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OUR CAUSE AND ITS
ACCUSERS.

A DISCOURSE

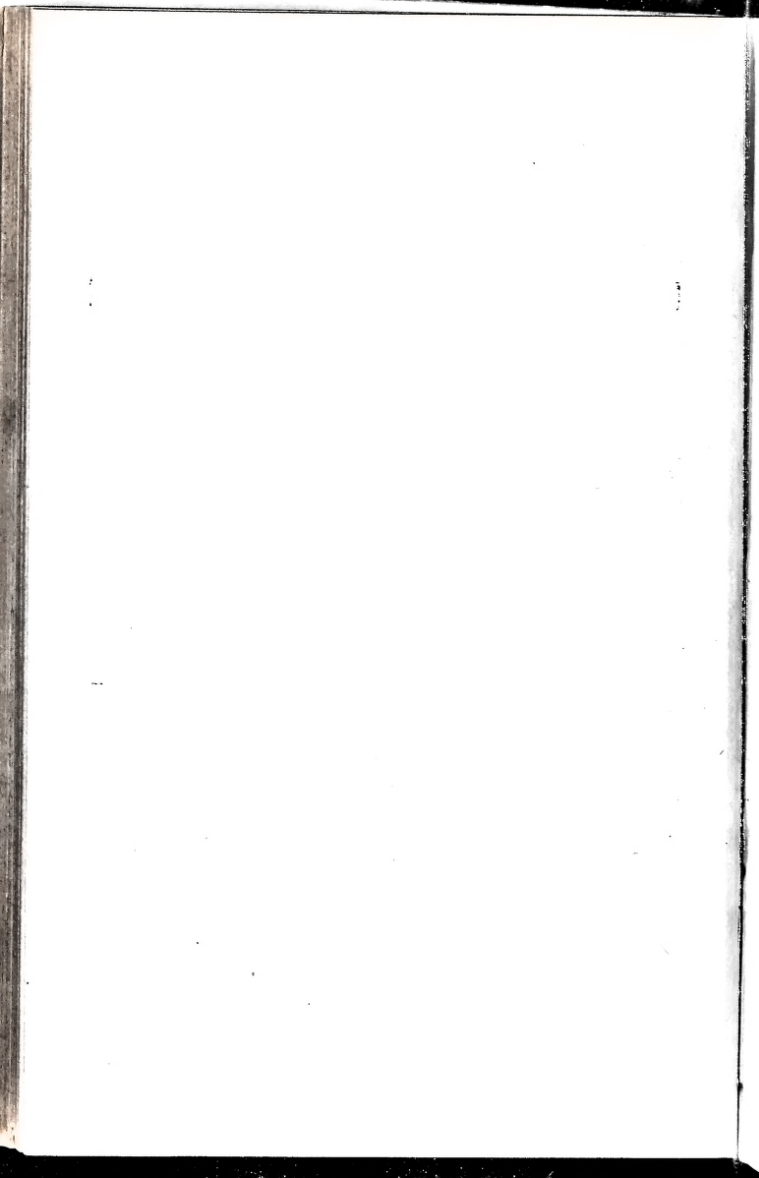
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BY

MONCURE D. CONWAY, M.A.



OUR CAUSE AND ITS ACCUSERS.

It is not because the believer in rational religion has not clear convictions that he will not shape them into a creed. It is because the experience of the world has proved that however well a creed may express the thought of one generation it is very certain to impede the thought of another. An oriental Prince once sent his servant some miles to get a bit of salt for his meal while out hunting; but when he found that his messenger had not paid for the salt he sent him all the way back with some money; for, he said, though the pinch of salt is a trifle, precedent is not a trifle, and if he should take even so little without payment the custom might grow until some prince of the future might desolate the country. As great despotisms have grown from small beginnings, so have oppressions

for the human mind and conscience grown out of the bad habit which our ancestors had of putting their opinions into dogmatic shape. For when a creed is so made they who believe it commit their pride of opinion to it; they get a party to build schools and churches to teach that creed; then many people have pecuniary interests invested in such schools and churches, are furious with those who question the creed which props their power and wealth, and do them all the mischief they can. This is why the church never burned people for immorality, but only for doubting or denying their creed. All this amounts to systematic discouragement of thought; and, as the rationalist desires to encourage thought, he refuses to formulate his opinions as dogmas or creeds, or to build his organisation on any corner-stone which may crush intellectual liberty beneath it. I have no claim, therefore, to commit those who have for many years honoured me with their confidence to any belief except belief in this liberty of mind and conscience. We are aiming to build a science of religion and of morals, based upon the facts of consciousness, the history of man, the laws of nature; and in science there can be no finality, no authority. In stating the views of rationalists, I speak only as one who has had long acquaintance with such, and has devoted his life to study of their principles.

