

RICHARD ROTHE, OF HEIDELBERG :

HIS CENTENARY.

RICHARD ROTHE was born at Posen 28th January, 1799. His centenary was celebrated at Heidelberg in February of *this* year, 1899, and as we are still in the same year, it may be permitted us to join our brethren of Germany in the remembrance of one of the most singular and remarkable of the theological geniuses which that country has produced. He died more than thirty years ago; yet is he considered the most outstanding name in German theology since that of Schleiermacher himself.

The only claim which the present writer has to give this sketch is, that he was himself a student of Rothe's classes in the midsummer of 1858, and therefore had some slight personal knowledge of the German divine.

Let us start with a glimpse of Heidelberg University about the meridian of this century,—very largely attended and then, probably, at the point of its highest reputation. In almost all faculties: in Law, in Letters, in History, but especially in Theology, socially, so far as student life is concerned, it was brilliant, even as a centre of German and European celebrities. It is chiefly, however, from its *theological* importance that we speak of it.

That slight spare man, with the scholarly look, slipping quietly through the streets, is *David Strauss*, now no longer a Professor, but in the leisure evening of his day. This well set up, elderly man, driving his neat pony carriage, with notable bust, expanded chest, and fine head, is *Baron Bunsen*; also pretty much retired from public and ambassadorial life, but still active; and notoriously occupied with his tall assistant (now Professor Kamphausen, of Bonn) in the preparation of his *Bibel-werk*, which was to revive Christian and Bible knowledge in Germany, but has

long since disappeared. The tall, presentable Scottish clergyman whom he is driving, to admire the sights of Heidelberg, is Professor, afterwards President, *James McCosh*, of Princeton, U.S.A., then on a visit to Bunsen. If we follow these two out of the University church on Sunday afternoon, we shall hear Dr. McCosh loud in praise of a pulpit oration on the Divine Love, which has just been uttered by *Professor Daniel Schenkel*. The student who writes, has formed his opinion, there and elsewhere, that Dr. Daniel Schenkel is pretty much a windbag—a verdict too pert, perhaps, for the utterer, but not contradicted now, by the verdict of history. If, on a College day, you follow a group of students into a private house and up into the modest drawing-room of the same, the invalided veteran, who reads his lecture to the assembled class from a sofa there, is the gentle *Professor Umbreit*, the author of a commentary, with notes and version of the Book of Job. But the centre point of the University is the class-room of *Professor Richard Rothe*. This unimposing and unpretending theologian looks the most modest of men. When not on duty, he may be seen in the company of his homely spouse, gazing vacantly into shop windows, or sitting pleased to hear an open-air string concert in the grounds of the old castle. When he steals into his crowded class-room, he first turns to hang up his hat on a nail behind the chair, then he flings himself forward on the desk and on his MS., and begins with his usual curt and nasal “*Meine Herren.*” One eye is close down on the paper, the other eye catches a glimpse of the assembled youth, and then retreats towards the ceiling. The upturned eye is by these same playful youth denominated *Faith*, and the other *Reason*—not an inapt suggestion of the singular combination of powers in their possessor. So sharp and penetrating, and incisive on the side of intellect—so soaring and intuitive on the side of Heart and Faith. Indeed,

these two eyes of unequal *focus* are suggestive of something deeply marked in the character of the man, not entirely without parallel in German theological history. *Schleiermacher* before him was one of the most noted instances of the union of Moravian piety with brilliant intellectual gift; a later and less marked example we have, in the generation nearest our own, *Professor Otto Pfleiderer*, of Berlin. Rothe himself insists again and again upon his individual, peculiar and entirely independent standpoint. He is a German of the Germans. His style is eminently his own; and in his greatest work, his *Theologische Ethik*, so *elusive* that we sometimes wonder "if it is *thought*, and not merely words skilfully strung together." But a sketch of his history, especially that of his mind, will put us in a better position for estimating his place in the theological world.

