

The Danger of Mares' Nests in Theology.

BY THE REV. A. E. GARVIE, D.D., PRINCIPAL OF NEW COLLEGE, LONDON.

II.

1. WE have seen that the Hegelian version of Christian theology is a mare's nest. But philosophy, especially idealist philosophy, is not the latest intellectual fashion. It is psychology that is considered up-to-date; for it is expected to give us sure knowledge and not vain speculation. There can be no doubt of the value of psychology, the scientific study of the mental processes; and what follows is not in any way intended to discredit psychology within its own proper province. Neither need it be disputed that we can learn a great deal about the nature and the development of religion in the human subject by the application of the psychological method. The ultimate problems of the origin, the value, and the validity of religion, however, so involve the reference to the divine object, that psychology by itself is incapable of answering them; and there is still room for a philosophy of religion alongside of a psychology. In the solution of the problems of religious education and 'the cure of souls' psychology is likely to be more and more a potent factor. In the interpretation of the Scriptures the dogmatic has given place to the historical and the critical treatment; this needs to be supplemented explicitly by the psychological, although it is already implicit in both history and criticism. We must interpret words spoken or written, deeds done and sufferings borne, through the human mind of speaker, writer, doer, or sufferer. Such books as James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Starbuck's *Psychology of Religion*, and Davenport's *Primitive Traits in Religious Revivals*, to mention only a few of an alarmingly increasing multitude, are not only of keen interest, but of great value to the Christian theologian. But when we look more closely at the applications of psychology to the religious consciousness, especially to the Christian faith, we shall probably have to record the discovery of more mares' nests.

2. Before we inspect with curiosity two of these specimens of the illusions of thought, it will be well to call attention to some of the defects of the method of psychology.

(a) Modern psychology is being studied in very close alliance with physiology. If the thought of former days unduly ignored the dependence of mind on brain, of soul on body, the tendency to-day is to exaggerate the closeness of the relation. It is assumed that there is a constant and complete parallelism between mental and organic processes; and that it is the organic rather than the mental process which is determinative. But we may remind ourselves that, from the standpoint of the physicist, Sir Oliver Lodge admits that life transcends, while it utilizes, physical and chemical forces; and from the standpoint of the psychologist the late William James insists that brain is not the productive, but the permissive or transmissive organ of mind. - While, in regard to sensation and movement, where the common activity of mind and body is evident, psychological investigation may establish so constant and complete correspondence, observation and experiment cannot so penetrate the inmost recesses of the inner life of the soul in religion as to demonstrate the same dependence of soul on body. In applying psychology to religion we must then beware of its physiological bias, as here one seems to be entering a realm beyond the methods of either of these sciences.

(b) But, *secondly*, psychology is compelled to abstract mental processes for their separate observation, whereas mind is a concrete unity. The method of psychology tends to be *atomic*, whereas consciousness itself is *organic*. Mind is a *continuum*, not a sum of states and movements. Further, psychology aims at objectivity and at observing the phenomena of mind as physics observes the phenomena of matter; but surely what is distinctive of mind is its subjectivity. Consciousness comes to its own in self-consciousness. Psychology may describe thoughts, feelings, and volitions as phenomena, but for the self these are not phenomena, as material objects are and must be for the human mind, but noumena, for they have significance and value only as its own. To ignore or neglect the subject here is to distort the reality

to be studied. If in religion especially the subjectivity is primary, the meaning and worth of the experience lying in what it is for the experient, we seem to need a very much more subtle method than any that scientific psychology has yet reached in order to interpret adequately and accurately the life of the soul, not as it *appears*, but as it *is*.

(c) A danger to be shunned is this, that the interest of the psychologist in religion may be not so much in its normal course as in its abnormal features. Conversion and revivals sometimes present psychical conditions that are unusual, and connected with them are abnormal features, and disturbances in various ways of the normal inner life. The types of religious experience selected as of special interest may present peculiarities that are not at all common to the religious life. Where psychology is thus applied to religion, it tends to become rather a pathology than a physiology (to borrow a distinction from the organic realm) of the life of the soul. It would be folly to ignore the significance of these unusual manifestations of the religious life, but it would be still more folly to depreciate in comparison with them the value of the less striking forms in which the religious life in most men expresses itself. The impression that such a one-sided treatment makes is that religion itself is something abnormal, an alien invasion of the mind of man, a hurtful disturbance of 'the even tenor of his way,' a perilous diversion from the safe path of his sanity. The proof from psychology that conversion, revival, contact and communion with God, are subjective facts, real as far as the science can test them, and not illusions and inventions, would be too dearly bought if the objective reality of the God to whom religion relates man were thereby obscured or distorted.

3. We can now turn to the first of our instances of a false application of psychology to Christian theology.

(a) We have been hearing a great deal in recent years about the *subliminal consciousness*, a rather contradictory phrase, as it describes a consciousness that is beyond, or rather below, the bounds of consciousness. Sir William Hamilton more correctly called the fact so described *mental latency*. As man is embodied mind, his consciousness has an organic basis. This consciousness is not continuous, nor is he at any moment conscious of the whole content of his mind. Impressions in

consciousness pass out of consciousness, but can be recalled to consciousness. Memory, and the sense of personal identity, suggest a continuity of mental life, uninterrupted by the transition from consciousness to unconsciousness. A train of thought, as in the solution of a problem, may have been interrupted, as in sleep; and when it is resumed, it is not exactly at the same point, but an advance toward the solution has been made, even if the solution does not at once present itself, when attention is again fixed upon the problem. The conclusion is inevitable that there is an activity, which we must describe as *mental*, that is not entirely within our consciousness. It has been recently held that the source of religion is in the *unconscious*; that it is in the processes beyond the margin of consciousness that the real contact of the soul with God takes place; and that the conscious part of religion may be the least part of the total reality of that contact.

