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Frederick Denison Maurice

Excerpt

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LECTURE I.

IN the year 1691 ROBERT BOYLE directed by a Codicil to his Will “that eight Sermons should be preached each year in London for proving the Christian Religion against notorious Infidels, to wit, Atheists, Theists, Pagans, Jews and Mahometans; not descending lower to any controversies that are among Christians themselves.” He desired “that the preacher of these Sermons should be assisting to all companies, and encouraging of them in any undertaking for propagating the Christian Religion to foreign parts;” and “further, that he should be ready to satisfy such real scruples as any may have concerning these matters, and to answer such objections and difficulties as may be started, to which good answers have not yet been made.”

The second of these clauses seems to explain the intention of the first. The objections to Christianity urged by Jews, Pagans and Mahometans, were not, perhaps, likely to perplex an ordinary Englishman. But England, in the 17th century, was becoming more and more a colonizing country. The American settlements were increasing in importance every year. The East India Company had already begun its career of commerce, if not of conquest. In his own particular department of

natural science Boyle observed the most steady progress; no one was doing more to accelerate it than himself. He would naturally divine, that an advancement, not less remarkable, must take place in another course, in which the interests of men were far more directly engaged. He must have felt how much the student in his closet was helping to give speed to the ships of the merchant, and to discover new openings to his ambition. As a benevolent man he could not contemplate accessions to the greatness and resources of his country, without longing that she might also be conscious of her responsibility, that she might bring no people within the circle of her government whom she did not bring within the circle of her Light. Accordingly, we find him offering frequent encouragement by his pen and purse to the hard-working missionaries who were preaching the Gospel among the North American Indians. Cheering words, pecuniary help, and faithful prayers, might be all which these teachers of savages could ask from their brethren at home. But Boyle knew that difficulties which they would rarely encounter must continually present themselves to those who came in contact with the Brahmin in Hindostan, with the Mussulman both in Europe and Asia, with the Jew in every corner of the globe. A man who thought lightly or contemptuously of any of these, or of their arguments—who had not earnestly considered what they would have to say, and what he had to tell them—could not be expected to do

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REASONS AGAINST CHRISTIAN MISSIONS. 3

them much good. Moreover, Boyle was too well acquainted with philosophical men, with the general society of England, and with his own heart, not to be aware that there was another kind of opposition more formidable than this, which the proposal to diffuse Christianity abroad must struggle with. Was the gift worth bestowing? Were we really carrying truth into the distant parts of the earth when we were carrying our own faith into them? Might not the whole notion be a dream of our vanity? Might not particular soils be adapted to particular religions? and might not the effort to transplant one into another involve the necessity of mischievous forcing, and terminate in inevitable disappointment? Might not a better day be at hand, in which all religions alike should be found to have done their work of partial good, of greater evil, and when something much more comprehensive and satisfactory should supersede them? Were not thick shadows overhanging Christendom itself, which must be scattered before it could be the source of light to the world?

Such questions as these Boyle must often have heard propounded by others; but the deepest and most painful suggestion of them had been to himself. He tells us, in the sketch of an European tour written under the name of *Philaretus*, that “when he was still a young man, after he had visited “other places, his curiosity at last led him to those “wild mountains where the first and chiefest of “the Carthusian abbeys is seated; where the devil,