Rothe's father was a Prussian Government official in Posen and Breslau; his mother was a woman of much spiritual gift. In his home religion was a quiet power, not much expressed in words. As a child, he developed a decided direction for the religious, the supernatural and the mystical; quite in contradiction to his surroundings, which were rationalistic. At his confirmation he experienced an awakening. For the supernatural form of the Saviour—his Lord and Redeemer—there arose in him a pious devotion, the exercise of which afforded him the most intense enjoyment. Along with this there sprang up in his mind an enthusiastic love of literature. Goethe, Schiller, Jean Paul, both the Schlegels, Tieck, but especially Novalis, were his favourites. The romantic spirit of the time made a deep impression upon him. In his childhood came the great year of patriotic uprising against the power of Napoleon. And Breslau was a centre of the movement. The Court resided here three months of the year 1813. Here were assembled such men as Von Stein and Moritz

Arndt, and hundreds of volunteers crowded to their banner. In 1817 Rothe completed his school course and entered the University—with the permission rather than encouragement of his parents—to study theology. Heidelberg was the University of his choice. He was warned from the first against its prevailing spirit, which in those days was regarded as mystical and overstrained, yet with undoubted speculative and poetic impulses. Daub, a now forgotten speculative theologian, and Hegel, the great philosopher, were its leading lights, as well as the historical researcher, Schlosser. Into this atmosphere plunged young Rothe with great joy and keenness. For Hegel he had at first little taste and hardly any understanding, but his logic and metaphysic began to interest him. The student life of the time, however, was pre-eminently attractive. These were the days of supreme patriotic feeling among students, and saw the founding of the well-known *Burschenschaften*. Into these Rothe threw himself upon conscientious principle, rather than from any personal pleasure they gave him. The public life of the time appeared to the young student as the beginning of a regeneration. It was marked by the festival of the *Burschenschaften*, which was held on the 18th October, 1817, at the Wartburg. Amid all this, his piety was protected by the childlikeness and simplicity of his life. He never forgot to attend church; every night before retiring to rest he sang a hymn. His relation to his parents remained childlike as ever, while we perceive a rapid growth of his personality, an increasing firmness of judgment, and a more determined cast of character.

Now as his twenty-first year approaches, we perceive the crisis which so often comes to spirits like his, exactly at that age. With Luther it led to the cloister and the struggles of the monk, and at last full emancipation. In men like Rothe it oft begins as disillusionment. His childlike optimism suddenly changed to an almost choleric pessimism. His

joyous contentment with existence broke into a bitter criticism. His third Heidelberg semester marks the period. Openly it took the form of Discontentment—a double sort: discontentment with the world as it appeared to him, and discontentment with his own spiritual possessions, the incompleteness of which could not yet possibly satisfy him. Several outward events intensified this strife: the breakdown of the student movement for freedom in 1819 by the rash act of young Sand in the assault upon the life of Kotzebue, and the not unnatural public reaction which followed it. Still deeper went this disturbance in regard to Church matters. It may be said that now Rothe begins to doubt as to the future of his own Protestant Church. He had long been inclined to hold that Protestantism was only a stage in the attainment of a higher Catholicism. But now arose the question in his mind, If Protestantism generally was anything positive, if one can really speak of a Protestant Church, if what is so called be not a mere negation of the idea, if the only true Church were not the Catholic Church! And at this point we see Rothe already on the way to Rome; really, however, only in his thought. His entire religious feeling remains Protestant. We perceive only the baffled striving of a young thinker ensnared in his own dogmatism, who makes the attempt to reconcile everything with his own dogmatic conception, and falls out with the spiritual world which surrounds him and with his own perception of it. He is, in short, dissatisfied with his whole surroundings. He is wholly dissevered from the social life of his student days, and at his departure from Heidelberg sings a Thanksgiving Psalm for his deliverance.

