

*THE LATE PROFESSOR DRUMMOND AND  
HIS CRITICS.*

THE fortunes of Drummond's *Natural Law in the Spiritual World* have been not a little curious. Its brilliance of style and suggestiveness of thought were enthusiastically appreciated from the first, and as a consequence the book passed through numerous editions, and became everywhere the subject of discussion. But the theory which it sought to establish has neither been widely accepted nor adequately valued. This may be accounted for, in part, by the fact that it made its appeal to two different classes of mind—the religious and the scientific, neither of which could appreciate more than half the book. The typical man of science—agnostic, or indifferent on religious questions—paid little attention to the theological aspects of the work, and contented himself with pointing out that its science, if popular, was neither original nor profound—a criticism which is true, but, as we shall see, not at all to the point. The typical religious critic, on the other hand—well versed in literature, perhaps, and an expert in theology—was a little chary of adopting wholesale the latest doctrines of science, and was incapable of viewing the whole subject from that scientific standpoint which is necessary to its full appreciation. While loud in his praises of the book, therefore, the critic of this type did not commit himself to the acceptance of its thesis any more than did his scientific *confrère*. Drummond, consequently, is now held up to us as an ineffectual thinker, as a man who possessed, indeed, great spiritual gifts and marvellous powers of exposition, but who missed his vocation when he endeavoured to make any serious contribution to theological truth.

The latest writer to insist on this view of Drummond is Prof. George Adam Smith in his recent *Life*. While full

of hearty admiration for his friend's character, he treats his claim to have established the main theory of *Natural Law in the Spiritual World* in the most cavalier fashion. He asserts: "Drummond's *a priori* argument from the principle of continuity was a huge *petitio principii*." Of a contention which lies at the root of the demonstration attempted by Drummond the Professor disposes summarily with the dictum, "Emphatically this is not true." "Drummond," he declares, "has simply begged the question," with more to the same effect. Prof. G. A. Smith's ability as a literary critic is so great that many will give to these unsupported statements a weight which in no way attaches to them. But surely any one at all imbued with the scientific spirit will see that here the Professor has passed beyond those wide boundaries within which he is an expert, and is laying claim to an authority in another man's sphere to which he has no title. Take this confident statement, for example: "The fact that the forces of spirit life are different from those of the physical life makes the presupposition very strong that, though the Lawgiver be the same, the laws in the two spheres are equally different." In face of the fact that the physical and intellectual in man are so closely allied as to be interdependent, and that the intellectual and spiritual faculties are also intimately united, it is surely an extraordinary assumption to make that while mind and matter are governed by one set of laws, spirit is governed by laws totally different. What a strange chaos would thus be created in human personality! Indeed, as one critic has already pointed out, by his insistence on the wide gulf which separates the natural and the spiritual, Prof. Smith comes perilously near asserting an absolute dualism in the universe. Drummond's theory, so far from being obviously untrue, as the Professor asserts, seems to many minds absolutely self-evident. Nature's uniformities are so

unvarying, her sequences so unbroken, her forces so identical amid all diversity of manifestation up to the very limit of the seen and temporal, that it is difficult indeed to suppose that they do not persist unchanged when they pass beyond our sight. No doubt one's opinion on this subject depends, to a large extent, on previous intellectual training. A student whose education has been mainly literary will tend to take the one view, and he whose education has been mainly scientific will almost inevitably take the other. But to say of that opinion with which he does not agree, "Emphatically it is not true," is very like that begging the question of which Prof. Smith accuses Drummond.

It is not necessary, however, to put either of these opinions out of court without investigation. Let it be granted that it is equally conceivable, *a priori*, that the spiritual laws are totally unlike the natural laws, or that they are parallel to them and operate in a similar manner. If the first is true, it will certainly be a misfortune to theology; in that case it is vain to look to nature for any confirmation of the truth of revelation, and we must be content with such evidence for religious truth as may be found in literary criticism of the Scriptures or in the testimony of human instinct. If the second theory is true, on the other hand, we may expect to find, on examination, that revelation and nature bear the same hall-mark, or in other words, that the Power that made the world and the Spirit that inspired the Scriptures are one and the same. We must not allow ourselves to be biassed in the least, however, by these considerations. The rival theories must be put to the test of facts, and by the testimony of these alone must be accepted or rejected. What evidence, then, can be adduced in favour of Prof. Smith's theory? I know of no fact, certainly of no body of facts, alleged in support of it. But is there no evidence in support of the second theory? One does not require to think to find such

evidence, it lies to one's hand on all sides. I take the first commonplace illustration that presents itself. As regards the natural and physical man, the following statements are indisputable: much depends upon his parentage; if he comes of a strong and healthy stock, he will tend to be himself strong and healthy: much depends, too, upon his environment; his continuance in health will be promoted by good food, suitable clothing, sanitary surroundings, and the rest; and if these be denied, his health will suffer even if originally endowed with a robust constitution: his physical aptitude, again, will depend upon his perseverance in practising any difficult feat he is desirous of accomplishing; actions which at first put a great strain upon him will, when often repeated, become easy, and at last he will perform them quite unconscious of effort, as the accomplished pianist dashes off a difficult piece of music. Now when we turn to man in his spiritual capacity, do we find that a totally different set of laws comes into operation? No, the spiritual laws are precisely similar and parallel. Heredity will determine the man's spiritual outfit just as it does his physical; environment will nurture or stunt the soul just as it will the body; and every one knows that practice makes virtue easy just as it makes fingers cunning, so that isolated acts oft repeated become habits, and habits long persevered in pass into character, which is virtuous or sinful impulse acting spontaneously, and unconscious of itself. It is true we are told that to apply the word "law" in the ordinary sense to all this is to use language loosely; there is no law, but only observed sequences. But to the Christian who believes that God operates always and everywhere this does not affect the argument: it is enough that it can be shown that God's providence acts in a precisely similar and parallel manner in the natural sphere and the spiritual, and that is all that Drummond meant when he postulated "natural law in the spiritual world." Now the

illustration here used does not stand alone; I have taken it, as I have said, almost at random. Examine life at any point, and you will find similar correspondences. Assuredly, then, this theory is not to be annihilated by any mere *ex cathedrâ* utterance, such as "Emphatically this is not true."

