

OF THE NATURE OF FAITH, PARTICULARLY
IN ITS RELATION TO SIGHT AND REASON.

ONE of the great difficulties attending all enquiries into the nature of Faith arises from the manifold varieties of meaning which, in common language, have gathered round the single syllable, Faith. In books and talk we speak of subjective faith, objective faith, personal faith, historic faith, ethical faith, the sacred deposit of faith, dead faith, the living faith which works by love. In all these, and other cognate uses of the term Faith, it is evident that the shades of meaning associated with the term are manifold and various. In its adjectival forms of "faithful" and "faithless," faith is used almost exclusively in the ethical sense of trustworthy, and unworthy of trust. God is faithful: He keeps faith; His word is sure; His promise immutable. Yet God has no faith: faith is no part of the Divine attributes in that sense of faith which the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews adopts when he says "These all died in faith, not having received the promise."¹ Although God is absolutely faithful, and in all things to be trusted, yet God takes nothing on trust Himself; by reason of His omniscience He is altogether incapable of faith, if by "faith" we mean trust in things unseen and reliance on things which, at most, are but partially known.

This manifoldness of meaning and diversity of use is, I repeat, one of the great difficulties blocking the very threshold of enquiry into the nature of faith. Even the Bible itself does not confine its use of the term "faith" to any single and unvarying signification. It speaks of the faith of devils,² the faith of God's elect,³ the faith of Jesus,⁴ the faith which saves,⁵ and the faith which does *not* save

¹ Heb. xi. 13.

² James ii. 19.

³ Titus i. 1.

⁴ Rev. xiv. 12.

⁵ Ephes. ii. 8.

—“though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.”¹ These Biblical uses of the term “faith” are obviously very far from being identical, ranging, as they do, from the faith which intensifies the torments of demons to the faith which is the salvation, and peace, and joy of the saints. But leaving aside, for the sake of concentration and perspicuity, all other secondary uses of the term “faith” to be found in the Bible, there remain two primary and fundamental uses—uses which are both mutually distinguished and separately distinct. These two uses are: (1) Faith regarded as a faculty of man’s spirit, and (2) *the* Faith regarded as a deposit of doctrine. It is obvious that when the term “faith” is used in such passages as: the faith of Abraham,² hast thou faith?³ we walk by faith,⁴ that Christ may dwell in your heart by faith,⁵ the sense of the term is different from the sense in such passages as—Elymas sought to turn away the proconsul from the faith,⁶ Felix and Drusilla sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith,⁷ he hath denied the faith,⁸ contend for the faith,⁹ I have kept the faith.¹⁰ In the former class of passages faith is evidently regarded as a personal possession, an individual attribute, the power of spiritual discernment in man; whereas in the latter class of passages, *the* Faith is the sacred deposit of doctrine; the historic and objective Evangel; the form of sound words;¹¹ the things which are surely believed;¹² rather than the faculty which perceives and believes the things. And, for the most part, the writers in Holy Scripture clearly mark this distinction in the two great uses of the term Faith, by prefixing the definite article before the term when it is used

¹ 1 Cor. xiii. 2.² Rom. iv. 12.³ Rom. xiv. 22.⁴ 2 Cor. v. 7.⁵ Ephes. iii. 17.⁶ Acts xiii. 8.⁷ Acts xxiv. 24.⁸ 1 Tim. v. 8.⁹ Jude 3.¹⁰ 2 Tim. iv. 7.¹¹ 2 Tim. i. 13.¹² S. Luke i. 3.

in the sense of the objective body of historic belief—the Faith once for all delivered unto the saints;¹ and omitting the article when faith is used to connote the instrument or faculty of individual belief in man—without faith it is impossible to please God.²

In this paper I propose to omit all consideration of the term “faith” in the objective sense of the things believed; and to enquire only into the nature of “faith” in the subjective sense of the mysterious power possessed by man of believing things: things invisible, eternal, infinite; things super-sensible, super-rational, wholly spiritual.