In the autumn of 1819 he left Heidelberg to continue his studies in Berlin. There he came within the influence of men like Schleiermacher, Neander, Marheinecke, and again Hegel. But the spirit of incompleteness and of discontent still possessed him. Even these great men had little sway

with him. He was a man of such peculiar individuality that he must fight his own battle alone and reconcile the two conflicting forces of his own nature ; his keen desire for thorough knowledge and understanding on the one side, his deep-hearted conception of the spiritual and supernatural on the other. One perceives in him the traces of this strife all through his life and work. No one could have a more entire, honest, and thorough-going hold of Christ as his supernatural Redeemer, of the now exalted and glorified Christ as the Ruler of the world, of the Crucified Christ as its Saviour. But no one could curb for a moment the freedom of his intellectual criticism or blunt the keenness of his perception of all the facts both of the theological and of the actual world.

On the close of his studies in Berlin, Rothe entered himself, at the advice of Neander, on seminary life in Wittenberg. The Theological Seminary is what we would call the *Divinity School proper* of the German pastor, however much he may have studied theology speculatively at the University. The personalities of the Seminary School had new attractions for him—the general superintendent, Nitsch, father of the well-known theologian, Karl Immanuel Nitsch, the Provost Schleusner, especially the strongly orthodox and believing Heubner, afterwards his brother-in-law, a man of noble metal, of great fulness of ideas, and of sharp perception. For a long while the inward contest still went on. The reconciliation between his deeply ingrained pietistic devoutness and his ever-rising delight in life went very slowly on. There was ever that real fight with himself, a love too for his Redeemer, a burning heart for mankind, a deep hate of sin, a painful despising of human nature, together with a glowing enthusiasm for its high worth. “O thou despised world,” he cries, “that most of us only knew, how much we have in thee!” “The spiritual man is like all others. He belongs also to the

world, and only through experience of life learns that all the relations of earth are holy so soon as one brings to them a holy disposition. So have I seen that noble Christlike men bring forth fruit."

In his second semester (1821) all this came to a head. There broke upon the seminary the storm of a new spirit. The entering candidates were mostly of the "awakened," with a newly awakened zeal. The most important personality of this time was *Rudolph Stier*, afterwards superintendent of Schkeuditz, near Leipsic, and the well-known author of the Evangelical commentary on *The Words of the Lord Jesus*. No other man ever made so deep an impression upon Rothe, and he retained it to the last day of his life. Stier was a Christian of the old stamp, a noble mixture of the thorough scriptural belief of the 16th century, with the deep inward piety of Spencer and Franke. Not long after this came his engagement to Luise von Brück, a sister-in-law of his friend Heubner. In the whole transaction he was a thorough-going pietist. "I put the matter wholly into the Lord's hand," he said, and in the last hour of prayer his conviction stood fast.

Late in the year 1822 he left the seminary and returned to his home in Breslau. The inward struggle still, to some extent, continued. "I was an upright, a sincere pietist, but not a happy one; a pietist of the conscience, but without real joyfulness." Preaching and study went on with great diligence till a notable event occurred which gave an entirely new turn both to his outward and to his inward life. In 1823 a call reached him to become *chaplain to the embassy at Rome*. The attraction was very obvious for a man of such academic culture, united to great preaching gifts and delight in preaching. But it cost him much inward conflict to make up his mind. Sleepless nights were spent in meditation and prayer before he came to a decision.

In the beginning of 1824 Rothe and his young wife arrived in Rome. The change was for him a striking one : from the Wittenberg Seminary to the capital of the world, from an exclusive intercourse with theological students and professors to a world-wide international fellowship with princes and noblemen, diplomatists and artists of the most various national, literary, religious, and artistic education and spiritual interests ; from the motherland of Protestantism to the centre point of the Roman Catholic Church ; from a narrow pietistic conventicle to a wide-opened world where culture and educated sensibility reigned and gathered together educated men out of all countries. But his own relation to all this was exactly what might have been expected. "Rome," he says, "has no other interest for me than the first village would have had to which I had been appointed pastor." The Vatican and the Colosseum alone might possibly have awakened some astonishment. But beyond his home happiness, which in the highest degree contented him, it was simply and solely the interest of the office he had undertaken which absorbed him. His preaching gifts were addressed to no indifferent circle. Three evangelical ambassadors belonged to his congregation : Baron Bunsen represented Prussia, Baron von Reden Hanover, and Reinhold the Netherlands, distinguished painters, sculptors and architects, people of rank and wealth from all lands, who flocked thither for pleasure, learned men who had a scientific purpose, sick people in search of health, German artisans and workmen who had strayed thither. A lively religious interest at that time pervaded the artistic world. Rome was the centre of a movement among distinguished men of artistic circles, the aim of which was the reconciling of religion and art.

