

Modern Positive Theology.

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II.

Scripture and Dogma: The Authority of Confessions.

THE great theological question of our day concerns the seat of authority in religion. In the last resort this is a problem of epistemology. What is religious faith? What is knowledge? How are they to be reconciled without injustice to either?

It is an abiding merit of the Ritschlian Theology to have stated the problem in this ultimate form. But Ritschlianism has also formulated another question closely related to this one, and though less fundamental, of even more direct interest to Christian Theology. This question is, What is Christianity? How does Christianity, in its essential nature as religion, stand related to Scripture and ecclesiastical dogma?

A theological school does not create problems. It only states and tries to answer them, and a clear statement is already an important step in the direction of an answer. Confronted by these same problems which Ritschlianism must always have the honour of having first clearly formulated, Modern Positive Theology seeks to answer them in a way of its own. Dissatisfaction with the Ritschlian answers is its very *raison d'être*.

Of course the problems themselves do not exist for those who are content to identify Christianity with assent to an external authority, the Bible, or the whole teaching of the Church, or the creeds, as giving an authoritative summary of the essential points of that teaching. But Modern Positive Theology is quite emphatic that the Christian can be bound by no merely external authority. Scripture and Dogma must both alike come to life again, so to speak, in personal experience before they are of any religious value, and they are authoritative only in so far as they are capable of being thus personally appropriated and reproduced. This is certainly modern. Perhaps, indeed, it is more distinctively modern than is always acknowledged. But it is not peculiar to the Modern Positive Theology. Some such view is held in principle by all 'modern' theologians. It is the foundation upon which von Hofmann

and Frank seek to base their systems. It is not too positive even for a Ritschlian. If differences emerge in the detailed elaboration, the reason is that the principle is not always held with sufficient clearness, or applied with thorough consistency. The faith of a Christian man is a complex thing. The faith of Christendom is still more complex. In experience, Christian faith is never found pure and unalloyed. To separate what belongs to its essence from all the accidentals, and to establish the residue as a system of Christian truth valid for, and acceptable to, all believers, is a harder task than theology has yet accomplished, though surely not harder than should yet be accomplished, if Dogmatics be indeed a science. Hofmann and Frank tried to show that the subjective faith of a Christian believer, according to the principle above set forth, vouches for substantially the whole content of the Bible, and the whole dogmatic content of Lutheran orthodoxy. The three fit together so that each establishes the others. The newer school is less ambitious, or rather they see clearly that such an attempt must prove as futile as it is unnecessary. Seeberg tells us that 'we experience divine revelation, and in our experience of it or of Christ, Christ becomes our Lord, and Scripture our authority.' Only 'what is authoritative for the Christian is not what stands in the Bible of cosmology, psychology, metaphysics, or exegesis; it is what the Bible says of religion.'

As to individual critical questions, differences of opinion are to be expected. But the legitimacy of historical criticism as regards both Testaments is fully conceded in principle by the whole school, and it is rightly maintained that the *religious* value of Scripture, capable of attestation as above, must remain unaffected by critical results. The attitude to criticism is admirably put by Beth (p. 238). 'By no longer isolating the Biblical writings, but investigating them in connexion with contemporary literature, modern scriptural study again and again

brings to view new points of contact from which we can gain insight into how the Biblical writers both thought and felt. From these investigations we have come to see how many ideas even in the New Testament are conditioned by the circumstances of the time. We are gradually coming to understand how so many religious conceptions of the New Testament authors were committed to writing in a form in which we cannot accept them. We are learning more and more to look into the structure of these men's thought, and so to understand the presuppositions of their presentation of it. And it is the beginning of a consistent use of Scripture that we are learning to know the ideas and modes of thought by means of which they built up and gave expression to their religious convictions, as distinguished from the objects of their faith, and now see the points where we can set to work in order to bring home to us men of to-day, in the sense meant by the ancient writer, those expressions which present difficulties to our understanding, and that without prejudice to the realities of the faith.' Thus Scripture and Dogma must both be understood psychologically. To have shown the way to this, according to Beth, is Seeberg's great service. But surely this is just what the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* are attempting to do. Only in their hands, psychology is apt to become a universal dissolvent, while Modern Positive Theology insists strongly that the ecclesiastical dogma enshrines *religious truth*, and that the religious motive was at least one of the dominant factors in its formation. 'Faith is a fact of experience, and dogma is the product of reflexion upon experience.' The formation of the ecclesiastical dogma was 'in its day a necessary modernizing process.' If dogmas were abolished the Christian world would begin to form new ones to-morrow. Granted; but would they be just those established at Nicea and Chalcedon? Not quite, Seeberg would admit, because, though the experience is the same, the general intellectual outlook and the attendant circumstances are different. So far as I can make out, the only difference between this position and that of the Ritschlian right is that, while Seeberg holds that the Dogma is authoritative in so far as it can attest itself to experience, a Ritschlian would rather say that the

experience from which the Dogma derives its justification belongs to the essence of Christianity. That is surely a distinction without a difference. The real difference is not one of principle, but only of degree. Modern Positive Theology is a shade more conservative than Ritschlianism. This holds true especially of its point of departure. It starts with the object of vindicating, as far as possible, the dogmatic heritage of the Christian Church, rather than from the immediacy of living Christian experience. But the practical outcome is very much the same.

Schian thinks that Beth inconsistently takes refuge in Scripture as an external authority, when he draws a distinction between the Apostles' and the other creeds on the ground that the statements of the former originate not in ancient theologizing, but in Scripture. Beth, however, does not set up the Apostles' creed as authoritative because directly scriptural. He merely states an objective fact regarding its contents. The grounds upon which Modern Positive Theology bases its conviction that those contents are true, will come before us in our next. Suffice it to say, meantime, that though of course not concerned to establish the historicity of every miracle narrative, our school strongly asserts that the presence of the miraculous in a document is no evidence that the document is unhistorical, and emphatically affirms the Virgin Birth and Resurrection of our Lord.

With reference to Confessions, Seeberg holds, with Frank, that they must not be allowed to become barriers in the way of theological progress. A Confession is not a formulated body of doctrine. It is only the affirmation of a religious truth in opposition to some particular error, with the help of the theological means of the time. It is thus binding only as regards the religious intention of the doctrine and the renunciation of the opposed error.

This view was held and taught, I believe, by a great Scottish theologian who had many points of affinity with the Modern Positive Theology, and was, if I am not mistaken, in his earlier years profoundly influenced by Hofmann, the late Professor A. B. Bruce. It is in my opinion a wise and salutary view. But was it known at Augsbur, Dresden, or Westminster?