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Preached Before the University of Oxford

Henry Longueville Mansel

Excerpt

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LECTURES.

LECTURE I.

DEUTERONOMY IV. 2.

“YE SHALL NOT ADD UNTO THE WORD WHICH I COMMAND YOU, NEITHER SHALL YE DIMINISH OUGHT FROM IT.”

DOGMATISM and Rationalism are the two extremes between which religious philosophy perpetually oscillates. Each represents a system from which, when nakedly and openly announced, the well-regulated mind almost instinctively shrinks back; yet which, in some more or less specious disguise, will be found to underlie the antagonist positions of many a theological controversy. Many a man who rejects isolated portions of Christian doctrine, on the ground that they are repugnant to his reason, would hesitate to avow broadly and unconditionally that reason is the supreme arbiter of all religious truth; though at the same time he would find it hard to point out any particular in which the position of reason, in relation to the truths which he still retains, differs from that which it occupies in relation to those which he rejects. And on the other hand, there are many who, while they would by no means construct a dogmatic system on the assumption that the conclusions of reason may always be made to coincide with those of revelation, yet, for want of an accurate distinction between that which is within the province of human thought and that which is beyond it,

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are accustomed in practice to demand the assent of the reason to positions which it is equally incompetent to affirm or to deny. Thus they not only lessen the value of the service which it is capable of rendering within its legitimate sphere, but also indirectly countenance that very intrusion of the human intellect into sacred things, which, in some of its other aspects, they so strongly and so justly condemn.

In using the above terms, it is necessary to state at the outset the sense in which each is employed, and to emancipate them from the various and vague associations connected with their ordinary use. I do not include under the name of *Dogmatism* the mere enunciation of religious truths, as resting upon authority and not upon reasoning, nor even the formal statement or logical development of truths implicitly contained in and ultimately resting on Scriptural grounds.^a The Dogmatist, as well as the Rationalist, is the constructor of a philosophical system; and in constructing it, however much the materials upon which he works may be given by a higher authority, yet, in connecting them together and giving them a systematic form and philosophical basis, he virtually places them on a new and merely human foundation. Indeed, whatever may be their actual antagonism in the field of religious controversy, the two terms

^a This clause has been added to the sentence as it originally stood, and the next sentence slightly altered, in order to obviate a misapprehension not sufficiently guarded against in former editions. The Dogmatism above described is a very different thing from Dogmatic Theology. A theology, however systematic, which proposes its articles of faith as ultimately resting on the autho-

rity of Holy Scripture, and to be believed in obedience to that authority, differs fundamentally from the Dogmatism of the Wolfian school, which accepts the doctrines of Christianity, not because they can be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture, but because they can be demonstrated from the principles of reason.

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LECT. I.

MEANING OF THE TERMS.

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are in their proper sense so little exclusive of each other, that both were originally employed to denote the same persons;—the name *Dogmatists* or *Rationalists* being indifferently given to those medical theorists who insisted on the necessity of calling in the aid of rational principles, to support or correct the conclusions furnished by experience (1). A like signification is to be found in the later language of philosophy, when the term *Dogmatists* was used to denote those philosophers who endeavoured to explain the phenomena of experience by means of rational conceptions and demonstrations; the intelligible world being regarded as the counterpart of the sensible, and the necessary relations of the former as the principles and ground of the observed facts of the latter (2). It is in a sense analogous to this that the term may be most accurately used in reference to Theology. Scripture is to the theological Dogmatist what Experience is to the philosophical. It supplies him with the facts to which his system has to adapt itself. It contains in an unsystematic form the positive doctrines, which further inquiry has to exhibit as supported by reasonable grounds and connected into a scientific whole. Theological Dogmatism is thus an application of reason to the support and defence of pre-existing statements of Scripture (3). Rationalism, on the other hand, so far as it deals with Scripture at all, deals with it as a thing to be adapted to the independent conclusions of the natural reason, and to be rejected where that adaptation cannot conveniently be made. By *Rationalism*, without intending to limit the name to any single school or period in theological controversy, I mean generally to designate that system whose final test of truth is placed in the direct assent of the human consciousness, whether in the form of logical deduction, or moral judgment, or religious intuition; by whatever previous process those faculties may have been

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4 DOGMATISM AND RATIONALISM CONTRASTED. LECT. I.

raised to their assumed dignity as arbitrators. The Rationalist, as such, is not bound to maintain that a divine revelation of religious truth is impossible, nor even to deny that it has actually been given. He may admit the existence of the revelation as a fact: he may acknowledge its utility as a temporary means of instruction for a ruder age: he may even accept certain portions as of universal and permanent authority (4). But he assigns to some superior tribunal the right of determining what is essential to religion and what is not: he claims for himself and his age the privilege of accepting or rejecting any given revelation, wholly or in part, according as it does or does not satisfy the conditions of some higher criterion to be supplied by the human consciousness (5).