The creeds of Christendom are largely historic, consisting in great measure of facts and incidents which, when they first transpired, were obvious to sense—to the ears of those who heard the words, to the eyes of those who saw the deeds, to the feeling of those who touched the persons. The manifestation of the Gospel was, in the first instance, a manifestation—*φανερώσεις*—to the senses. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the Word of life; for the life was manifested and we have seen it: that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you:—*ὃ ἑώρακαμεν καὶ ἀκηκόαμεν, ἀπαγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν.*”³ Then after the contemporaries of Christ had passed away, the incidents of the Gospel became matter of history, dependent, like all other matters of history, for their authorization upon tried and rational testimony. The manifestation of the Gospel which, at first, had been a manifestation to the senses, became subsequently, in its purely historic part, a manifestation to the reason of mankind.

And as with the specific tenets of belief proper to the

¹ Jude 3. *τῇ ἅπαξ παραδοθείσῃ τοῖς ἁγίοις πίστει.*

² Heb. xi. 6. *χωρὶς δὲ πίστεως ἀδύνατον εὐαρεστηῆσαι.*

³ 1 S. John i. 1-3.

Historic Gospel, so with the more general tenets of belief common to Natural Religion, and the various world-religions founded on Natural Religion (tenets such as belief in the power and providence of God, in the continuance of man's life after death, in the moral government of the world, and the like) they all greatly depend, for their evidence at least, on the testimony of sense and reason. The invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being *understood* by the things that are made.¹ Sun, moon, stars, flowers, rain, fruitful seasons, the disposition of events, the voice of conscience, the existence of mind, the ordering of the pathways of nations and men—these all testify to sense and reason of the invisibilities which underlie the visibilities of the universe.

Yet although sense and reason combine to bear witness to spiritual facts and spiritual truths; neither sense nor reason can actually grasp, and lay hold of, either spiritual fact or spiritual truth. It is a law, too often forgotten but nevertheless a law, that spiritual things are spiritually discerned.² As sensible things are sensibly discerned, and rational things are rationally discerned, so spiritual things are discerned spiritually, and only spiritually. Neither the physical nor psychical man receiveth the things of the Spirit of God; they are foolishness unto him, and he cannot—he is not able, it is not possible for him to—know them.³ It is only the spiritual man—*πνευματικός*—who can discern spiritual things—*πνευμάτικα*.

This great truth of Scripture, like all other Scriptural truths, is in perfect harmony with the experiences of mankind. For upon examination, and in experience, what does man find himself to be? He finds himself to be at once

¹ Romans i. 19, 20. Διότι τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ φανερόν ἐστιν ἐν αὐτοῖς· ὁ γὰρ Θεὸς αὐτοῖς ἐφάνησε· τὰ γὰρ ἀδρατα αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου τοῖς ποιήμασι νοούμενα καθορᾶται.

² 1 Cor. ii. 14. πνευματικῶς ἀνακρίνεται.

³ 1 Cor. ii. 14. οὐ δύναται γινῶναι.

single and complex: single in his personality, complex in his constitution. Every student of his own nature discovers himself to be a being compounded of several beings. Man is not, in himself, either one being or two; but three beings combined in one, one being composed of three. He has a body which brings him into communication with the world of sensible things, a soul which brings him into communication with the world of psychical things, and a spirit which brings him into communication with the world of spiritual things.¹ Every properly constituted man dwells concurrently in three worlds, three different planes of gradually ascending existence; and has three beings, each severally fitted for acting in its own world and developing its own distinct existence. Man's body enables him to move and act in the material world; man's soul enables him to move and act in the psychical world; man's spirit enables him to move and act in the spiritual world. And in the combination and development of these three beings is found the *ego*:—the completion and fulness of the trinal unity, the entire self, of each individual man.