Occasionally, indeed, some few liberals—not exactly

rationalists—have wished for something like a set of articles ; but I think we are justified in our repugnance to everything of that kind not only by the history of persecution for opinion's sake, but by what is now occurring around us, even here in the most enlightened metropolis of the world. The transfer of our little Society to a larger hall than that in which we have gathered for near ten years in quietness, has been the occasion of denunciations which could not have been more fierce had we during those years demoralised the whole neighbourhood. We have been vilified, accused, misrepresented, and for what offence? For inability to subscribe to a creed framed in an age when science did not exist, by men who believed more childish superstitions than the Church of Rome, a creed which our assailants themselves could not and would not believe were their faculties unfettered. Here are two printed sermons directed against us, and all who tolerate us, by the Vicar of St. Luke's, West Holloway. One is entitled "The Lord's Derision of Opposer's Schemes;" and in it he describes his God as laughing, but with an awful angry laugh, at our opposition to the Vicar's creed. The other is called "The Lord's Question to those who harbour his enemies," the question being that which Jehovah is said to have asked Balaam, "What men are these with thee?" The Vicar talks about his God in this way :—"First, then, it is a question of *Surprise*. It is asked even by God

in a tone of surprise and of startled wonder. What! God seems to say ; is it possible ? ” And again “ the question is also one of *anger and high indignation.* ” He also represents Balaam as being killed in battle because he had joined Jehovah’s enemies.

Now this so-called deity is familiar to all students of superstition. The God that laughs at the calamity of his own creatures and mocks when their fear cometh, and sends into the world opposers only to deride and then kill them,—even as he hardened Pharaoh’s heart in order, as he said, that he might show his own glory upon him,—this fearful phantasm of a semi-barbarous Syrian tribe, is known to us. But how comes it that he is held up as a real god here in London, in an age of refinement and culture? How comes it that the graduate of a University is prepared to bid men love their enemies in one breath, and in another bid them worship a God who derides, mocks, pursues, and slays his enemies, even though he made them himself voluntarily? Why the reverend gentleman himself shows us how it has come about. He says, “ There is a false and mock liberality which says that we may allow people to think and do as they like ! Now that might be true if God had given us no rule, no law to guide us ; but as He has, men have *no* such liberty.” I honour that clergyman’s candour. He confesses that what he preaches is not his own thought, not what he might like or believe if he should indulge

in the wickedness of reasoning without prejudice. He thinks only as authority has prescribed ; and because for ages men like him have laboured not to discover what is true but to defend the incredible creeds of the world's infancy, around which temporal interests and institutions have grown, we find this idol of the Stone Age artificially preserved to disgrace the Age of Reason. This clergyman says our God is " a clot on the brain." I can assure him that I do not believe his startled, angry, jealous, plotting god is a clot on the brain : it is the yet uncrumbled fragment of an ancient cosmogony occupying the place where a brain ought to be at work in the life that now is, and in the light shining for its direction.

It is a formidable thing for a man to take such a conception of God into his mind, and set it up on the tomb of his freedom ; for the day has passed by in which it can be maintained by fair and honourable means. As the angry, jealous, mocking god gives no sign or miracle to attest his existence at a moment when in all the ranks of literature and science no unprofessional defender of that existence is discoverable, they whose all is based upon that superstition are tempted to support it by intemperate language, by personal misrepresentations, and foul aspersions. I do not feel animosity towards the Vicar on account of the injustice he has done my friends and myself, because his sermons reveal the earnestness of his