In relation to the actual condition of religious truth, as communicated by Holy Scripture, Dogmatism and Rationalism may be considered as severally representing, the one the spirit which adds to the word of God, and the other that which diminishes from it. Whether a complete system of scientific Theology could or could not have been given by direct revelation, consistently with the existing laws of human thought and the purposes which Revelation is designed to answer, it is at least certain that such a system is not given in the Revelation which we possess, but, if it is to exist at all, must be constructed out of it by human interpretation. And it is in attempting such a construction that Dogmatism and Rationalism exhibit their most striking contrasts. The one seeks to build up a complete scheme of theological doctrine out of the unsystematic materials furnished by Scripture, partly by the more complete development of certain leading ideas; partly by extending the apparent import of the Revelation to ground which it does not avowedly occupy, and attempting by inference and analogy to solve problems which the sacred volume may indeed suggest, but which

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LECT. I. RELATION OF FAITH AND REASON.

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it does not directly answer; partly by endeavouring to give additional support to the scriptural statements themselves, treating them as truths, not above, but within the grasp of reason and capable of demonstration from rational premises. The other aims at the same end by opposite means. It strives to attain to unity and completeness of system, not by filling up supposed deficiencies, but by paring down supposed excrescences. Commencing with a preconceived theory of the purpose of a revelation and the form which it ought to assume, it proceeds to remove or reduce all that will not harmonize with this leading idea; sometimes explaining away in the interpretation that which it accepts as given in the letter; sometimes denying, on *à priori* grounds, the genuineness of this or that portion of the sacred text; sometimes pretending to distinguish between the several purposes of Revelation itself, and to determine what portions are intended to convey the elements of an absolute religion, valid in all countries and for all ages, and what must be regarded as relative and accidental features of the divine plan, determined by the local or temporal peculiarities of the individuals to whom it was first addressed.

The two methods thus contrasted may appear at first sight to represent the respective claims of Faith and Reason, each extended to that point at which it encroaches on the domain of the other. But in truth the contrast between Faith and Reason, if it holds good in this relation at all, does so merely by accident. It may be applicable in some instances to the disciples of the respective systems, but not to the teachers; and even as regards the former, it is but partially and occasionally true. The disciples of the Rationalist are not necessarily the disciples of reason. It is quite as possible to receive with unquestioning submission a system of religion or philosophy invented by a human teacher, as it is to believe, upon the authority of

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6 DOGMATISM AND RATIONALISM AS SYSTEMS. LECT. I.

Revelation, doctrines which no human reason is competent to discover. The so-called freethinker is as often as any other man the slave of some self-chosen master; and many who scorn the imputation of believing anything merely because it is found in the Bible would find it hard to give any better reason for their own unbelief than the *ipse dixit* of some infidel philosopher. But when we turn from the disciples to the teachers, and look to the origin of Dogmatism and Rationalism as systems, we find both alike to be the products of thought, operating in different ways upon the same materials. Faith, properly so called, is not constructive, but receptive. It cannot supply the missing portions of an incomplete system; though it may bid us remain content with the deficiency. It cannot of itself give harmony to the discordant voices of religious thought: it cannot reduce to a single focus the many-coloured rays into which the light of God's presence is refracted in its passage through the human soul; though it may bid us look forward to a time when the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped; when that apparent discord shall be known but as the echo of a half-heard concert, and those diverging rays shall be blended once more in the pure white light of heaven. But Faith alone cannot suggest any actual solution of our doubts: it can offer no definite reconciliation of apparently conflicting truths; for in order to accomplish that end, the hostile elements must be examined, compared, accommodated, and joined together, one with another; and such a process is an act of thought, not of belief. Considered from this point of view, both Dogmatism and Rationalism may be regarded as emanating from the same source, and amenable to the same principles of criticism; in so far as they keep within or go beyond those limits of sound thought which the laws of man's mind or the circumstances in which he is placed, have imposed upon him.

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LECT. I. AIMS AND INSTANCES OF EACH. 7

In fact, the two systems may be considered as both aiming, though in different ways, at the same end; that end being to produce a coincidence between what we believe and what we think; to remove the boundary which separates the comprehensible from the incomprehensible. The Dogmatist employs reason to prove, almost as much as the Rationalist employs it to disprove. The one, in the character of an advocate, accepts the doctrines of revealed religion as conclusions, but appeals to the reason, enlightened, it may be, by Revelation, to find premises to support them. The other, in the character of a critic, draws his premises from reason in the first instance; and, adopting these as his standard, either distorts the revealed doctrine into conformity with them, or, if it obstinately resists this treatment, sets it aside altogether. The one strives to lift up reason to the point of view occupied by Revelation: the other strives to bring down Revelation to the level of reason. And both alike have prejudged or neglected the previous inquiry,—Are there not definite and discernible limits to the province of reason itself, whether it be exercised for advocacy or for criticism?

