

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67792-0 - Sound Learning and Religious Education: Lecture Delivered at the King's College Women's Department, October 5th, 1904, Introductory to the Courses of Biblical Study

Alice Gardner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SOUND LEARNING AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION.

IN choosing this venerable phrase for our starting-point to-day, I may possibly seem to be guilty of great presumption. For I have small enough personal claim myself to represent either of the great causes denoted in these words, nor should I venture, for the modest scheme we are about to launch, to demand the shelter of so notable an aegis. It is not as champions—rather as humble followers—that we would identify our ideal with that of the pioneers and promoters of learning and religion in all times. And there is no presumption in setting before us a lofty purpose, if we remember that it has belonged and still belongs to thousands of others who, in their pursuit of it, have attained very varying measures of success.

The juxtaposition of the two terms seemed to me suggestive of much that might lead to profitable reflections. Those of us who, in University churches or at certain cathedral services, have become familiar with this clause of the “bidding-prayer,” may have sometimes felt it to arouse a melancholy feeling touched with a certain irony—or at least, incongruity. It is “in order that there may never be wanting a supply of men duly qualified to serve God both in Church and State” that we are bidden to “pray for a blessing on all seminaries of sound learning and religious education, particularly the Universities of this land.” Without stopping to enquire whether the idea of capacity for service is in fact with us the main object of higher education, we cannot help believing that the clause which especially concerns us here

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67792-0 - Sound Learning and Religious Education: Lecture Delivered at the King's College Women's Department, October 5th, 1904, Introductory to the Courses of Biblical Study

Alice Gardner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

represented in the minds of those who drew up the formula an intimate relation between learning—including what we should call science—and religion, considerably remote from present actuality. It is a relation which assumes that advance in what is called secular and in what is called religious knowledge should always be concomitant,—that every step made in intellectual progress should deepen and widen our ideas of religion; and that all new light attained by the religious consciousness, every fresh stirring of religious zeal, should guide and stimulate the mind to the attainment of a higher plane of knowledge. Any rivalry or discord between the two great forces which raise men to the higher life does not appear as even conceivable. This is unfortunately *not* the modern view of the subject.

The historical reason of the change is not far to seek. Though the phrase may be of post-Reformation times, the idea is that of the Mediaeval Church. For that Church, not by reason of her innate character, nor of her original mission, but because of the political and social condition of things during the earlier centuries of her dominance, had become at one and the same time champion of learning against ignorance, of political order against brute force, and of morality against licence. If the literature and the cultured habits of the ancient world had survived, if there had been no barbarian invasions and no Mahometan propaganda, the Christian Church would still have had much to do, but in all probability neither the organizing of governments, nor the planting of agricultural institutions, nor yet the establishment of schools and libraries, the building up of the old materials and the new into an intellectual fabric unique in character—would ever have become her tasks. These suppositions, however, are beyond the reach of the most vigorous imagination. We must renounce the attempt at such flights, and contemplate the spectacle of primitive Christianity, struggling to vindicate itself as a “philosophy” in a cultured Pagan world, and in the Western Christianity of the Early Middle Ages, giving forth to barbarous peoples what it had assimilated—or sometimes perhaps clung to without assimilation—of ancient

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67792-0 - Sound Learning and Religious Education: Lecture Delivered at the King's College Women's Department, October 5th, 1904, Introductory to the Courses of Biblical Study

Alice Gardner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

5

learning, generally in the forms which had been impressed upon it by the master-minds of the period of transition. With the Renaissance, if not earlier, a change was bound to come. The Church did not become less learned, but learning became strong enough to stand alone.

There is something very attractive and imposing in the unity of culture in Mediaeval Christendom, at least in Western Europe. But the Golden Age—whether or no we are to anticipate it in the future—is certainly nowhere to be found in the past. Learning was not necessarily pious because it dealt much with sacred things, any more than art is pious if fashion confines it to the depicting of Madonnas and Saints. Identity of dogmatic belief and even of religious observance was found to be compatible with the extreme types of moral excellence and depravity. Indeed I think we may say that neither then nor at any time has it been expedient for one of the two forces—learning or religion—to dominate the other. At that time, religion was all-powerful. And in the interests of religion itself, as well as in those of learning, the result was not altogether good. One hesitates to say anything in disparagement of periods which produced such lofty types of Christian character as Louis IX of France, Francis of Assisi, or the author of the *Imitatio*. Nor would we underrate the prodigious intellectual industry of those who raised the fabric of scholastic learning. “There were giants in the earth in those days.” But those characters would have been still greater, because more natural, those labours would have been more fruitful, because more rational, if they had been more inspired by the breath of healthy human life, less overshadowed by the terrors of the world to come. It may be objected that it is the tyranny of a one-sided type of religion rather than the all-pervading influence of religion itself of which I am complaining. But in reply I would suggest that any religion tends to become one-sided unless it is allowed to live and grow in the midst of ideas and interests of the kind we generally call secular. And many great minds have ever found an exclusively religious atmosphere uncongenial. We know how ecclesiastical authority has dealt with spirits whom