Our own Scottish Thomas Erskine, of Linlathen, is expressly mentioned by Rothe as one of those with whom it

was his peculiar delight to have religious intercourse. The direction of his work at this time may be gathered from his own words: "The Bible was to me a complete organism, a mirror of our common life, out of which everything is to be gained which is necessary for knowledge. The essential elements of speculation are to be found in the Holy Scripture. It is a microcosm. The new life which has come to us through Christ has all those varied sides which our own spirit has. It is really a life, not only of moral sanctification, but also in the acknowledgment of truth, and in the presentation of beauty. All mirrors itself in the Scripture, not as abstract presentation of new knowledge, but as a living image of real life."

It is evident also all the while that he is working at the solution of his own personal problem. "According to my small experience there is nothing so wholesome as practically and livingly to learn the pure *moral* nature of faith; that a man can with truth joyfully say to his Saviour, 'Lord, I seek Thee and not myself. I know nothing in myself of which I can have any joy, over which I must not bitterly lament; I know nothing in heaven or on earth through which I can have help but from Thee alone.' Upon this rests the real certainty, validity, and strength of faith." Of his preaching it can be said that it flows out of his innermost personal life; he preaches because his heart is full of it. Dogmatically it is still upon the basis of the orthodox, but it is the inner life which commands it, for the dogmatic background is unthought of. Towards the close of his Roman sojourn we read that "Italian scenery is made for the artist, but has not much effect upon the soul." The life of the people has no charm for him; the carnival affects him in a very different way from that in which (*e.g.*) it affected Goethe; the Catholic festivals are to him tasteless and spiritless. Roman Catholicism finds nothing in him to content. "If any one wants to be thoroughly convinced

that the Romish Church has no help or reviving for the Church of Christ, let him come to Rome."

By this time his pursuits and studies had turned him to the scientific side of Christianity rather than to the homiletic, and an offer being made to him of a place in the professorship of the Wittenberg Seminary, he left Rome in June, 1828, and returned to Wittenberg in September. The chief fruit of his *nine* years' literary and theological activity there was the appearance in 1837 of *The Beginnings of the Christian Church and her Constitution: a Historical Essay*. For the reconciliation of his inward life the time at Wittenberg was the continuance and completion of the time at Rome. It brought to him a full inward freedom. One can read now more completely his favourite solution of life problems, the entire outline of his view of the world, and that which remained with him for the rest of his days. It was in substance this:

A conviction of the unity of the Divine and of the truly human—the unity of Christendom with that of real humanity. The natural powers which God has planted in man are the powers through which God is building up His kingdom. The departments of ordinary human life, calling and family, social and public life, art and science, these are the departments in which the Divine life works itself out. The historical development of mankind is nothing less than the life of God slowly actualizing itself through the powers of men. But Rothe brought these Hegelian ideas to a more exact point. He has put the question and given the answer. Has this natural human life, which is also the life of God, in the world any combination in settled order? As the Church is the community of the religious life, is there any community for the human life? He finds this community in the State. Church and State are the two organisms, of which the latter is by no means secondary to the former in independent worth before God. This con-

ception was, of course, an entire overturning of the simple and one-sided religious standpoint. It meant an entire and radical opposition to the pietistic view of the world, which recognises certain cherished conditions of the heart as the only realities in the sight of God, and treats the world which lies beyond these with indifference, or even with hostility. He has arrived at the conviction that it had been a fault of the pietistic movement to repress individuality; and that in the fullest development of his individual powers lies the life-task of every human being. That to watch the unfolding of human history was worthy of an almost devout attention, for behind these occurrences lay deep designs of Providence, that the movements of public life corresponded to a great Divine plan for the human race.

