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John Henry Newman

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INTRODUCTION.

CHRISTIANITY has been long enough in the world to justify us in dealing with it as a fact in the world's history. Its genius and character, its doctrines, precepts, and objects cannot be treated as matters of private opinion or deduction, unless we may reasonably so regard the Spartan institutions or the religion of Mahomet. It may legitimately be made the subject-matter of theories; what is its moral and political excellence, what its due location in the range of ideas or of facts which we possess, whether it be divine or human, whether original or eclectic, or both at once, how far favourable to civilization or to literature, whether a religion for all ages or for a particular state of society, these are questions upon the fact, or professed solutions of the fact, and belong to the province of opinion; but to a fact do they relate, on an admitted fact do they turn, which must be ascertained as other facts, and surely has on the whole been so ascertained, unless the testimony of so many centuries is to go for nothing. Christianity is no dream of the study or the cloister. It has long since passed beyond the letter of documents and the reasonings of individual minds, and has become public property. Its "sound has gone out into all lands," and its "words unto the ends of the world." It has from the first had an objective existence, and has thrown itself upon the great concourse of men.

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Its home is in the world; and to know what it is, we must seek it in the world, and hear the world's witness of it.

The hypothesis, indeed, has met with wide reception in these latter ages, that Christianity does not fall within the province of history,—that it is to each man what each man thinks it to be, and nothing else; and thus in fact is a mere name for a number of different religions all together, at variance one with another, and claiming the same appellation, not because they can assign any one and the same doctrine as the common foundation of all, but because certain points of agreement may be found here and there of some sort or other, by which each in its turn is connected with one or another of its neighbours. Or again, it has been maintained, or implied, that all existing denominations of Christianity are wrong, none representing it as taught by Christ and His Apostles; that it died out of the world at its birth, and was forthwith succeeded by a counterfeit or counterfeits which assumed its name, though they inherited but a portion of its teaching; that it has existed indeed among men ever since, and exists at this day, but as a secret and hidden doctrine, which does but revive here and there under a supernatural influence in the hearts of individuals, and is manifested to the world only by glimpses or in gleams, according to the number or the station of the illuminated, and their connexion with the history of their times.

This is what, with more or less distinctness, is said or thought; and it is sufficient to observe upon it simply that it *is* an hypothesis, which has no claim on our time and attention till facts are adduced on which it is built, or for which it accounts. Till it is shown why we should view the matter differently, it is natural, or rather necessary, it is agreeable to our modes of proceeding in parallel

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cases, to consider that the society of Christians which the Apostles left on earth was of that religion to which the Apostles had converted them; that the external continuity of name, profession, and communion is a *primâ facie* argument for a real continuity of doctrine; that, as Christianity began by manifesting itself to all mankind, therefore it went on to manifest itself; and that the more, considering that prophecy had already determined that it was to be a power visible in the world and sovereign over it, characters which are accurately fulfilled in that historical Christianity to which we commonly give the name. It is not a great assumption, then, but rather mere abstinence from the wanton admission of a principle which would necessarily lead to the most vexatious and preposterous scepticism,¹ to take it for granted that the Christianity of the second, fourth, seventh, twelfth, sixteenth, and intermediate centuries is in its substance the very religion which Christ and his Apostles taught in the first, whatever may be the modifications for good or for evil which lapse of years, or the vicissitudes of human affairs, have impressed upon it.

I am not denying the abstract possibility of extreme changes. The substitution is certainly, in idea, supposable of a counterfeit Christianity for the original, by means of the adroit innovations of seasons, places, and persons, till, according to the familiar illustration, the "blade" and the "handle" are successively renewed, and identity is lost without the loss of continuity. It is possible; but it must not be assumed. The *onus probandi* is with those who assert what it is unnatural to expect; to be just able to doubt is no warrant for disbelieving.

Accordingly, some writers have gone on to give reasons from history for their refusing to appeal to it. They say that, when they come to look into the

¹ On "The Difficulties of Latitudinarianism," vide Tracts for the Times, No. 85, Lecture 2.

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history of Christianity, they find its doctrines so variously represented, and so inconsistently maintained by its professors, that, however natural it be *à priori*, it is useless, in fact, to seek in history the matter of that Revelation which has been vouchsafed to mankind; that they cannot be historical Christians if they would. They say, in the words of Chillingworth, "There are popes against popes, councils against councils, some fathers against others, the same fathers against themselves, a consent of fathers of one age against a consent of fathers of another age, the Church of one age against the Church of another age." And it must be allowed to such persons that, while reason antecedently suggests an historical inquiry, as the means of arriving at a knowledge of Christianity, it makes no promise that difficulties will not embarrass its course, or even preclude its satisfactory completion. The remoteness or the nearness of the times, the scantiness or the abundance of materials, the multitude of details, the depth and intricacy of the system, the subtle intermixture of received teaching and personal opinion, and the disorder which is inevitable in any mass of historical facts,—the problem of finding a point of view from which minds born under the gracious shelter of Revelation may approximate to an external and general survey of it,—these are considerations which lead to misgivings, that, even though history be the true mode of determining the character of Christianity, still it cannot be satisfactorily used for the purpose.