It must be noted, however, that, in our present mortal condition of existence, each of these three beings, or natures, in man is dependent for its health and action on the other two. In no man is either body, or soul, or spirit severally independent; they are all three invariably interdependent. The common formula, *mens sana in corpore sano*, is but a very partial formula to denote the perfect and well-rounded man. The full formula for the perfect man is, *sanus spiritus cum sanâ animâ in sano corpore*. And each of these three parts of every mortal man's complete constitution—body, soul, and spirit—interpenetrates the other two. Although at death one part will, for a time at least, be sundered from the other two, yet, during the course of this mortal life, the health and fulness of each part is so in-

¹ 1 Thess. v. 23.

dissolubly associated with the two other parts, that we can hardly even conceive of them as either separate or separable. The body ministers to the soul, the soul to the spirit; and contrariwise, the spirit is rightful lord over the soul, and the soul rightful lord over the body.

Moreover when we examine more closely into the constitution of man, we find that not only does each whole and perfect man consist of three parts, but each of these three parts is itself compounded of manifold parts. The body is not one member but many, and each member has its own office.¹ Similarly the soul has not one faculty but many faculties, such as reason, conscience, emotion, will, and the like. The spirit likewise appears to consist of a combination of faculties—faith, eternal hope, self-sacrificing charity, *the peace of God* which passeth all understanding, and is therefore a peace distinct from *peace of mind* which by no means surpasses the understanding faculty of the soul.

In endeavouring to pursue this subject a little further still, let us, for the sake of brevity and clearness, segregate from the manifold faculties of the body the single faculty of Sight; and from the manifold faculties of the soul, the single faculty of Reason: and from the manifold faculties of the spirit, the single faculty of Faith. What is the relation, we ask, between these three faculties, or powers in man of sight, and reason, and faith? Sight is sensible vision, reason is intellectual vision, faith is spiritual vision. As the eye is the organ of physical sight, so reason is the organ of intellectual sight, and faith is the organ of spiritual sight. Sight is the power of seeing with the body, reason is the power of seeing with the soul, faith is the power of seeing with the spirit. And as some men are physically blind, and others imbecile or intellectually blind, so some are spiritually defective, blind in spirit. It is to be noted,

¹ 1 Cor. xii. 14.

too, that all forms of sight—physical sight, intellectual sight, spiritual sight—are gifts from God. We have nothing which we have not received.¹ Faith is the gift of God; reason is the gift of God; sight is the gift of God. Why the gift of sight is withheld from some, and the gift of reason from others, and from others the gift of faith, it is not part of my present purpose even to enquire; indeed, I am inclined to think that this is one among the many mysteries whose depths are too profound to be fathomed by any plumb of mortal man. Leaving, therefore, aside both this and all similar inscrutable mysteries surrounding so far-reaching a theme, let us limit ourselves to the things which are intelligible and plain.

1. And among plain things nothing could be, first of all, more plain than that the eye of the body ministers to the eye of the soul. Sight is the servant of reason. Without adopting in its entirety the theory of Locke, that the ideas of the mind wholly depend, in the first instance, on the communications of sense; I think it must be obvious that if a man is born blind, and no means are taken to compensate for his blindness in other ways, that man's reason will be greatly crippled and starved. The beauties of the material world will be a blank to him. And those images of intellectual loveliness which the mind fashions for itself from the analogous beauties of Nature will also be a blank. It is through the window of the bodily eye that visions of natural beauty sweep into the mind of man. Without the assistant light of the bodily eye, even the reason would be partially darkened.

On the other hand, the bodily eye can do little of itself without the aid of reason. You spread the same landscape before the eye of the artist and the clown, yet to the two men that same landscape appears to be wholly different. And why? The mechanism of their eyes is identical. An

¹ 1 Cor. iv. 7.

optician could probably not discern any difference in their physical formation. No; the difference is in the seeing power which lies behind the physical eye: in the rational sensitiveness and self-culture which distinguishes the artist from the clown. Thus reason depends for its food upon sight, and sight depends for its delicacy and richness on reason.

