

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY.

II. OBJECTIONS ON THE THRESHOLD.

EXCEPTION has been taken to the pursuit of eschatology on various grounds. It is opposed in the name of spiritual religion, of science, of ethics, and finally on behalf of a particular view of knowledge. We shall consider each of these in turn, starting with the religious veto, since, if the thought of future destiny is actually irrelevant to faith in the living God, there is no need to go on.

The religious case against eschatology is best put in an early work of Schleiermacher. Addressing "the cultured despisers of religion" in 1799, he writes: "You still believe in a personal God and in personal immortality. I see: unlike myself, you are still pupils of the *Aufklärung*. Even of these conceptions I have no need in order to unveil before you the sublime beauty and divinity of religion. My God is the Universe, the Unity of the All. . . . Besides, your personal immortality outside time and behind time is in truth no immortality at all. Only he who surrenders personality, which is perishable, to God the Eternal, has true or genuine immortality. In the midst of finitude to be one with the Infinite and in every moment to be eternal—this is the immortality of religion. Therefore strive even here to annihilate your personality, and to live in the One and All; strive to be more than yourself, so that when you lose yourself, you may lose but little." In notes to a later edition of the *Reden*, Schleiermacher pleads that in this passage he was discarding merely a sensuous and egoistic form of belief in survival. When writing, as he explained, he was thinking of the fact that Old Testament saints had no such belief and that religious feeling is concerned more with the present than the future. He therefore thought himself justified in point-

ing out that the hope of immortality was not so essential to piety that both stand or fall together.

The argument, on the whole, is that interest in the world to come is a mark of unspirituality. We are sure of God now and here, and nothing else really counts. There is a dawning sense of this in the Fourth Gospel, the writer of which over and over again repeats the truth that the believer has eternal life now.

In point of fact, the Fourth Gospel dwells on the future life more than any of the Synoptics. But apart from this, the religious mood typically expressed by Schleiermacher is very imperfectly moralised. It operates with a comparatively unethical thought of God. Eschatology is of course mere foolishness if God and the Universe are two names for one thing. There is no more reason why the impersonal system of things should preserve or redeem souls than why in opening spring it should raise the leaves from the winter mould, and give them another season of green beauty. A partially moral God is always precarious; caprice may leave men to the dust. The conception of man, too, is unethical. From the purely artistic or lyric point of view man is a piece of nature; and to the artist one of the chief values of man is just that his greatness and apparent promise should form so moving a contrast to his inexorable fate. That he, with "such splendid purpose in his eyes," with his love and suffering and hope, should be "blown about the desert dust, or sealed within the iron hills," has always been a fruitful and impressively pathetic theme. But art and religion appeal to disparate interests. If the Gospel is false, the aesthetic view of human life may be true, and the Christian hope has nothing in it. But if Christ is real, the only question worth asking is how far into the future His influence stretches. Can we suppose a line where it stops?

Not only so; but were the hope of blessedness to come

extinguished, present religious experience would part with its specific quality. The Christian attitude to doubt, to sense, to sin—whether in self or in society—would be radically altered. Suffering must lose its old relative aspect and become wholly dark if there is no prospect of a life un-sorrowing, but only the assurance that pain and we shall disappear together. Fellowship with God, known to be merely for a term of years, is not the fellowship which Jesus gives. It is simple lack of imagination which denies this—failure to see that the future, when it arrives, will be as real as the present.

Thus the endless hope is no vestigial survival of Jewish apocalyptic. It is the result of seeing God in the grace of Jesus. There was a promise in the human heart which God fulfilled by giving Christ; there is now a promise in the Christian heart which He will fulfil by bringing in complete redemption—a promise not simply that Christ will continue to save men in this world, but that at last He will make an end of all tragedy. A page back I quoted words from Schleiermacher's earlier period. There is a later picture of the great thinker, in his sixty-third year, at the graveside of his only son. "I stand here," he then said, "with my comfort and hope set only on the strong petition of our Lord: 'Father, I will that they whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am.'" The Gospel, without the life everlasting, has lost its identity; and a man need only be a Christian long enough to know that this is a position beyond dispute. As it has been put, "The end is not always present to the religious consciousness; it lies sometimes below the horizon; but it is always there." Even the eighteenth-century Rationalism, which swept out most doctrines, kept its hold firmly on immortality, because in its dim, unimpassioned way it still clung fast to God.