Up to this time he had been indifferent to politics; in Rome he had hardly ever read a newspaper. Political history had taken for him, since the July Revolution of 1830, a meaning and a charm. But what has the Reformation and Protestantism to do with the great evolution of mankind? For this question also he has his answer. The Church is not the final aim. The final aim is the State—the organization of the moral life, and Protestantism has no higher task than gradually to lead men out of the exclusively religious region into the moral. What have we from the Reformation? Not unbelief. The Reformation required science; at God's design she has called it into life; unbelief is only a passing phenomenon, not the destruction of piety. The pious Christian is no more than the true and real man. The Reformation has really brought piety back into human life. She has created a Church, though this is not of the greatest importance. The Reformation has created a greater fellowship than that of a narrow, external Church. Far from restricting Christian fellowship within the narrow limits of a Church, she has opened it to

the world. Not a new Church, but the world itself, the entire common life of mankind shall form the region of the Christian fellowship. No more shall there be a particular Christian society, but all human society shall become Christian.

The scene of Rothe's activity during the remaining thirty years of his life was the Chair of Theology in *Heidelberg*, to which he was translated in 1837. With the exception of five or six years in a similar position at Bonn, his vigour as a scholar and as a man was devoted to the fulfilment of this task. During his first ten years of professorial life at Heidelberg the main product was the publication of his *Theologische Ethik* (1845), in which were embodied the ideas we have briefly sketched, and which was undoubtedly his most characteristic contribution to theological literature. The other main work published in his lifetime was his *Zur Dogmatik*, "Introduction to Dogmatics," in which he discusses from his own standpoint the idea of Dogmatic, the nature of Revelation, and the Holy Scripture. His own class-treatment of *Dogmatic* was not published till after his death. It is a valuable outline of all the usual Christian doctrines, accompanied with a threefold criticism: a comparison of it with the Biblical statement,—a scientific criticism, and one from the standpoint of religious feeling. Revelation completes itself through a manifestation of God in historical and natural occurrences which bear a miraculous character; and, on the other hand, through inspiration, which acts on the human mind, not magically, but morally. Rothe does not allow that Revelation and Holy Scripture are identical. Scripture is the necessary historical annal or account of Revelation. But the Bible does not contain the entire truth; there follows after it always new and further Christian truth. The result of Biblical research must contribute its part, the repression or concealment of which will only stir up doubt and mistrust. These ideas of Róthe

were not new, but the manner in which they were expressed, from a believing standpoint, made a great impression on the theological world.

Another of his favourite ideas anticipated, and may be said to have originated, one that has become prominent and characteristic of the Ritschlian school. We are possessed, he said, of the conviction that the Christendom of our day can only believe with inward truth in an undogmatic Christ. The Christ of the theologians can never, for Christians in general, become an object of belief. The large proportion of hearts beats cordially for the undogmatic Christ of the New Testament, even when they have turned from the Christ of the theologians. To help these *unconscious* Christians—to help them to the consciousness that the best they have springs from Christ, that must be held the chief task of our time. “Let us suppose,” he said, “that the Lord Jesus were again to appear in the midst of Christendom, but exactly as of old, in the form of a servant, in the most complete *incognito*, without title, and without credentials, without his robes of office, and without the insignia of His heavenly Father, so that there were nothing to be seen in Him by us but His holiness, His heart wholly filled by His heavenly Father with pitying love and enlightening truth. Who of our present Christians would hold to Him and recognise Him, and who not? I judge no man beforehand, but, for my part, I hold that many of those who with the greatest readiness would subscribe an orthodox confession about Christ, would pass Him by without recognition, without at all suspecting His Divine origin, just because they did not perceive in Him those decisive signs which stand in their dogmatic. And that, on the other hand, many of those who are not able to make their own the Church Confession about Christ would feel drawn to Him in the deepest ground of their hearts, would follow Him in every step, and would fall adoring at His feet.”