Thus, to select one example out of many, the revealed doctrine of Christ's Atonement for the sins of men has been alternately defended and assailed by some such arguments as these. We have been told, on the one hand, that man's redemption *could not* have been brought about by any other means (6):—that God could not, consistently with His own attributes, have suffered man to perish unredeemed, or have redeemed him by any inferior sacrifice (7):—that man, redeemed from death, must become the servant of him who redeems him; and that it was not meet that he should be the servant of any other than God (8):—that no other sacrifice could have satisfied divine justice (9):—that no other victim could have endured the burden of

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God's wrath (10). These and similar arguments have been brought forward, as one of the greatest of their authors avows, to defend the teaching of the Catholic Faith on the ground of a *reasonable necessity* (11). While, on the other hand, it has been argued that the revealed doctrine itself cannot be accepted as literally true; because we cannot believe that God was angry, and needed to be propitiated (12):—because it is inconsistent with the Divine Justice that the innocent should suffer for the sins of the guilty (13):—because it is more reasonable to believe that God freely forgives the offences of His creatures (14):—because we cannot conceive how the punishment of one can do away with the guilt of another (15).

I quote these arguments only as specimens of the method in which Christian doctrines have been handled by writers on opposite sides. To examine them more in detail would detain me too long from my main purpose. I shall not therefore at present consider whether the conclusions actually arrived at, on the one side or on the other, are in themselves reasonable or unreasonable, orthodox or heretical. I am concerned only with the methods respectively employed, and the need of some rule for their employment. May reason be used without restriction in defence or refutation of religious doctrines? And if not, what are the conditions of its legitimate use? It may be that this man has defended, on reasonable grounds, none but the most essential articles of the Christian Faith: but has he pointed out any rule which can hinder the same or similar reasoning from being advanced by another in support of the most dangerous errors? It may be that that man has employed the test of reasonableness, only in the refutation of opinions concerning which the Church has pronounced no positive judgment: but has he fenced his method round with any cautions to prevent its being used for the overthrow of Christianity itself? If we can find

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LECT. I. METHOD OF DOGMATISM EXAMINED. 9

no other ground than the arbitrary will of the man himself, why he should stop short at the particular point which he has chosen, we may not perhaps condemn the tenets of the individual, but we may fairly charge his method with the consequences to which it logically leads us.

Thus we find a late lamented writer of our own day, and at that time of our own Church, defending the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ, on the metaphysical assumption of the real existence of an abstract humanity. "This," he tells us, "is why the existence of human nature is a thing too precious to be surrendered to the subtleties of logic, because upon its existence depends that real manhood of Christ, which renders him a co-partner with ourselves." And again: "To the reality of this work, the existence of that common nature is indispensable, whereby, as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, He himself took part of the same. Else, how would the perfect assumption of humanity have consisted with His retaining that divine personality which it was impossible that He should surrender? Since it was no new person which He took, it can only have been the substratum, in which personality has its existence (16)." In this case, our belief in the undeniable truth of the doctrine defended may dispose us to overlook the questionable character of the defence. But if we are inclined for a moment to acquiesce in this unnatural union of metaphysical premises and theological conclusions, we are recalled to ourselves by the recollection of the fearful consequence which Occam deduces from the same hypothesis of the assumption by Christ of a "substratum in which personality has its existence;"—a consequence drawn in language which we shudder to read, even as it is employed by its author, merely for the purpose of reducing to an absurdity the principles of his antagonists (17).

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There is an union of Philosophy with Religion in which each contributes to the support of the other; and there is also an union which, under the appearance of support, does but undermine the foundations and prey upon the life of both. To which of these two the above argument belongs, it needs but a bare statement of its assumption to determine. It tells us that our belief in the doctrine of God manifest in the flesh indispensably depends upon our acceptance of the Realist theory of the nature of universal notions. Philosophy and Theology alike protest against such an outrage upon the claims both of Reason and of Revelation, as is implied in this association of one of the most fundamental truths of the Christian Faith with one of the most questionable speculations of mediæval metaphysics. What does Theology gain by this employment of a weapon which may at any moment be turned against her? Does it make one whit clearer to our understandings than mysterious twofold nature of one Christ, very God, and very Man? By no means. It was a truth above human comprehension before; and it remains a truth above human comprehension still. We believe that Christ is both God and Man; for this is revealed to us. We know not how He is so; for this is not revealed; and we can learn it in no other way. Theology gains nothing; but she is in danger of losing everything. Her most precious truths are cut from the anchor which held them firm, and cast upon the waters of philosophical speculation, to float hither and thither with the ever-shifting waves of thought. And what does Philosophy gain? Her just domains are narrowed, and her free limbs cramped in their onward course. The problems which she has a native right to sift to the uttermost are taken out of the field of free discussion, and fenced about with religious doctrines which it is heresy to call in question. Neither Christian truth nor philosophical inquiry can be advanced by such a