Again, it has been objected that Christian eschatology

must of necessity be in conflict with science. It implies (does it not ?) that the present world-process will come to an abrupt termination, whereas the scientific mind can only conceive the series of changes in space and time—with which human life is inextricably entangled—as alike unending and unbeginning ; just as each effect must have a cause, and so backwards for ever, so each cause must have an effect, and so onwards without conclusion.¹

It is not desirable to evade this by protesting simply that faith makes no assertions about the physical cosmos. That is not the fact. Faith is convinced, for example, that body is organic and ministrant to spirit ; that evolution was so guided of God as finally to issue in souls capable of Divine sonship ; that the phenomenon of death has no power to touch the higher self. These are all affirmations regarding the material system, its powers and its limitations ; and it is faith that makes them, not science.

But it may be pointed out that the prediction of an unending human history is at variance even with the hypothesis suggested by astronomy, according to which our planet will one day be uninhabitable. Mankind will be blotted off the face of the universe. If faith declares—validly, we Christians hold—that fellowship with God is not broken by the death of the individual, it is equally within its rights in urging that the reality of the future Kingdom is not affected by the coming annihilation of the race. The physical extinction of the species, if it happens, will make no difference to the things which God has prepared for them that love Him. Nothing that science can say vetoes Christian belief in the immortality of the individual. To believe in immortality, it is unnecessary to know the later fortunes of the body, for no ascertainable fact regarding physical corruption is rele-

¹ Cf. Kölbing, *Die bleibende Bedeutung der urchristlichen Eschatologie*, 30.

vant to the higher issue. In like manner, the final history of our planet is irrelevant to the Christian hope for mankind. The new transcendent order belongs to another plane of being. God will give the new environment as it may please Him. How or when reality will be vouchsafed to the perfect Kingdom—after the disappearance of the earth or before—we have no interest in deciding, even if decision were possible, for Christian hope is set not upon a future condition of the world, but on God.

Again, eschatology is assailed on moral grounds. "Otherworldliness," it is said, has commonly induced a contemptible neglect of life in the present—its ennobling activities, its pathetic needs. To live with a future life in sight means the undervaluation of civilized existence. We are called to possess the world and our own personality, to master nature's secrets, to give free play to intellect and imagination, to produce a society organised in wisdom and liberty. This task cannot be achieved by men whose energy and interest are distracted by thoughts of a coming world.

No one will deny that too often a selfish and fanatical "otherworldliness" has defaced the religious life. But any single interest may absorb the mind unduly. The man of science may be so engrossed in research as to neglect his family; the lover of sport may postpone civic duty to pleasure; have then sport and science no place in the good life? Such eccentricities may be put aside. The really important thing is that profoundly eschatological religion has so frequently supplied moral power and zest to great social reformers. It was Christians of this type who persuaded Great Britain to stamp out slavery. Faith of the same kind led to the amelioration of prisons and the establishment of hospitals. The consciousness of being in communion with God, such that even death could not touch it, had much to do with the manhood, trust and courage by

which these men were inspired.¹ If the human mind works sanely, what else could we expect? Can the man without hope work on as bravely or unweariedly as the man whose hope is limitless? Tholuck surely had psychology on his side when he said that only a Christian can live wholly in the present, for to him the past is pardoned and the future safe in God. What is more, no one is so constantly reminded as the Christian, if he will but study Jesus' words, that future destiny is in very close relation to present life and character. It is not believers in Christ who are tempted to exclaim, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die." It is not they whose moral energy is sapped by the refined and exquisite melancholy of the creed, "I came like Water, and like Wind I go."