Similarly with reason and faith. Reason nourishes faith, and faith illuminates reason. Nothing could be more untrue than the supposition that faith is irrational. Superstition may be irrational, but faith is fundamentally reasonable. That faith often transcends reason is as true as that reason often transcends sight; but that faith contradicts reason is as untrue, and essentially false, as that reason contradicts sight. We know, of course, that reason sometimes corrects the illusions of sight, as when by illusive refraction a straight staff in clear water appears to be crooked. In like manner, faith sometimes corrects the illusions of reason, as when, to reason, pleasure seems the highest good and self-sacrifice the most stupid folly. But to correct the illusions imposed on a faculty is a quite different thing from contradicting the faculty itself. Although, therefore, faith sometimes transcends reason, and sometimes corrects it, yet it never contradicts it. As from the point of view of reason we call whatever is contrary to sense, senseless; so from the point of view of faith, we call whatever is contrary to reason, irrational. And as no senseless thing is according to reason, so no irrational thing is according to faith.

An easy illustration will clearly set forth what I mean. When, in the days of Isaiah, the idolater felled a tree, and out of the same felled tree made, of the one part, blocks of fuel, and, of another part, carved images of worship, both sense and intellect, sight and reason, rebelled against the vain imagination that, out of the selfsame substance, one

part could be transformed into ashes and heat, and another part into a divinity worthy of worship. And this rebellion of sense and reason was ground enough to Isaiah for denying to wooden idols the homage of adoring faith.¹ For although faith sees beyond reason, as reason sees beyond physical sight, yet reason cannot think in flat contradiction to sight, nor faith believe in flat contradiction to reason.

2. This leads to a second truth connected with the relationship of faith to reason, and of reason to sight. This truth is that the proof of the existence of each of these three faculties alike is in the possession of them. How do men know that the faculty of sight exists? Is it not because they possess the power to see? Similarly, men know that the faculty of reason exists, because they themselves possess the power to think. In like manner, they who feel within themselves the power to believe have in themselves the witness of the existence of faith.

Of course it is no evidence to *B* of the existence of faith that *A* believes, if *B* himself is void of the faculty of faith. But neither would it be any evidence to *B* of the existence of reason or sight, that *A* could both think and see, so long as *B* himself had no capacity for either thinking or seeing. None the less is *A* sure of both his reason and sight, notwithstanding the blindness and mindlessness of *B*. And what is true of reason and sight, is also true of faith. They who believe have the proof of faith in themselves: and the absence of faith in others is no disproof to them of their own faith.

Moreover, faith is not transferable. I cannot give my faith to another, or he his faith to me, any more than I can give to another my reason or sight. But what I can do is: I can give to others *the evidences* of these faculties in myself. I can show the blind man that I can do what

¹ Isaiah xlv. 9-20.

he is unable to do: I can walk fast and firmly where he would stumble and fall; I can find my way where he would be lost; I can rejoice in beauties which to him are invisible. So also I can show to the mindless—in so far as they are capable of being shown the evidences of things—that I can do what they cannot. I can form judgments, weigh evidence, test opinions, solve problems, apprehend laws. In like manner, although I cannot give my faith to another, yet I can give to another *the evidence* of my faith. I can rejoice in infirmities, I can glory in tribulations, I can forgive my enemies and pray for them that persecute me, I can reckon the seen as nothing in comparison with the unseen, I can welcome death as the harbinger of life, though God slay me yet can I continue to trust Him. And if, after these evidences of faith in multitudes of sober, truth-loving, high-minded men, the unbeliever persists in denying the existence of faith, he places himself in the same plight as an unreasoning man who denies the evidences of reason, or an unseeing man who denies the evidences of sight. And yet few things are more common than for unbelievers to set themselves up as authorities concerning faith; although, in truth and fact, men without faith are no more authorities concerning faith than men without reason would be authorities on reason, or men without eyes authorities on sight.

3. A third thing which is very plain, from the correlation of faith with reason and sight, is the complete and absolute distinction between a faculty and the realm in which the faculty operates. My sight is a quite different thing from the things I see. My reason, and the matters in which my reason exercises itself, are utterly, and generically, different. My sight is not the thing I see, my reason is not the thing I think. My sight is the vehicle through which the images of external things pass inward to my reason; my reason is the instrument by means of which these concrete images

are formed and reformed, arranged and rearranged, broken up and combined, into an infinite variety of abstract ideas.