feeling. His pain and alarm are at least more creditable than the hypocrisy of the hirelings who flee when they see the wolf approaching their fold. The only sorrow I have is that so candid and earnest a gentleman should mistake me for a wolf, for he cannot help fighting me as such, without being particular as to his weapons. Not being a wolf, and indeed trying to watch beside a flock of my own, I am compelled to remonstrate against his misrepresentations. He tells his people that I call their Lord and Saviour "*a dead Jew.*" That is not true. This phrase, "*a dead Jew,*" is taken from a book of mine,* and by detachment is made to seem like an epithet on Christ, instead of a rebuke to those who ignore his grand humanity. I remember once to have had a fear that some one might fancy that sentence was a slur upon the Jewish race, which I honour for its genius and its high record in art and philosophy; but it did not occur to me that it would ever be so hopelessly wrested from its meaning as it has been by the Vicar of St. Luke's. In the preceding sentence I speak of laying my "*palm before the heroic prophet of Jerusalem,*" and immediately after on the same page of "*the brave reformer*" sacrificed to "*the High Church of Palestine.*" When, therefore, I asked in that connection, "*What shall we say of the cultivated*

* The Earthward Pilgrimage. Chatto and Windus, 74, Piccadilly, W. The reference is to p. 240.

Europeans whose god is a dead Jew?" I was plainly not expressing my conception of Christ, but that of the Churches generally. I heartily wish it were otherwise. I wish that the sweet humanity of Christ, his heroic struggle with the Established Church of his time, his poetry and eloquence, were recognised by the orthodox; but unhappily it is untheological to dwell on the human characteristics of Christ. They insist that he was going through a prescribed routine in a perfunctory way; his temptations, difficulties, all unreal, as, being God, he could not sin, and was never in any danger of failing. So there is no man there at all. According to that view, so far as his humanity is concerned, he is merely a dead Jew, his death being the only seriously important thing about him.

Again, my reverend critic writes as follows:—"Can you 'receive into your house' men who speak thus of the sacred mystery of the Incarnation. . . 'His infant head, (said the poets)—alluding thus, it would appear, to that most reverent and devout hymn of good Bishop Heber—and where can Rationalism find among *its* disciples such a specimen of pure high morality, to say nothing of heavenly spirituality, as we can present it with in Heber?—'Low lies His head, mid the beasts of the stall':—'His infant head was laid down amid the beasts of the stall.' And now listen to the way in which the Son of God, your Saviour, and His holy Gospel are

spoken of: 'Its helpless infancy must be confided to donkeys, who shall mingle many a bray with this new Gospel.'"

Such is the fate of my honest effort to save faith in the wisdom and the greatness of Christ from being hid and lost for rational people by reason of the stupidity and bigotry which for ages have been taking him under their fatal protection, making him into their own image, until it is almost impossible to convince able men that there was any grandeur in him at all. In charity I must suppose that some one must have handed the Vicar the extract, for if he had read it in its connection he must have known that he was conveying to his people an impression widely different, and, so far as related to Christ, exactly the reverse of what is said in my book. I must now ask you to listen to what I there wrote:—"Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that can pierce through its glittering shows, and see this Nazarene peasant to be the Son of God? From that moment the old heavens begin to fade: on the soul's eye shines already the new heaven to whose every tint the new earth must respond. . . . A thousand revolutions germinated when the people knelt before a right and true, and a poor man. He was born amid the wild winter, said the poets; his infant head was laid low amid the beasts of the stall; his cause must struggle with the hostile elements of an icy conservatism; its

helpless infancy must be confided to donkeys, who shall mingle many a bray with this new gospel. All the old fables about Jahve, Zeus, and the rest, shall swathe this babe. Nevertheless, to us this child is born; where he enters idols shall fall, oracles be struck dumb, and all the signs of the heavens hold themselves honoured in weaving an aureole about the brow of a Man. This babe shall consecrate every babe; this mechanic shall establish the dignity of labour; this pauper shall liberate slaves and strike off the burdens of the poor."

Such is the page in which the Vicar detects blasphemy. I have given it at length, because it is of very serious importance to me that I shall not be held up before this community as falling beneath any man living in my homage to Christ. In a ministry that has now lasted a quarter of a century no word concerning that great soul has yet fallen from my tongue or pen that was not inspired by reverence, love, and even enthusiasm.

