HOW FAR IS THE CHURCH RESPONSIBLE FOR PRESENT SCEPTICISM?

SCEPTICISM is the price which each generation has to pay for growth in knowledge. Each newly discovered truth demands to be admitted into and to be assimilated to the body of truth already believed. This process of assimilation is accompanied by many growing pains. Beliefs which have stiffened with age are forcibly thrust out of their old positions. The whole body assumes altered proportions. New truths come like invaders who exterminate those already in possession, if ground is not peaceably yielded to them. It is the ceaseless task of the Church to receive into the fellowship of the Christian faith every truth as it is ascertained—a task which calls for candour, knowledge, and wisdom; for a mind devoted not to the fragment of truth already held, but to all truth; for that patience, above all, which comes of the immovable conviction that no one truth can grow at the expense of others, but that truth is a whole which must grow together or not at all. Lassalle said, "With truth there can be no arguing. You might as well argue with the pillar of fire which went before the children of Israel." But we must go further, and welcome every truth as that which centres in and leads up to Him who said, "I am the truth."

But when the relations between the old and the new are strained, it is always easier to cut short all effort at reconcilement, and throw in one's lot with either extreme. Impatience is the prolific mother of the double brood of

traditionalists and sceptics. Men cannot brook mystery, nor exercise a masculine suspense of judgment. They crave definite and immediate knowledge; and what is definite they adopt, no matter how shallow it be. Irresponsible security, though it be in a cage, is better, in the judgment of most men, than the expanse and freedom of the open heaven with its risks and call upon self-government. Men will rather have a full-sized creed than the mustard seed of ascertained truth with its present insignificance and future possibilities. Definite knowledge is our snare. Not only do men assume as axiomatic that the world is intelligible, that the universe is made on the scale of the human understanding, but they also demand that everything shall be at once intelligible to the individual understanding of this present generation. It is this impatience of the slow processes of reconciliation which prompts men to reject either the new or the old truth, and makes a rational and open-minded faith so difficult and so rare. It was his observation of this feature of every generation which prompted Mohammed's exclamation, "There are two things I abhor: the learned in his infidelities, and the fool in his devotions."

We have the happiness and the responsibility of living in a time when the most powerful and various solvents have been applied to religious beliefs, and when new truths have with unusual rapidity been brought to light, so that it cannot be wondered at if the Church is slightly in arrears in the checking and admission of these truths. The allied studies, literary criticism and historical research, have been pursued with unprecedented intelligence, ardour, and success; and much has been brought to light which considerably modifies our view of past times and of ancient documents. The Bible lies within the field of this fresh light, and we understand now better what the Bible is. Physical science by its extraordinary conquests has put

men in possession of truths regarding the world and its laws which not only minister to human convenience, but also to a considerable extent alter our conception of nature as a whole. In the theory of evolution, as Darwin himself was careful to point out, there is nothing that *necessarily* excludes the agency of a personal Creator; but as that theory, at any rate, removes God's creative agency to an immeasurable distance in the past, and traces back all this varied universe to a few original elements, the natural, if illogical, consequence is that nature is thought of as self-evolving and self-regulating. The agency of nature in evolving and preserving living forms is so efficient, so wonderful, and so open to observation, that it tends to occupy the mind to the exclusion of any radical originating cause.

That scepticism should exist in this, as in other ages, need not then surprise us. If Bishop Butler, one hundred and fifty years ago, had reason to say, "It has come to be taken for granted that Christianity is not so much as a subject of inquiry, but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious," we may rather wonder that in an age even more difficult to faith there should be so much intelligent conviction. But the question for us is, Is the Church in any degree responsible for present scepticism? and is there any alteration we can make in our attitude towards it, or in our methods of dealing with it, which may be expected to abate its violence and diminish its extent?

It cannot, I think, be doubted that the Church might have given a more distinct idea of Christianity and of what the true Christian is. It must frequently have been matter of astonishment, and even of something like dismay, to every reader to find how completely even the best educated assailants of Christianity misunderstand what it is. Not only in the lower class of freethinking journals, but in

writers of the culture and knowledge of the late Cotter Morison, there is exhibited an almost unaccountable ignorance of the spirit and aims of Christianity. The Christian is represented as an obscurantist, afraid of light, and capable of swallowing the grossest absurdities; as a selfish, small-souled creature, whose object it is to save his own soul, and whose idea of saving his soul is escaping from punishment in a future life.