(b) If in God we live and move and have our being, if He is the spiritual environment, as nature is the physical environment, of our life, it is assuredly true that we are not conscious of the whole contact with either the one or the other environment. Our body is affected by the world in our breathing, feeding, moving, by light and heat, in far more ways than we are ever aware of; and so doubtless our souls are being influenced by God far beyond the measure of our consciousness. But it is most desirable that we should not confuse the distinction between our dependence on the physical universe through our body, and on God in our spirits, which are in His likeness and for His fellowship, by the use of the same term for that part of the contact that falls not within our consciousness. By so doing we mix up organic processes and spiritual experiences, and so encourage the tendency already noted, of allying psychology too closely with physiology. If we use *subliminal* for such mental activity out of consciousness as is directly dependent on organic conditions, we should use such a term as *supraliminal* for all of our life in God that lies beyond our consciousness; and if the purpose of our ordinary life is to rise as far as we can out of the depths of the subliminal into clear consciousness, so it should be the aspiration of our religious life to lift our consciousness to the heights of what still is to us *supraliminal*, but what a finer and keener spiritual discernment might secure as a known reality for us.

(c) It seems of the utmost importance to insist on this distinction, for we must not confuse the moral ideals and spiritual aspirations which summon us to realize ever more fully the spiritual environment in which our life is with God with the organic processes on which much of our mental activity as embodied spirits necessarily depends, and with the natural impulses and emotional disturbances that arise from our dependence on the body as affected by the world around. We obscure the meaning and depreciate the worth of religion by making it so dependent, as psychologists often do, on only partially understood organic processes. Conversion is not merely a natural event, an *epi-phenomenon* of adolescence, as some treatments of the subject suggest. Revivals are not explained fully by the *mob-mind*. It may be frankly admitted that emotions especially are affected by organic conditions; but that influence does not give them their distinctive religious character, but the object for the mind with which they happen to be associated. If God comes to man, makes Himself known, and enters into fellowship, it will be along channels of communication congruous with His nature, character, and purpose, in the vision of the seer, in the aspiration of the saint, in the wisdom of the sage, in the achievement of the hero. To use a figure that may more vividly present the contrast: He will not creep in by some back door into the cellar of life, but will enter by the open windows in the upper chambers of the soul.

4. One of the most serious and lamentable applications of the conception of the *subliminal consciousness* in Christian theology is the attempt recently made by Dr. Sanday to solve the problem of Christology thereby.

(a) For Dr. Sanday as a New Testament scholar there can be only the highest possible respect; but the interests of the truth demand all the more urgently that so great a peril to constructive Christian thought should be clearly pointed out. Assuming that the *locus* of the divine in man is the subliminal, Dr. Sanday tries to relegate the divine nature of Christ to that region, with only occasional incursions of the divinity into the realm of the strictly human consciousness. As one of our most candid scholars he has on the one hand been so impressed by the evidence of the real

human consciousness, experience, character of Jesus, which modern scholarship forces upon us; and on the other, as a loyal churchman, he is anxious to preserve as much of the orthodox Christology as he possibly can. This reconciliation, however, carries us into the region of the unknown; it has just as much value as Spencer's reconciliation of philosophy and religion in his doctrine of the *Unknowable*. If, apart from only occasional manifestations within consciousness, we dismiss the divinity of Jesus to the subliminal region, we preserve the orthodox Christology only in name. The value of Christ's person for Christian faith lies here first of all, and most of all, that in Him divinity is not concealed, but revealed.

(b) Dr. Sanday's method of approach to the problem seems to be altogether wrong; reason has already been given why psychology should be used with caution and a recognition of its obvious limitations in Christian theology, and why especially this conception of the *subliminal consciousness* is inadequate to explain religion. The problem should be approached rather through philosophy than psychology, through an idealism less intellectualist and speculative than Hegel's and more ethical and spiritual, through what the writer ventures to call *personalism*. The conception of personality is the clue through the labyrinth, and not this will-o'-the-wisp of the subliminal consciousness. If we form an adequate conception of human personality, laying the stress, not on its organic dependence and its obscurer features, but on its self-consciousness, on its ideals and aspirations, on its upward trend, not its downward drag; if we apply—as we are not only entitled by such a philosophy, but compelled by the religious consciousness of communion with God, to do—this conception to God; and if with Lotze we recognize that God is perfect, and man progressive, personality—then we can think of Christ as the meeting-place of God's downward movement in grace and man's upward movement in faith; and we shall find both His typical humanity and His real divinity, not in the obscurities of the subliminal, but in the unity in Him of divine truth with human thought, divine goodness with human deed, divine love with human heart. His perfect human consciousness reveals and conveys His real divine relation.