And it cannot be denied that this anticipation is in a measure, though only in a measure, fulfilled. It is not fulfilled in such sense that an inquirer, coming to history, would not obtain a certain definite impression what Christianity was, and certain general views of its doctrines, principles, and characteristics. The nature and temper of the religion, as a matter of fact, no one can mistake, whether he

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accept it or stumble at it. No one, for instance, will say that Christianity has not always taught benevolence and mercy; that it has sanctioned injustice, or made light of impurity; that its spirit has been sceptical; that it has discountenanced what is called the sacramental principle, or the principle of mystery. Bold outlines, which cannot be disregarded, rise out of the records of the past, when we look to see what it will give up to us: they may be dim, they may be incomplete, but they are definite; —there is that which they are not, which they cannot be. Whatever be historical Christianity, it is not Protestantism. If ever there were a safe truth, it is this.

And Protestantism has ever felt it. I do not mean that every Protestant writer has felt it; for it was the fashion at first, at least as a rhetorical argument against Rome, to appeal to past ages, or to some of them; but Protestantism, as a whole, feels it, and has felt it. This is shown in the determination already referred to, of dispensing with historical Christianity altogether, and of forming a Christianity from the Bible alone: men never would have put it aside, unless they had despaired of it. It is shown by the long neglect of ecclesiastical history in England, which prevails even in the English Church. Our popular religion scarcely recognises the fact of the twelve long ages which lie between the Councils of Nicæa and Trent, except as affording one or two passages to illustrate its wild interpretations of certain prophecies of St. Paul and St. John. It is melancholy to say it, but the chief, perhaps the only English writer who has any claim to be considered an ecclesiastical historian, is the infidel Gibbon. German Protestantism, on the other hand, has been of a bolder character; it has calmly faced and carefully surveyed the Christianity of eighteen hundred years, and it frankly avows that it is a mere religion of man and the

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accident of a period. It considers it a syncretism of various opinions springing up in time and place, and forming such combinations one with another as their respective characters admitted; it considers it as the religion of the childhood of the human mind, and curious to the philosopher as a phenomenon.

And the utter incongruity between Protestantism and historical Christianity is true whether the latter be regarded in its earlier or in its later centuries. Protestants can as little bear its Ante-nicene as its Post-tridentine period. I have elsewhere observed on this circumstance: "So much must the Protestant grant that, if such a system of doctrine as he would now introduce ever existed in early times, it has been clean swept away as if by a deluge, suddenly, silently, and without memorial; by a deluge coming in a night, and utterly soaking, rotting, heaving up, and hurrying off every vestige of what it found in the Church, before cock-crowing: so that 'when they rose in the morning' her true seed 'were all dead corpses'—nay dead and buried—and without grave-stone. 'The waters went over them; there was not one of them left; they sunk like lead in the mighty waters.' Strange antitype, indeed, to the early fortunes of Israel!—then the enemy was drowned, and 'Israel saw them dead upon the seashore.' But now, it would seem, water proceeded as a flood 'out of the serpent's mouth,' and covered all the witnesses, so that not even their dead bodies 'lay in the streets of the great city.' Let him take which of his doctrines he will, his peculiar view of self-righteousness, of formality, of superstition; his notion of faith, or of spirituality in religious worship; his denial of the virtue of the sacraments, or of the ministerial commission, or of the visible Church; or his doctrine of the divine efficacy of the Scriptures as the one appointed instrument of religious teaching; and let him consider how far antiquity, as it has come down to us, will counte-

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nance him in it. No; he must allow that the alleged deluge has done its work; yes, and has in turn disappeared itself, it has been swallowed up in the earth mercilessly as itself was merciless."¹

That Protestantism, then, is not the Christianity of history, it is easy to determine; but there is a determination which is difficult. It is difficult to complete, to finish from history that picture of the divine religion which, even in its outlines, is sufficient to condemn Protestantism, though not sufficient to imprint upon our minds the living image of Christianity. Confused, inaccurate knowledge is no knowledge. It is the very fault we find with youths under education that they use words without meaning, that they are wanting in precision and distinctness, that they are ignorant what they know and what they do not know. We account this a great defect of mind, which must be overcome. Now our difficulty lies in getting beyond this half knowledge of Christianity, if we make history our teacher; in obtaining from it views serviceable, ready, for belief and practice, whole views, definite answers to definite questions, critical decisions between truth and error, explanations of its own variations, measures of its meaning. History is not a creed or a catechism; it gives lessons rather than rules; it does not bring out clearly upon the canvass the details which were familiar to the ten thousand minds of whose combined movements and fortunes it treats. Such is it from its very nature; nor can the defect ever fully be remedied. This must be admitted: at the same time, principles may be laid down with considerable success as keys to its various notices, enabling us to arrange and reconcile them.