To accuse present-day Christians of being too "other-worldly" is, however, fitted rather to provoke a smile. Far from thinking too often about the next life, they think much too seldom. It is certain that when spiritual zeal rekindles, as assuredly it will, we shall witness the uprush of a more vivid, august and passionate interest in the world to come. All deep feeling for God reopens that fountain of undying hope. It is the man who has received most through Christ who is surest that so far he has not received the best. Love, action, knowledge—the most desirable and worthy experiences given to man—all are ours, in this world, only in part and insecurely, whilst also it is certain that their perfect reality is in His keeping Who has bestowed the "earnest." And for the believer this means two things. On the one

¹ "The essential note of the Clapham Sect was philanthropy. Justification by works was the central doctrine of its adherents; but they were before and above all things the party of good works. Sharp, Clarkson, Wilberforce, and, later, Shaftesbury, were men of whom any Church might be proud. The abolition of the slave trade and of slavery, missions, Sunday schools, education, the Factory Acts—this was the field on which their activity displayed itself; they 'went about doing good'" (*Fawkes, Studies in Modernism*, 426).

hand, as that world of perfect good becomes more visible to faith and more attractive, "his grasp of this world becomes, perhaps, not less kindly, but it becomes less tenacious."¹ And on the other, how shall he prepare himself to possess that better, richer life, coming to flood our earthly experience as the ocean fills the shrunken river mouth with its mightier flood, except as he is true and faithful here? For the content of Christian hope is morally qualified and is assimilated only in moral ways.

One point is perhaps worth adding. It is part of faith in God to believe that men will never cease to cherish the hope of immortality. Undoubtedly no proof can be given that the Church might not drop "the life everlasting" out of the creed. But faith is sure she will not, and the certainty reposes upon the unconditionally ethical character which belongs both to God and man as revealed in Jesus. Every renascence of spiritual religion, with its quickened impression of the value and incomparable greatness of Christ, will evoke a new conviction that the soul possessed by God cannot perish.

Finally, objection has been raised on the ground that eschatological conceptions are thoroughly symbolic and, in that character, are incapable of conveying truth. The mere *fact* of symbolism is of course evident. Haering, indeed, has argued that conceptions of the world to come are necessarily symbolic, so to speak, to the second power. Symbolism here mounts, he says, to a higher point than elsewhere in religious assertion, "for the simple reason that in eschatology we speak of communion with God under other conditions of existence than those of the present, and have no words in which to describe it but those which are taken from present conditions."² All words expressive of higher experience betray a far-off sensuous origin; they reflect the life of earth. They do not convey perfectly even the ideas

¹ Rainy, *Philippians*, 254.

² *The Christian Faith* (E. T.), 855.

and feelings we now have. How then can they set forth adequately a future spiritual experience that will itself have altered ? And is not this destructive of their claim to truth ?

The answer to this will in the main be found in the consideration that if symbolism in thinking excludes truth, then human thought in all its aspects is radically unsound. Sabatier, in a captivating but unsatisfying treatment of the subject,¹ has attempted to differentiate science from religion in this respect, arguing that while religion is doomed to express the transcendent in phenomenal images whose scope is strictly limited by space and time, exact sciences operate with conceptions which may be taken as precise equivalents of the objects described. Religion, therefore, speaks in parables ; science employs notions that copy facts. This is not the place for a detailed epistemological discussion, but it may be mentioned that prominent men of science, like Mach, now maintain that the fundamental ideas of physics, such as atom, molecule, energy, mass and ether, are symbolic through and through ; they are labour-saving devices, possessed of a high degree of mental utility, which yet may have no positively true relation to the objective facts of nature. If this be so, it is conceivable that the proportion of symbolism in a statement like " God is our Father " may be much lower than in many a proposition of physics, while in the words " God is love " it would, so far as I can see, have reached a vanishing point.

Apart from this, however, we have no cause to hide the fact that eschatological expressions are symbolic in a degree that is, within theology, special and abnormal. Admittedly robes and palms and songs, pearl gateways and crystal rivers cannot be taken in a literal sense, nor can such a text as " I will give to him to sit down with Me on My throne." Is this the equivalent of saying that no true state-

¹ *Esquisse d'une philosophie de la religion*, 390-400.