“ taking advantage of that deep raving melancholy
“ befitting so sad a place, his humour, and the strange
“ stories and pictures he found there of Bruno, the
“ father of that order, suggested such strange and
“ hideous thoughts, and such distracting doubts of
“ some of the fundamentals of Christianity, that
“ though his looks did little betray his thoughts,
“ nothing but the forbiddingness of self-dispatch
“ hindered his acting it. But, after a tedious lan-
“ guishment of many months in this tedious per-
“ plexity, at last it pleased God one day he had
“ received the Sacrament to restore unto him the
“ withdrawn sense of his favour. But, though Phi-
“ laretus ever looked upon these impious suggestions
“ rather as temptations to be resisted than as doubts
“ to be resolved, yet never did these fleeting clouds
“ cease now and then to darken the clearest serenity
“ of his quiet; which made him often say that
“ injections of this nature were such a disease to the
“ faith as toothache is to the body, for though it be
“ not mortal, it is very troublesome. However, as all
“ things work together for good to them that love
“ God, Philaretus derived from this anxiety the
“ advantage of groundedness in his religion; for
“ the perplexity his doubts created obliged him to
“ remove them—to be seriously inquisitive of the
“ truth of the very fundamentals of Christianity,
“ and to hear what both Jews and Turks, and the
“ chief sects of Christians, could allege for their
“ several opinions; that so, though he believed more
“ than he could comprehend, he might not believe

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“ more than he could prove, and not owe the sted-
 “ fastness of his faith to so poor a cause as the
 “ ignorance of what might be objected against it.
 “ He said, speaking of those persons who want not
 “ means to enquire and abilities to judge, that it
 “ was not a greater happiness to inherit a good
 “ religion, than it was a fault to have it only by
 “ inheritance, and think it the best because it is
 “ generally embraced, rather than embrace it be-
 “ cause we know it to be the best. That though
 “ we cannot always give a reason for what we be-
 “ lieve, yet we should be ever able to give a reason
 “ why we believe it. That it is the greatest of follies
 “ to neglect any diligence that may prevent the
 “ being mistaken where it is the greatest of miseries
 “ to be deceived. That how dear soever things taken
 “ upon the score are sold, there is nothing worse
 “ taken up upon trust than religion, in which he
 “ deserves not to meet with the true one that
 “ cares not to examine whether or no it be so.”
 (Works, Vol. I., p. 12.)

It is evident, I think, that a comparison of
 religious systems undertaken by a man who had
 just passed through so tremendous a conflict, and
 who had no professional motive for entering upon
 it, must have been something very different from
 a dry legal enquiry respecting the balance of pro-
 babilities in favour of one or the other. I do not
 mean that Boyle will not have brought to this
 subject all the habits of patient investigation which
 he ordinarily applied to the study of physical

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phenomena. The very anguish of his mind made it essential that he should seek for a real standing ground; and that he should not therefore strain facts for the sake of arriving at an agreeable conclusion. Indeed, it is difficult to say which conclusion would seem most agreeable to a man exercised as he was: there would be at times a bias of understanding, and even affection, as strong against Christianity, as his education could create in favour of it. But, undoubtedly, his object in questioning these different schemes of belief will have been to ascertain what each of them could do for him; what there was in it to meet the demands of his heart and reason. It was no occasion for clever special pleading; the question was to him one of life and death: when he had once resolved it, the next duty was to act upon his conviction, and to strive that all men should be better for that, which he, because he was a man, had found to be needful for himself. Upon this principle he founded these Lectures. The truth of which he had become assured, was, he believed, a permanent one; the next generation would need it as much as his own. He did not suppose that the actual relation in which that truth stood to different systems of belief could alter. But it did not follow that the enquiry respecting the nature of that relation would be exhausted in his day. As new regions unfolded themselves to European adventure, new facts, modifying or changing previous notions respecting the faiths which prevailed in them, might

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FAITH HOW REGARDED IN THE LAST CENTURY. 7

come to light; fresh and more trying experiences might make the past more intelligible; the same doubts respecting the justice, wisdom, or possibility of bringing other men into our religious fellowship which presented themselves to his contemporaries, might appear again and again in very different shapes, and appealing to even opposite feelings and tempers.