Such a key, as regards the teaching of Christianity, it has been imagined was contained in the celebrated dictum of Vincentius,—a method of accounting for whatever variations we may find in the

¹ Church of the Fathers, p. 327.

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historical testimonies concerning it, of separating authoritative doctrine from opinion, of rejecting what is faulty, and combining and forming a theology. That "Christianity is what has been held always, everywhere, and by all," certainly promises a solution of the perplexities, an interpretation of the meaning of history. What can be more natural than that divines and bodies of men should speak sometimes from themselves, sometimes from tradition? what more natural than that individually they should say many things on impulse, or under excitement, or as conjectures, or in ignorance? what more certain than that they must have been all instructed and catechised in the Creed of the Apostles? what more evident than that what was their own would in its degree be peculiar, and differ from what was similarly private and personal in their brethren? what more conclusive than that the doctrine that was common to all at once was not really their own, but public property in which they had a joint interest, and proved by the concurrence of so many witnesses to have come from an apostolical source? Here, then, we have a short and easy method for reconciling the various informations of ecclesiastical history with that antecedent probability in its favour, which nothing but its actual variations would lead us to neglect.

Such is the rule of historical interpretation which has been professed in the English school of divines; and it contains a majestic truth, and offers an intelligible principle, and wears a reasonable air. It is congenial, or, as it may be said, native to the Anglican mind, which takes up a middle position, neither discarding the Fathers nor acknowledging the Pope. It lays down a simple rule by which to measure the value of every historical fact as it comes, and thereby it provides a bulwark against Rome while it opens an assault upon Protestantism. Such is its promise; but its difficulty lies in applying it in

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particular cases. The rule is more serviceable in determining what is not, than what is Christianity; it is irresistible against Protestantism, and in one sense indeed it is irresistible against Rome also, but in the same sense it is irresistible against England. It strikes at Rome through England. It admits of being interpreted in one of two ways: if it be narrowed for the purpose of disproving the catholicity of the Creed of Pope Pius, it becomes also an objection to the Athanasian; and if it be relaxed to admit the doctrines retained by the English Church, it no longer excludes certain doctrines of Rome which that Church denies. It cannot at once condemn St. Thomas and St. Bernard, and defend St. Athanasius and St. Gregory Nazianzen.

This general defect in its serviceableness has been heretofore felt by those who appealed to it. It has been said: "The Rule of Vincent is not of a mathematical or demonstrative character, but moral, and requires practical judgment and good sense to apply it. For instance, what is meant by being 'taught *always*?' does it mean in every century, or every year, or every month? Does '*every where*' mean in every country, or in every diocese? and does 'the *Consent of Fathers*' require us to produce the direct testimony of every one of them? How many Fathers, how many places, how many instances constitute a fulfilment of the test proposed? It is, then, from the nature of the case, a condition which never can be satisfied as fully as it might have been. It admits of various and unequal application in various instances; and what degree of application is enough, must be decided by the same principles which guide us in the conduct of life, which determine us in politics, or trade, or war, which lead us to accept Revelation at all, for which we have but probability to show at most, nay, to believe in the existence of an intelligent Creator."¹

¹ Proph. Office, pp. 68, 69, ed. 2.

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So much was allowed by the writer; but then he added:—

“This character, indeed, of Vincent’s Canon, will but recommend it to the disciples of the school of Butler, from its agreement with the analogy of nature; but it affords a ready loophole for such as do not wish to be persuaded, of which both Protestants and Romanists are not slow to avail themselves.”

This is the language of disputants who are more intent on assailing others than defending themselves; as if similar loopholes were not necessary for Anglican theology.

He elsewhere says: “What there is not the shadow of a reason for saying that the Fathers held, what has not the faintest pretensions of being a Catholic truth, is this, that St. Peter or his successors were and are universal Bishops, that they have the whole of Christendom for their one diocese in a way in which other Apostles and Bishops had and have not.”¹ Most true, if, in order that a doctrine be considered Catholic, it must be formally stated by the Fathers generally from the very first; but, on the same understanding, the doctrine also of the apostolical succession in the episcopal order “has not the faintest pretensions of being a Catholic truth.”

Nor was this writer without a feeling of the difficulty of his school; and he attempted to meet it by denying it. He wished to maintain that the sacred doctrines admitted by the Church of England into her Articles were taught in primitive times with a distinctness which could not be fancied to attach to the characteristics of Rome.

“We confidently affirm,” he said in another publication, “that there is not an article in the Athanasian Creed concerning the Incarnation which is not anticipated in the controversy with the Gnostics. There is no question which the Apollinarian

¹ *Ibid.* p. 221.