For such misrepresentations the Church is responsible, in so far as it has not produced a type of Christianity which would make these conceptions impossible; and in so far as it has allowed faith in Christ to become identified in the popular mind with faith in a number of doctrines regarding Christ, and has thus made faith needlessly difficult, and to many minds repellent and impossible. What Christ Himself required in His followers should be enough for the Church to require. This position, clearly defined and defended by Stillingfleet and Jeremy Taylor, should be ostentatiously occupied. What Christ required was, that men should follow Him. He did not require them to accept a number of propositions about Him, but to prove their belief in Him by accepting Him as the true Ruler of their life. We have no right to ask more. We have no right to put bars on the door of His fold which He did not put. Never was His own liberal rule more in need of application: "He that is not against us is on our part." Even though a man does not see his way to follow with us, yet if he shows that to him Christ is the highest authority, his true guide in all moral and spiritual matters, that man is a Christian; and whatever increase in his knowledge may be desirable, that increase will be reached as he follows Christ in his life.

By confounding faith in Christ with faith in Scripture, or faith in a certain theory of the atonement, or in this or that doctrine, and by giving the impression that without accept-

ing these doctrines a man cannot accept Christ and be a zealous Christian, the Church not only needlessly increases the difficulties of faith, and so produces sceptics, but also leads men to misapprehend the real point at issue between faith and scepticism. The differentia of the Christian, that which distinguishes Christian faith from every other form of opinion or belief, is the one conviction that Jesus is at this moment conscious and supreme. The question which separates men into the two great classes of Christians and sceptics is this: Did Christ rise from the dead? If He did, then there is a spiritual power stronger than the mightiest physical forces in nature, a spiritual power which can compel natural laws to subserve spiritual purposes. By His resurrection we are put in possession of God and immortality. But if, on the contrary, He still lies in His grave in "the lone Syrian town," if death terminated His living touch with this world, and if now He is helplessly separated from it, then the religion of the apostles and martyrs is no more, and for aught that Christianity can say to the contrary, Nature is God, and beyond the limits she imposes we have no outlook at all.

Secondly, the Church is responsible for present scepticism by producing the impression that the Bible must either be accepted as throughout infallible or not at all. Renan, in his autobiography, tells us that he was brought up to believe that Christianity was bound up with the infallibility of Scripture; so that when he found that there were statements in Scripture irreconcilable with fact, he had no choice but to abandon Christianity. Such is the history of scepticism in many minds. A lad grows up under the impression that the Church accepts all the statements in the Bible as infallibly true, and requires all believers to accept them. He understands that there is no middle position between accepting the whole of Scripture and rejecting the whole of it. He has been taught that the

infallibility of the Bible is the ground of the whole Christian faith, and accordingly, when he finds that there are in the Bible what he conceives to be mistakes, he fancies the foundations are removed, and he yields himself to unbelief. It is the duty of the Church to make it plain that faith in Christ is not bound up with faith in the infallibility of Scripture.

The Church is also responsible for not having yet formulated a doctrine of revelation which enables inquiring minds to understand what the Bible is, and to account for all its characteristics. Col. Ingersoll's assault upon Christianity has done incalculable harm, and the strength of that assault consists largely in the trenchant exposure he makes of the imperfect morality of the Old Testament, and of what he terms the "mistakes of Moses." This, it may be said, is proof of his ignorance and of the weakness of his attack. It is certainly proof of his ignorance, but it is no proof of the weakness of his attack; for thousands believe with him that Christianity stands or falls with the infallibility of the Old Testament; and the Church itself has no formulated doctrine of revelation, its methods and its progress, which accounts for the mistakes and the immoralities of the Old Testament on a principle which satisfies the thinking man.

The Old Testament history is a faithful record of a race which was being trained to know God and to love righteousness, and it shows us the steps in their progress. The leading men of this race were sincere and devoted servants of Jehovah, and were in true communion with Him, but they had not a perfect knowledge of Him. They were gradually advancing towards that perfect knowledge which came at last in Christ. They were able to understand only so much of the Divine nature as they had grown up to, as a child cannot understand the whole of his father's character and ways. And these imperfections in the knowledge of God,

the Bible, being a true and faithful record, freely recounts, boldly showing us how even the best men among the Jews misunderstood God, but how by adhering to His law and seeking to hold fellowship with Him, they gradually eliminated from their knowledge of Him what was crude and unworthy. And it is not the imperfections and immoralities which disfigure the earlier part of this growth which should arrest the attention, but the sure and grand progress which at last extruded and left behind all those crudities and imperfections, and justified the training hand and Spirit of God. To look upon the Old Testament as depicting a final stage in knowledge and righteousness is a fatal error. Revelation has been a growing light from dawn to perfect day, and though many in the gray dawn served God as faithfully as their successors, it was not possible they should know Him as well or interpret His will as accurately.