The event, I believe, has proved that he was right. Within fifty years a prodigious change has taken place in the feelings of men generally—of philosophical men particularly—respecting Religious Systems. In the latter part of the 17th century, still more during a great part of the 18th, they were regarded by those who most gave the tone to popular thinking, and who had the highest reputation for wisdom, as the inventions of law-givers and priests. Men cleverer and more dishonest than the rest of the world, found it impossible to build up systems of policy, or to establish their own power, unless they appealed to those fears of an invisible world, which ignorance so willingly receives, and so tenderly fosters. This being the admitted maxim respecting religions generally, it seemed the office of the Christian apologist to shew that there was one exception; to explain why the Gospel could not be referred to this origin; how entirely unlike it was to those forms of belief which were rightly considered deceptions. That many dangerous positions were confuted by works written with this object; that many of the dis-

tinguishing marks of Christianity were brought out in them; that many learnt from them to seek and to find a standing-ground in the midst of pits and morasses, it is impossible to doubt. But the demonstrations of God's providence were in this case, as in all others, infinitely broader, deeper, more effectual than those of man's sagacity. The evidence furnished by the great political Revolution at the close of the last century, seems slowly to have undermined the whole theory respecting the invisible world, and men's connection with it, which possessed the teachers of that century. Men are beginning to be convinced, that if Religion had had only the devices and tricks of statesmen or priests to rest upon, it could not have stood at all; for that these are very weak things indeed, which, when they are left to themselves, a popular tempest must carry utterly away. If they have lasted a single day, it must have been because they had something better, truer than themselves, to sustain them. This better, truer thing, it seems to be allowed, must be that very faith in men's hearts upon which so many disparaging epithets were cast, and which it was supposed could produce no fruits that were not evil and hurtful. Faith it is now admitted has been the most potent instrument of good to the world; has given to it nearly all which it can call precious. But then it is asked, is there not ground for supposing that all the different religious systems, and not one only, may be legitimate products of that faith which is so

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CHARACTER OF MODERN OBJECTIONS. 9

essential a part of man's constitution? Are not they manifestly adapted to peculiar times and localities and races? Is it not probable that the theology of all alike is something merely accidental, an imperfect theory about our relations to the universe, which will in due time give place to some other? Have we not reason to suppose that Christianity, instead of being, as we have been taught, a revelation, has its root in the heart and intellects of man, as much as any other system? Are there not the closest the most obvious relations between it and them? Is it not subject to the same law of decay from the progress of knowledge and society with all the rest? Must we not expect that it too will lose all its mere theological characteristics, and that what at last survives of it will be something of a very general character—some great ideas of what is good and beautiful—some excellent maxims of life, which may very well assimilate, if they be not actually the same, with the essential principles which are contained in all other religions, and which will also, it is hoped, abide for ever.

Notions of this kind will be found, I think, in much of the erudite as well of the popular literature of this day; they will often be heard in social circles; they are undoubtedly floating in the minds of us all. While they hover about us, it is clearly impossible that we can, with sound hearts and clear consciences, seek to evangelize the world: yet they are not to be spoken of as if they proceeded from a mere denying, unbelieving spirit: they are

often entertained by minds of deepest earnestness; they derive their plausibility from facts which cannot be questioned, and which a Christian should not wish to question. They may, I believe, if fairly dealt with, help to strengthen our own convictions, to make our duty plainer, and to shew us better how we shall perform it. All their danger lies in their vagueness: if we once bring them fairly to those tests by which the worth of hypotheses in another department is ascertained, it may not perhaps be hard to discover what portions of truth, and what of falsehood, they contain. I think I shall be carrying out the intention of Boyle's Will, if I attempt, in my present course, to make this experiment. I propose to examine the great Religious Systems which present themselves to us in the history of the world, not going into their details, far less searching for their absurdities; but enquiring what was their main characteristical principle. If we find, as the objectors say, good in each of them, we shall desire to know what this good is, and under what conditions it may be preserved and made effectual. These questions may, I think, be kept distinct from those which will occupy us in the latter half of the course. In what relation does Christianity stand to these different faiths? If there be a faith which is meant for mankind is this the one, or should we look for another?

I shall not take these systems in their historical order, but rather according to the extent of