More than this. No single man's sight sees the whole of anything. No single man's reason apprehends the whole of anything. The demonstration of this truth is evident. Take any visible thing you like—a picture, an animal, a tree, a precious stone, a landscape—and show it to half-a-dozen different persons, and each of the six persons will point out some feature, or quality, of the thing unnoticed by the other five. Or let six persons read any book, or listen to some course of ratiocination, and you will find that no two of the six have formed exactly the same impression of the book, or fixed on exactly the same points in the ratiocination. What, *e.g.*, is more common than for persons to differ as to the apparent size of the moon, or as to the logical cogency of a sermon; yet, notwithstanding these differences, the size of the moon is fixed, and the logic of the sermon (if there be any) is fixed also. In both instances the thing itself is fixed; the apparent differences arise, not from the thing, but from the variations, and partialities, and defects, of individual reason and individual sight.

Similarly with faith. What is faith? No better definition of faith has ever been vouchsafed to man than the definition of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Faith is that which gives substance or reality—*ὑπόστασις* as opposed to *ἔμφασις*—to things hoped for: it is the proof of the concrete and important character of things unseen.¹ Or as Dante, in the twenty-fourth canto of his vision of Paradise, has so wonderfully rendered the inspired definition:—

“Faith of things hoped is substance, and the proof
Of things not seen; and herein doth consist
Methinks its essence.—“Rightly hast thou deemed,”
Was answered; “if thou well discern, why first
He hath defined it substance, and then proof.”²

¹ Heb. xi. 1, *πραγμάτων ἐλεγχος οὐ βλεπομένων.*

² Cary's Translation.

Just as sight, with the sister senses, makes the material world real to us; and reason is itself the evidence and proof, not less than test, of the veritable character of the world of thought; so faith makes solidly sure things insubstantial, and actually real things within the veil, and spiritually visible things carnally invisible.

Yet this faculty of faith is wholly distinct from the realm of things eternal, invisible, infinite, in which the faculty lives, and moves, and has its being. The realm of things hoped for is a realm too vast for the faith of any single person, however bright and strong, to fully and completely grasp. As the realms of reason and sight both partake of, and are limited by, the separate individuality of each seeing and reasoning person; so each believer's realm of faith is both limited by, and interpenetrated with, that believer's personality. As no two persons either see or think alike, so no two persons either can, or do, believe alike. And as no single person can either see or think the whole of anything, so no single person can believe the whole of anything. According to my individuality I see, and reason upon one part of some vast whole; and according to his individuality another man sees, and reasons upon, another part. But my part does not exclude the other man's, or his mine. That we see but parts is a proof of the limitations *not* of the thing seen, but of our powers of seeing it. And as the whole is greater than any of its parts, so the whole of any fact, or truth, is greater than any man's apprehension of it, whether by reason or sight.

Similarly with faith. That man has a poor and mean perception of the vastness of things hoped for, and the infinitude of things unseen, who vainly dreams that his own personal fragment of individual faith either comprehends or comprises the whole realm of facts and truths which may surely be believed by men. No! For myself I venture to doubt whether even all the faith of all the

believers who have ever dwelt among men, taken together in its enormous magnitude, has yet realized even more than a small proportion of the things which await our ever-expanding realization throughout the unimaginable ages of an unthinkable eternity. If no man's sight has ever seen the whole of visible things, if no man's reason has ever grasped the entirety of all intellectual things: *a fortiori* has no man's faith ever yet seen or grasped the immeasurable whole, and the inconceivable entirety of spiritual and eternal things. In his triune constitution,¹ man, the human trinity, is made in the image and after the likeness of the Ever-blessed Trinity, Divine; yet, although he resembles God, he is only man, and is bounded with all the limitations of a finite and imperfect manhood.

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¹ 1 Thess. v. 23.