

## The Danger of Mares' Nests in Theology.

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1. DURING the last century there has been a very rapid expansion of human knowledge, and a very thorough transformation of human thought. Since the Renaissance and the Reformation this process has been going on, but probably the nineteenth century may be regarded as showing the process of change most widely and fully. During the Middle Ages the Church dominated thought and life; and the authority, which often degenerated into the tyranny, of 'the queen of the sciences' was unchallenged, or challenged only at very great risk or cost. In the modern world an emancipation of the varied interests and pursuits of human society from ecclesiastical surveillance and control has been taking place, and even Christian theology has been drawn into this movement. The ban of authority is broken, and theology is seeking to maintain itself in freedom. As the human mind is one, it cannot remain unaffected by the progress of human knowledge and thought around; and it would even appear as if its former servants were claiming to be its present masters. Historical and literary criticism, scientific discovery, and philosophical inquiry sometimes seek to dictate terms of peace on the evident assumption that the battle has gone against it; and even in the Christian churches there are thinkers and writers who seem to regard the belief in miracles, for instance, as the Adrianople of Christian theology, which should be forthwith surrendered to the alliance of criticism, science, philosophy.

2. Modern knowledge and thought claim all reality as their province; and during last century religion has received attention from both science and philosophy such as it had not received before. It was impossible for philosophy, dealing with the ultimate problems of the world, to ignore religion, which claims to relate man to the ultimate reality; but in Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Only* we have the beginnings of the modern philosophy of religion; and to Hegel this discipline owes more than to any other great thinker. To thinkers of an earlier age it would have appeared certain that religion as an expression of the mind of man belonged as a subject of study to philosophy and not to science; but during last

century science was steadily encroaching on the domain of philosophy, and claiming that mental phenomena no less than physical fell under its dominion also. The *Lectures on Metaphysics*, by Sir William Hamilton, contain a great deal that now is without dispute relegated to the science of psychology. The study of the inner life of man by the exact methods of science has made great advance within a short time; and now in the psychology of religion the religious life of man is subjected to its close scrutiny. As the facts about men's religious life throughout the world have been gathered, the endeavour has been made amid all the perplexing variety of beliefs, customs, rites, to discover uniformity by the comparative study of religions. Thus has the range of knowledge been extended, and the method of study been defined.

3. It would be folly for Christian theology to ignore this fresh outlook and to neglect these new resources; for the Christian religion cannot be isolated from all other religions, and its truth and their error be dogmatically asserted. The Christian religion has much to gain from this more extensive and accurate study of what religion in itself is, and what the other religions have become. Whether, and how far, it is fitted and destined to be the universal religion can be determined only if it can be shown to correspond to the essential nature of religion, and to satisfy the permanent and universal necessities of the soul as no other religion can. But even if there was not this inward impulse to abandon its isolation, there is the outward demand. In the name of religion, and in view of the rights of other religions, the Christian religion is being challenged to prove its claim. The missionary enterprise of the Christian Church must be intellectually justified by Christian theology; nor is this the only reason. Many inquiring minds within the Christian Church are disturbed and perplexed in faith by their new knowledge and fresh thought on religion, and are demanding some reassurance in regard to the superiority of this to all other religions. Such thought as the writer has been able to give to the philosophy, psychology, and comparative study of religion has led to a growing conviction that Christian theology in its

own interests as well as in defence or commendation of the Christian faith must fully utilize these new resources.

4. It must be recognized, however, that there is a peril as well as a promise in the application of this new knowledge and fresh thought to the object of Christian faith. There is a danger lest the distinctive character of the religion of Christ should be obscured by being clothed in borrowed and alien representations. There may be a mutilation and a distortion of the object of Christian faith in the attempt to assimilate it to the contents of other beliefs. In the method of comparison uniformity may appear to be secured by the unwarranted sacrifice of real differences. The method of investigation, which has been effective in one sphere of knowledge, may be altogether inappropriate in another. The interest of philosophy and the interest of religion are not identical; and so philosophy may assert as primary what is less vital for religion, and may ignore as an inferior element what for religion has most value. Mind so differs from matter that the methods of physical science are not without modification applicable to the study of it. Religion involves a relation to a reality that does not come within the observation and experiment of science; and consequently, even if psychology were adequate to describe and explain most of the processes of mind, the doubt may arise whether its plummet can go down to the depths of the soul. The purpose of this article is to enforce the need of caution in the use of these fresh resources of Christian theology, by exposing some of the *mares' nests* which an inadequately critical use of the new methods has discovered.

### I.

1. The first attempt to apply to Christian theology one of these partly alien methods was made by philosophy; and we can take Hegel as the conspicuous example of the results of such application. Hegel supposed that in giving a philosophical interpretation of the Christian faith he was confirming the truth by commending it to thought. To him the doctrine of the Trinity has a speculative significance and value. It conforms to his formal principle of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; it accords with his material principle of God in Himself, God in the otherness from Himself, and God in the return to Himself. 'In his account of Christianity,' says Pfeleiderer, 'he treats

of God, firstly *per se*, as He is in eternity (Kingdom of the Father); then in His manifestation in history (Kingdom of the Son); lastly in His return from manifestation into Himself in the process of reconciliation, or as the spirit of the Church, which is the eternal in time' (*Development of Theology*, p. 77). The reconciliation of God to Himself, the taking up of the difference once more into unity 'can only take place by a process within the human spirit,' and this is 'conceived in the creed of the Christian Church as the external history of the incarnation of God in Christ, as the atoning death of the God-man.' 'Thus the orthodox conception of the deity and humanity of Christ is explained as an inner necessity of the religious consciousness in its Christian stage.' Hegel, however, does not hold Jesus to have been a really supernatural being, but essentially a man conscious of oneness with the will of God (*ibid.* pp. 78-79).

2. Although the Right Wing of the Hegelian school tried to develop a Christian theology on this basis, the Left Wing soon showed how far these speculative ideas were from the distinctive Christian faith. As Hegel identifies the Divine Trinity with the process of the world, God appearing to come to self-consciousness in man only, and completing His or its evolution in the Hegelian philosophy, Hegelianism easily passes over into pantheism, or even, in view of the abstract ideas with little religious content used, into what Pfeleiderer has properly described as *panlogism*. As Strauss proved, the idea of Incarnation as presented by Hegel is more applicable to humanity as a whole than to the historical Jesus. We may say that this Hegelian version of Christian doctrine is a mare's nest. For this failure two reasons can be given: the interest is cosmic rather than ethical, and the method is too intellectual. The object is the explanation of the world in terms of thought, and not the deliverance of man in facts of experience. Speculative thought tends to a premature monism; religious experience recognizes a dualism of sin and God, which can be transcended only in a gradual process of redemption. The apprehension and appreciation of this process requires more than the exercise of the intellect; it is the moral conscience and the religious spirit in man that must be exercised; for the Christian faith that grasps the reality of God in Christ and His Cross has another interest and another method than any philosophy has ever had.