“And so,” he says, addressing one in whom this struggle between faith and unbelief was at its height—“so you will perceive that what you call unbelief is to a great extent not such; that, indeed, the real unbelief in Jesus has its seat in quite other regions than where you seek it. You will become aware of a real and already present faith in Jesus which you have not hitherto acknowledged, because a false representation of Him has blinded your eye. You will become conscious of your hitherto *unconscious* Christianity, you will call by its right name what of true piety lives in you, namely, faith in our Lord Jesus Christ,—no more, as heretofore, a love of virtue and the like; you will humbly give thanks for all that is good and noble in you to Jesus, from whom alone it springs. You will joyfully acknowledge Him before all the world, and reach, without shyness, the brother hand to those who have long since openly confessed Him.”¹

One can see how this amiable, but really practically unworkable position of Rothe's latest years led to what was a *tragic* result, so far as he personally was concerned—a tragedy not of the outward or sensational kind, but one of the soul and heart in a man so sensitive. The curious disparity and inconsistency between his far-reaching intellectual positions, his determination to secure absolute liberty of teaching within the Church, and his firm personal adherence to the spiritual and supernatural elements in Christianity, his firm belief in the supernatural and glorified Divine Christ of the Scriptures, are obvious enough. In his latest years he took an open and public place in ecclesiastical and even in political affairs, such as he had never previously occupied. Along with Schenkel, who was really the active and working member of the alliance, he founded the well-known *Protestanten-Verein*—“*Protestant Union*,”

¹ *Gesammelte Vorträge und Abhandlungen Dr. Richard Rothes aus seinen letzten Lebensjahren.* Elberfeld: R. L. Friederichs, 1886.

which gave a practical expression to principles that have been sketched.

This movement was put into definite shape at Frankfort (a.-M.) on September 20th, 1863. At first the movement had great vogue. A good deal of enthusiasm and unity were evoked. The intention, ratherly vaguely expressed, it must be admitted, was the formation of a Church which would include all that had been gained in the Christian culture which had prevailed in Europe since the beginning of the present century. A Church which is to be the Church of the people must create an inward agreement with the life of the people, with their entire culture,—must come into sympathetic and happy mutual connection with them. “Things are come to that point, that our Church must with full consciousness express her choice between the alternative of being a people’s Church or a mere meeting for pietistic edification.” These ideas gained ground at the first celebration of the Protestant Union, 7th June, 1865, and again at a celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Preachers’ Seminary, founded by Rothe. But in the midst of these hopeful developments of the new era there occurred suddenly a great disturbance. This was occasioned by the appearance in 1864 of Schenkel’s *Characterbild Jesu* following Renan’s *Leben Jesu*. The consequence of the appearance of this book was a violent agitation against the author, and a desire for his removal from the directorship of the Seminary. It gave occasion to the protest of 118 of the ministers of Baden, and was followed by a decision of the rulers of the Church in the same direction. The publication of a representation of Christ without the supernatural birth and the bodily resurrection, without the miraculous feedings and without the raisings of the dead, was a sufficient ground for all this. The storm evoked fell as much upon Rothe as upon Schenkel, though in the case of the former certainly quite unjustifiably. But the blow

given to the movement was in Rothe's case fatal. It was followed by public decisions of the Church authorities which could not be revoked. Rothe took it seriously to heart, and in the end sickened and died, 20th August, 1867. During his illness, being asked if he wished his relatives to be called, he declined, with the peculiar remark, "It is not good when so many people stand round a death-bed. There is no room left for the angels of God." One of his last utterances was: "I die in the faith upon which I have lived, and this faith is for me in nothing disturbed or gone astray. It has only always become more inward and more steadfast." His funeral services were attended by great numbers, and he was interred with the greatest honours.¹

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¹ The latter part of this paper is greatly indebted to the tractate, *Richard Rothe, sein Character, Leben und Denken*. Von Wilhelm Hönig Pfarrer in Heidelberg. Berlin, 1898.