Finally, our general bearing and attitude towards sceptics might probably be improved. As Plato long ago remarked: "It is a pity that if one half of the world goes mad with godlessness, the other half should go mad with indignation at them." Sceptics often betray animosity against believers, sometimes from irritation that men should go on trusting in what they have striven to persuade the world is false; sometimes perhaps from some remaining uneasiness in their own mind. And on our part, we are probably too much in the way of thinking that all scepticism is voluntary and wanton. There are, doubtless, sceptics and sceptics, and not all command our respect or sympathy. Many loud declamations are but echoes, not original voices: reverberations from cold, hard surfaces of men, not utterances wrung from the exercised spirits of living men. For dealing with such persons, as with many other varieties of opinion and practice, the Church needs above all else a Satirist.

There is indeed quite as much cant and repetition of pet formulas and shallow thinking and reliance on authority to be found among sceptics as among believers. "Freethinking" often means thinking that is free from the restrictions which accurate knowledge and the recognised laws of reasoning lay upon scientific investigation. And any one whose own studies have disclosed to him the mass of evidence which must be taken account of before a critical decision is given, will agree with Renan when he says that "in reality few persons have the right to disbelieve in Christianity."

There is however a scepticism which does deserve our sympathy and respect. Inquiry into the grounds of our belief is, happily, to many minds a necessity. And in the Christian faith so much is involved, and the necessary inferences from it come into contact at so many points with the whole circle of our beliefs, that hesitation and doubt cannot but arise in earnest minds. But we are to judge of men rather by what they wish to believe than by what they presently find themselves able to believe. A man may passionately desire to believe, and may gather before his mind all the evidence he can, and yet for the present feel uncertain and doubtful. But if he be in earnest to find the truth, and if his desire and belief are that truth, whatever he finds it to be, will aid him in the pursuit of righteousness and the knowledge of God, that man's scepticism is faith in the making. In words which have brought light and hope to many a disturbed and darkened soul—

"What matter though I doubt at every pore,—
Head-doubts, heart-doubts, doubts at my fingers' ends,
Doubts in the trivial work of every day,
Doubts at the very bases of my soul
In the grand moments when she probes herself—
If finally I have a life to show?

* * * * *

'What think ye of Christ,' friend? When all's done and said,
Like you this Christianity or not?
It may be false, but do you wish it true?
Has it your vote to be so if it can?

* * * * *

If you desire faith, then you've faith enough;
What else seeks God? nay, what else seek ourselves?"

One important practical conclusion will certainly be gathered by thoughtful persons from this subject; that is, that it is the unbelief within the Church which is mainly responsible for the unbelief outside. Were the members of the Church leading a supernatural life, unbelief in the supernatural would become impossible. Were the supreme, living, present power of Christ manifested in the actual superiority of His people to earthly ways and motives, it would be as impossible to deny that power as it is to deny the power of the tides or of the sun. Offences come and sceptics are made chiefly by the worldliness and unreformed poor lives of professed believers. What is a man to gain by believing, if his life is raised to no greater value than that of most Christians he sees? Men seek what will make them useful, pure, in the best sense heavenly; but in most of us they see little to tell of any force in religion that makes men so. However careless men are, and however little they inquire into things, they have a rough common sense, a true instinct, which, without any effort on their part, makes them aware whether Christianity is a success or not. Men acknowledge success, and they despise whatever makes loud professions and does nothing, and therefore it is that so commonly in this country and in this age religion is despised; and this it is also which makes us shamefaced about our religion: we have a latent consciousness that in ourselves it has not proved itself mighty to the pulling down of the strongholds of sin in us. These are grievous things to have to say, but we must look the

facts in the face, and recognise our responsibility. Christ's words are very awful, "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depths of the sea." If any conduct of ours, or if the tenour of our life or any infirmity be gradually impressing on the mind of some child or youth or wavering person that there is little reality in religion, no duty can more urgently press upon us than inquiry into our conduct, and strenuous endeavour to make our religion more real than ever.

MARCUS DODS.