those others will fall into their due place, with a 'felt congruity' attaching to them which, for all their marvel, will satisfy most reverent minds: taken with the evidence we have for both in the Gospels, it certainly

satisfies my own. But we shall not, I think, begin with them : in our apologetic, certainly, the initial emphasis will be elsewhere.

To conclude then—We cannot do without a creed, brief though it be, and it must be in strict keeping with the Apostolic witness, its nearer lines definite and precise, though stretching towards Infinity. Is He the Everlasting Son, or has He only the value of God, whatever that may mean ? Here you want a plain answer. At the same time, I would not force dogma on men, at the sword's point :

' For modes of faith let graceless bigots fight :
His can't be wrong, whose life is in the right.'

There is at any rate just this much truth in Pope's couplet that the way to more light and surer faith is obedience to what we already have. Readiness to do the Will must always condition knowledge of the doctrine, for ' this is His commandment that we should believe . . . and love ' : certainly high thinking and high believing are only possible where there is also a Christian rightness of life. ' If I could only believe in your creed,' said a dissolute youth to Pascal, ' I should be a better man ' : ' Begin,' was the reply, ' by being a better man, and you may come to believe in my creed.' And, at this later hour in the world's history, with creeds to re-think, and reunion to achieve, what we need is more love ; and in view of our unhappy divisions and devastating uncharitablenesses, the old prayer should often be upon our lips,

Try me, O God, and seek the ground of my heart : prove me and examine my thoughts. Look well if there be any way of wickedness in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

The Rev. Ernest Evans, B.D., Sub-Warden of the Missionary College of St. Augustine, Canterbury, has written *A Reason for the Faith, Offered to Young Men and Women of England* (John Murray, 5s. net). The Bishop of Oxford contributes a Preface in which he refers to the interest taken in religious problems at the present time, but warns anyone who questions the Christian Faith that he " must be prepared to take trouble and spend time in ascertaining what it is as a whole, if he is to have any chance of reaching a true and sane conclusion." One difficulty for the enquirer must be that there are points of difference on various matters of importance among upholders of the Faith. Thus we find Mr. Evans an excellent guide on a wide range of elements in the Faith, but we cannot accept a number of his statements on the ministry and the sacraments. We regard them as just the kind of Christian over-statement which may easily repel the young men and women of England. While so much in the book is so good, and so well expressed, we regret we cannot recommend it whole-heartedly.