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67792-0 - Sound Learning and Religious Education: Lecture Delivered at the King's College Women's Department, October 5th, 1904, Introductory to the Courses of Biblical Study

Alice Gardner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

reason had made recalcitrant. The examples of Abelard and Arnold of Brescia, of the Mediaeval Platonists, of many other obstinate questioners will occur to the mind. When Theology was Queen of the Sciences she had but a meagre realm, and many fertile fields were left uncultivated.

But we are quite secular enough nowadays, as few here are likely to dispute. Learning and religion go their several ways. Not only that learning is nowadays not very much regarded in Church appointments, except in rare cases. The halo which seemed to surround the seeker after truth has melted away, or lost any supramundane light. We hear a great deal about religious education, especially in the way of protest against religious education of some particular kind. But the most ardent champion in either educational camp would not as a rule venture to represent his cause as also that of good learning, any more than the foremost teachers of the sciences—human or natural—would assume the robes of a priest or the mantle of a prophet. There is not, perhaps, much of actual antagonism between religion and science—as generally understood—at the present day. Science has become wonderfully modest of late, in acknowledging its limitations and the vastness of the realms which lie beyond its boundaries, and it is more ready than ever before to treat as *fact* the experiences of the spiritual life. But we are far from having arrived at a clear mutual understanding between science and literary culture (which may for our present purposes be taken together) on the one hand, and religion on the other. This is bad for our religion, in keeping it narrow and unenlightened. It is also bad—if not for learning, yet for learned people—in excluding them from participating in some of the strongest helps to duty and perennial sources of happiness. Of course it does not shut them off from religious life in the highest sense. But it does deprive them in many cases of full religious communion with their fellows.

I should think it far worse than superfluous to enter here into a discussion of the conflict between the religious and the learned influences in our modern life. But as we need to see the origin of the dissension before we can take even the hum-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67792-0 - Sound Learning and Religious Education: Lecture Delivered at the King's College Women's Department, October 5th, 1904, Introductory to the Courses of Biblical Study

Alice Gardner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

7

blest means towards removing it, I may just point out what seems to be, historically, the cause of the difficulty. Religion must always “speak as one having authority.” Mediaeval learning was based on authority also, on tradition accumulated and interpreted according to traditional canons. Modern learning is critical, and its methods are the scientific ones of observation and inductive reasoning. In early times—in all times—there is bound to be a conflict between rival authorities, but, generally speaking, the authorities formerly recognized were more or less of one kind. The authority to which mediaeval learning bowed was that which spoke also in the Church. But modern learning knows no authority save the consensus of experts. There have, of course, been visionary schemes of a really effective religious authority established on a scientific basis. But any such scheme is, to say the least, remote, and in the interests of liberty and progress we can hardly wish to see it among us set on a firm footing.

The separation thus marked out may appear beyond hope of reunion. Our religious faith must be something well beyond reach of intellectual controversies, disputed texts, or metaphysical fogs. “Religion,” says Matthew Arnold, “must be something about which there is no puzzle.” (He would not, of course, have said “no mystery.”) And knowledge could not flourish—nay, she would not continue to live—if she had to submit to any laws but those which she had herself sanctioned. What is the plain man to do who feels the need of religion and is yet, in common honesty, bound to recognize the claims of knowledge?