ment regarding the future can be made? By no means. To begin with a fact easily overlooked, symbols not often merely but always have a quite definite meaning. Each symbol is a soul in a body. When it is remarked of a distinguished public man that he wore his laurels with becoming modesty, or of a thief that he showed his pursuers a clean pair of heels, the use of highly figurative language in no way excludes an entirely plain sense. Such phrases, it is true, do not give an exact photograph of the event, none the less they are understood by every person familiar generally with the matters in question. This existence, within the symbol, of a distinct thought is signalised very clearly by the fact that symbols undergo a perpetual process of criticism and refinement. The mind can criticise symbols because it has made them for its own ends; it knows what they are trying to say, and, as thought advances, discovers how it may be better said. For us this means that in their faith Christian believers possess the key to unlock symbols which to others are dark and non-significant. Communion with God has rendered them familiar with what logicians call "the subject of discourse," enabling them to test the validity of figures by reference to the supreme reality of which all are partial expressions. So that even when what is not of this world is expressed in terms of this world, we are not without a guiding principle. And the task of Dogmatic, in this regard, is not to strip away the picture, but to be fully conscious of it, and, when it is outworn, to replace it by one more worthy.

We are thus entitled to use eschatological symbols freely, provided that our symbolism is in consonance with the Gospel. If we speak in faith, our words will have a valid sense, capable of verification by the best Christian feeling. It would not help us in the least to discard the loved ancient phrases, "In my Father's house are many mansions," or

“ God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes,” as being fatally metaphorical ; on the contrary, we should lose inexpressibly by parting with expressions so natural and sincere. If we select a poem dealing with life beyond the veil, can we say it would gain *in truth* by the exclusion of all symbol ? Take, for instance, Vaughan’s well-known stanzas opening with these lines :

“ They are all gone into the world of light,
And I alone sit lingering here.”

Can it in this case be maintained that symbolism is a hindrance to the expression of truth, and not rather its choicest and most transparent medium ? Who will venture to extract the substance of Vaughan’s truth, and to exhibit it in more adequate form ?

The question of symbolism, however, is suggestive of a graver difficulty. How shall we test doctrines of eschatology, proving them true or false ? Is there an available criterion ? It cannot of course be Bible language chosen indiscriminately. On this point the manifold character and content of Scripture eschatologies is conclusive, forming as it does a problem which the dogma of verbal inspiration could not in the least relieve. Conceptions of the last things found in the Synoptics diverge from those of St. Paul, St. Paul’s from those of St. John. We need only consider what the New Testament affirms regarding the woes of the last time, the coming of Antichrist, his overthrow, the first resurrection and the second death, the millennial reign of Christ, to feel the utter hopelessness of erecting the Bible text into a final statutory code. To attempt to force upon modern intelligence the whole unsifted mass of Bible conceptions has the effect of bringing down the edifice of Christian hope in ruins. There are elements in the representation which have no power to evoke faith ; nothing in the soul echoes to them ; they are not felt to express any vital aspect of salva-

tion ; they are not made sure to the mind by the witness of the Spirit. Altogether apart from the Old Testament, as to which there will be no dispute, there are details even in the New Testament picture of things to come for which it is impossible any longer to win Christian interest. Can we assume, indeed, that St. Paul had finally adjusted his conclusions on each point ? And must we not allow for idiosyncrasy in the apostolic mind ? We surely must : and surely we may also hold that even an apostle may be a poet, who would stare at the literalism of the commentator. It will not do to proceed on an *a priori* view which puts the creative message of the Gospel on one level with any and every inherited conception of Rabbinism or apocalyptic.

Yet there is a criterion, and it may be formulated quite simply. It is the criterion we use in doctrine elsewhere ; and it is good for eschatology as for truth about Divine providence, or sin, or atonement. It is the Person of Jesus, in His sovereign redemptive power, as apprehended by the faith which finds God in Him. Belief concerning the last things, accordingly, is part of our confession of the Saviour. As we seek to distinguish husk and kernel in old tradition, we must again and again put the question, What truth, on this point or that, is certified to the soul by faith in Jesus ? What ideas are echoed in the redeemed spirit, winning free and unhesitating assent ? The question how we know a true eschatological statement when we see it can only be answered by reference to the same standard of truth as prevails in Christian Dogmatic as a whole—the Gospel in its vital unity with the believing mind. To elicit and to systematise the utterances of faith is our task. It is not postulates of practical Reason that we seek, or the speculative dicta of metaphysic, but the calm and triumphant certainties of the soul possessed by Christ.

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