The charge that Drummond's argument was "a huge *petitio principii*" can be refuted without much difficulty. His method of investigation was strictly inductive and scientific. How did Darwin establish his theory of evolution? He was not its absolute originator: his grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, and others had observed certain facts which pointed that way, and these were sufficient to suggest the theory as a possible one. Darwin did not, of course, at once assume its truth. He used it as a working hypothesis, and not till he had patiently examined an enormous mass of facts, and found them to be in harmony with it, did he propound his theory to the scientific world. Precisely similar was the manner in which Drummond carried out his investigation. He was not the absolute originator of the truth that spiritual law is similar and parallel to natural law; indications of this truth were abundant before his day. In the New Testament itself they are very numerous. When Christ said, for example, "Whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath,"<sup>1</sup> who can fail to see that He was drawing attention to the fact, that Providence, in the enriching or impoverishing of souls, acts by much the same methods as in the apportionment of earthly riches? Or who can read the Parable of the Sower, and not perceive that the spiritual seed is like the natural in its dependence upon the quality of the soil into which it falls, in the nature of its growth, in the impediments to which it is liable?

<sup>1</sup> Matt. xiii, 12.

From the Gospels and Epistles alone, a formidable amount of support could be found for Drummond's theory, and this evidence could not be dismissed as mere analogy; the correspondences are so persistent and minute that no other terms but "parallel and similar" will describe them. But of course the evidence is not confined to the New Testament. There probably has never been a thoughtful preacher who has not at some time or other hit upon one of those striking resemblances between things spiritual and things natural which irresistibly suggest Milton's words:

What if Earth,  
Be but the shadow of Heav'n, and things therein,  
Each to other like, more than on Earth is thought?

All that Drummond has done is to bring the theory into clearer light, and to illustrate it with a number of facts, most of them derived from the physical sciences. To speak of Drummond's demonstrations as an "*a priori* argument" is therefore unfair. His theory was not the arbitrary creation of his own imagination; it was originally suggested by facts, and now stands supported by evidence of a very varied and interesting character. Admirers of Drummond may justly claim that it holds the field, and that the arguments on which it is built have never been met or refuted. Before his book can justly be spoken of in such terms as Prof. G. A. Smith has used it must be shown either that its science is unsound, or that its treatment of the spiritual facts of our nature is not to be relied upon. The charge that the science of the book is not original or profound has sometimes been adduced as though it discredited the theory. But to advance original scientific research was no part of Drummond's object in writing *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*. To illustrate his theory and carry conviction to the class of readers for whom

he wrote, he needed facts which were well known and beyond dispute. It is just the commonplace nature of his materials which renders his theory unassailable from the scientific side. And from the religious side I do not know that his arguments are open to serious challenge. If any one thinks they are, let him justify his faith by his works, and produce proof; let him begin on the Parable of the Sower, and show that our Lord, when he uttered this parable, was dealing not with spiritual facts but with fanciful analogies; and after that he will need to explain away many other passages in the New Testament before he arrives at Drummond's scientific illustrations. So long as neither science nor religion can convict Drummond of grave inaccuracy in his facts, and so long as no evidence is offered in support of the rival theory that the spiritual laws are totally different from the physical laws, it is absurd to treat Drummond's work as a thing of no value. Rather may we claim that *Natural Law in the Spiritual World* is a successful attempt to apply the method of Butler's *Analogy* to the great body of scientific knowledge which in Butler's day existed only in a rudimentary form; and we may hope that it may yet come to be as serviceable to theology in our time as was Butler's great work to the generations which immediately succeeded him.

Drummond's *Ascent of Man* has suffered much in the same manner and from the same causes as his earlier work. It was the late Mrs. Lynn Linton, I think, who derided this book as commonplace because a passage could be found in Darwin and in Herbert Spencer in which the presence of "the struggle for the life of others" was vaguely recognised as a factor in evolution. The absurdity of this criticism must be recognised by every fair-minded student. Drummond certainly never laid claim to absolute originality—if indeed absolute originality can be said to exist in our world at all. But of what use were those two obscure passages in

Darwin and Spencer to the Christian Church? What is undoubted is that in the evolutionary theory as originally enunciated the struggle for the survival of the fittest dwarfed all other conceptions. It loomed large not only in scientific works but in magazines, reviews, and religious addresses; few quotations had become more trite in sermons than

Nature red in tooth and claw with ravine.

Unquestionably this doctrine as it stood alone had a tendency to obscure the truth that God is love, and constituted a very serious difficulty to many thoughtful minds. The service which Prof. Drummond rendered the Christian Church when he gave its proper prominence to the vicarious principle in nature, to the "struggle for the life of others," can hardly be overrated; he wove, as it were, a silver strand into the dark web of fate; he helped us to see in the blackest shadow a proof that somewhere the light is shining. I am convinced that should the Church lightly discard the two great truths which Drummond offers her in these books, she will have thrown away weapons which will become every day more necessary to her as the teachings of science spread and are adopted as the common faith of mankind.

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