Whatever he does, if he is a plain, honest man he is bound to make no compromise, but to acknowledge to the full the claims of both. I do not say that the plain man will always see exactly where he is to bow to the authority of religion and where to follow the conclusions of his reason or of reasonable investigation. But he may at least be taught not to go a little way in one direction and then, if the path becomes encumbered and stiff, leap over the wall into another road. If he has decided that the validity, for him, of certain religious doctrines and observances rests on a higher than human autho-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67792-0 - Sound Learning and Religious Education: Lecture Delivered at the King's College Women's Department, October 5th, 1904, Introductory to the Courses of Biblical Study

Alice Gardner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

riety, he has no right to cease to meditate on the doctrine or to practise the observances in consequence of any changes that increased knowledge may have brought about in his theories as to their origin. Or if he submits certain questions of fact or of argument about which he has strong religious feelings to be decided by the ordinary methods of historical or critical science, he is not at liberty, if he finds the case going as he would wish it not to go, to fall back on authority and declare that the point at issue is a matter of faith. It was in his power to say this at the first. Like Ananias, he is keeping back part of the price. If he is only a plain man, we should be too harsh if we went on to say to him—as we may fairly say to thinking people who do this advisedly—that they have lied, not unto men, but unto God.

But I fear that I am becoming at once too abstract and too censorious. I would acknowledge that in these regions we all of us, however honestly minded, trip occasionally. And if I seem merely to have stated an insoluble problem, I would answer cheerfully, *solvitur ambulando*. We may never reach a conclusion quite satisfactory in itself. But in our efforts towards a practical line of conduct we may hope for the light which comes soon or late to all honest seekers.

For after all, human life is not divided into so many quite distinct compartments, with no communication between them. The divisions which might seem impenetrable, are but the cell-walls of a living organism. Our thoughts and our beliefs about religion and about other matters are determined by the same deep, underlying causes. And even where we must draw the line, it is found to be elastic. To put this matter more literally: although it is desirable to make the distinction in our minds between spiritual and intellectual authority, yet we practically find that the kind of subjects which we refer to one or the other depends very much on our mind and character, and especially that the extent of the sphere allowed to intellectual authority increases immensely with the development of intellectual culture and scientific habits of mind, whereas that of the purely spiritual judgment

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67792-0 - Sound Learning and Religious Education: Lecture Delivered at the King's College Women's Department, October 5th, 1904, Introductory to the Courses of Biblical Study

Alice Gardner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

grows in strength but not necessarily in compass with the growth in religious depth and sincerity.

Thus I think we now find the principle generally accepted by all educated and thoughtful people who have to discuss questions of evidence and proof, that no divine voice has ever authoritatively assured man of any things as to which his ordinary faculties were competent to decide. This principle was not grasped in the ages during which man had not learned how far his faculties availed him and where they broke down. And it is just in those particular regions where any one student has attained fixed principles and well tested results that he is most unwilling to accept, on spiritual authority, any statement that is evidently at variance with his special conclusions or general theory. In departments of knowledge with which he is unfamiliar, he is probably indifferent as to whether such higher authority is to be accepted or not. For us whose knowledge of most things is generally not first-hand, it has become habitual to look for information to those who are best informed, and not to expect a divine revelation coming along the lines by which human knowledge is visibly progressing. At the same time it is possible while questioning or denying the obligation to accept any statements on matters of science or history on purely religious grounds, to acknowledge most fully the significance which a religious interpretation may give to any kind of truth, however obtained.

These principles will, I hope, become clearer after we have considered a little the subject in which they chiefly need to be applied: that of the study of the Bible.

The study of the Bible provides a large meeting-ground—I fear I must add a battle-field,—for all motive and principles that may ever have impelled and regulated the pursuit of sound learning and of religious education. The Bible is accepted among us as the handbook—in all Christian countries as the main source—of religious instruction. At the same time, since it is a book of composite structure, of various and remote dates, both in language and thought containing very much that is almost unintelligible to modern minds, describing

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67792-0 - Sound Learning and Religious Education: Lecture Delivered at the King's College Women's Department, October 5th, 1904, Introductory to the Courses of Biblical Study

Alice Gardner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

IO

and indicating conditions of society veiled in obscurity but of great historical interest—it has, quite apart from the sanction of religious authority, a unique importance for the student of mankind. And all except a few uncultivated fanatics allow the necessity of at least some serious intellectual effort and the application of knowledge derived from various regions for an appreciation—except of the rudest kind—of even the spiritual teaching of Biblical writers. Nevertheless there seems to be a general consensus among educated people that the Bible does not hold so prominent a place as it ought to do, in our education and our reading. I speak of a general consensus—but this is true only as to the negative side of the complaint, since there is by no means a consensus as to the place which the Bible *ought* to hold among us. But even this narrow ground of unanimity gives us, at least, a starting-point of enquiry: why is not the Bible taught more thoroughly in schools, and read more intelligently at home?

Chiefly, I would answer, because of the great confusion in the public mind as to what Bible study is, how it should be carried on, and what may be expected from it. This confusion is, of course, in itself a proof of the deficiency complained of and a full justification of the complaint. The fact briefly and baldly stated is that a large section of the British public is nervous of Biblical study except on such conditions as would strangle the growth of any study worth the name. It does not always know exactly *why* it is nervous, but I think we may resolve the cause of dread into two elements: people are afraid that Bible teaching will be mixed up with “views,” and in different sections of the public there are different sets of views regarded as spiritually dangerous; and in the second place they have some dread lest the habit of taking up the Bible according to modern methods of free enquiry might lead to the loss of its unique position in our estimation,—lest the spirit of “sound learning” should entirely crush, or at least inflict serious damage on, the cause of religious education.

Now I believe that there is, if not a sound justification, a very plausible pretext for both these fears. They imply

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67792-0 - Sound Learning and Religious Education: Lecture Delivered at the King's College Women's Department, October 5th, 1904, Introductory to the Courses of Biblical Study

Alice Gardner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

II

considerable haziness of thought ; they suppose the necessary persistence of influences which some of us are trying to reduce considerably, if not to eliminate, and if either of them were to be allowed full scope, such an enterprise as that we are beginning to-day would be doomed from the outset. But they are so widespread, even among cultivated and intellectual people, that we must give them a little consideration.

Now as to the connection of Biblical Teaching with particular religious views, it would be absurd to deny its existence. Yet all who have followed with interest and attention for twenty or thirty years the progress of educated opinion on the subject must allow that, as was said just now, the sphere allowed, within the range of Biblical studies, to the ordinary methods of explanation and criticism, has been of late immensely increased. Educated people have long become accustomed to a far freer use than our fathers would have sanctioned as to Old Testament narratives and even Old Testament standards of common morals. We are inclined to smile at the attitude of a man like Professor Freeman, who, as late as his undergraduate days, denied, on the authority of Scripture, the rotundity of the earth. No philologist is accused of heresy for looking elsewhere than to the Tower of Babel for the origin of languages and dialects. The standing-still of the sun at the desire of Joshua does not worry us ; even the sneer of Gibbon as to the silence of the ancient world on the darkness of the Passion seems to us beneath the notice of a Christian apologist. Where physical science and statements of Holy Writ have come into close conflict, science has been victorious all along the line,—one need hardly say without any loss to the prestige of the Bible. It seems to me that we owe more than we always acknowledge to the reputation of those earnest scholars who by their efforts, at the cost of much disapproval and resistance, even from those who ought to have trusted and supported them, have earned for us the promised land of freedom into which they entered not in themselves. We do not accept all their conclusions nor follow out all their principles. Some of those principles appear to us entirely unsound—such as the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67792-0 - Sound Learning and Religious Education: Lecture Delivered at the King's College Women's Department, October 5th, 1904, Introductory to the Courses of Biblical Study

Alice Gardner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

12

cumbersome and unactual process of allegorizing, by which very often the plain sense of plain narratives was skilfully explained away. Some of their generalizations were crude, just because it was impossible to bring them into connection with hosts of facts that have since been discovered. But if the allegorizers seem timid and shifty, if the destructive critics were too hasty, is there no timidity, nor shiftiness, nor haste among our scholars of to-day? Let us pay due honour to the pioneers whose faces were turned towards the light, yet consider that if we go no further than they went we are guilty of the reproach made against those who built the sepulchres of the prophets but followed not their teaching.

After all, however, it may be said that those questions as to which free enquiry is allowed by all except a few extremists are far less important than those as to which there are deep-lying differences. And it has become, in education, a recognized principle that no teacher ought to give instruction that conflicts with religious doctrine in which his pupils are being brought up, while in the case of adults, conflicts of the kind are commonly—and often rightly—regarded as undesirable. To take first the case of children—of course the matter would be simple if the line, which we have already called an elastic one—between matters of faith and of knowledge were more clearly drawn, though for the good of all in the present state of culture I cannot say that I desire to see it made altogether definite. With respect to the regions of which I have already spoken, those which have been frankly given over to historical and critical determination, there are, of course, some parents who have not grasped the situation. Suppose the child of such parents came home saying, “Miss Dash told us that the Jews didn’t have the laws to keep till ever so long after Moses,” or, “Mr Blank says that he doesn’t think St John wrote all his Gospel himself,” and if the parents take alarm and complain, what is to be done? It may be said that careful teachers will know how to avoid such situations, but certainly they can only do so by discouraging children from freely asking questions—a procedure not only at variance with our present educational notions, but additionally per-