•So much in self-defence. The next point in the Vicar's attack is a more serious one, and it involves the whole Rationalistic community. He virtually charges it with sensualism. He tells his hearers that if they even tolerate us God will withdraw his light from their mind and his grace from their heart. "You will become," he says, "first a sceptic, and then an infidel, and then a scoffer, and then, at last

the openly immoral sensualist!" What is a sceptic? It is a Greek word, meaning a man who "considers." What is infidel? It means a man who disbelieves what the majority believe. It was what Paul confessed to when he said, "This I confess, that after the way they call heresy so worship I the God of my Fathers." According to the Vicar, to consider (*σκέπτειν*), and to adopt an individual opinion, in religion, is the sure path to immorality. Well, Christ was called a blasphemer and a friend of sinners, and in league with Beelzebub; and if priests spoke so of him we need not be disturbed when priests say hard things of us. But we have the right to ask the Vicar to prove his case. The Liberal religious body is of respectable age, and the Vicar should point out the examples of immorality in its record of eminent men. Will he select Channing, or Belsham, or Priestley—whose house a Christian mob tore down—in the past, or Martineau and John James Tayler, Dr. Carpenter and Miss Mary Carpenter of recent years? Or, taking more pronounced rationalism, will he name as sensualists Professor Newman, or Miss Cobbe, or Sir Charles Lyell, or Mr. Justice Grove, or Lord Houghton, or the Duke of Somerset, or the poet Tennyson, or Matthew Arnold, or Herbert Spencer? These are men who have carried scepticism and rationalism to its fullest logical results. Are they known as sensualists, or even as men who bear false witness against their neighbours?

I think most persons will agree that Mr. Gladstone is about as good a judge of the religious world as the Vicar of St. Luke. In his article on "Modern Religious Thought," Mr. Gladstone speaks of those whom the Vicar calls Sensualists, in the following terms :—

"There are within it," he says, speaking of the Unitarian, theistic, and rationalistic class generally, "men not only irreproachable in life, but excellent; and many who have written both in this country and on the Continent with no less power than earnestness, in defence of the belief which they retain. Such are, for example, Professor Frohschammer in Germany, and M. Laveleye in Belgium; while in this country, without pretending to exhaust the list, I would pay a debt of honour to Mr. Martineau, Mr. Greg, Dr. Carpenter and Mr. Jevons. . . . They are generally men exempt from such temptations as distress entails, and fortified with such restraints as culture can supply. . . . We should not hastily be led by antagonism of opinion to estimate lightly the influence which a School, limited like this in numbers, may exercise on the future. For, if they are not rulers, they rule those who are. They belong to the class of thinkers and teachers; and it is from within this circle, always, and, even in the largest organisations, a narrow one, that go forth the influences which one by one form the minds of men, and in their aggregate determine the course of affairs, the fate of institutions, and the happiness of the human race."

Such is the judgment upon the men and the influences at work in the rationalistic movement uttered by one who has given as much attention to religious subjects as any man of our time.

The Vicar challenges us to show in the ranks of rationalism any man so moral and spiritual as Bishop Heber. That kind of argument is more absurd than if I were to ask him to point out among rationalists one so coarse as the present Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol, who advised the landlords, when Joseph Arch and other leaders of the Agricultural Unions came, "to duck them in the nearest horsepond." It is at least more pertinent to illustrate the character of an existing belief by living examples than by going back to one dead over fifty years. There was a time when the saintliest souls in Europe were Roman Catholics. The falsity of the system had not then been exposed: Since Bishop Heber died the religious mind of England has been revolutionised by the great discoveries of science, the generalisations of philosophy, and the opening to us of the religions of the East. It is under such influences as these that the Hebers of the past have become the Thirlwalls, and Colensos, and Temples of the present. For the rationalist movement in England has been fed at a fountain which is now the most living in the English Church. Possibly the Vicar of St. Luke's may have excommunicated the late Bishop of St. David's, when

he refused to act as a reviser of the Bible translation if a leading Unitarian were excluded from the Committee ; and perhaps he is ready to excommunicate the rationalist Bishop Colenso, and the Bishop of Exeter, and Dean Stanley, and Stopford Brooke who extols the poet Shelley, and the Rev. Mr. Haweis who declares that prayer can have no possible effect on the unalterable course of Nature. Nevertheless, I will venture to suggest that it is not one of the thirty-nine articles that the neighbouring Vicar shall represent all the wisdom in the Church of England. At any rate, it is plain that he can hardly expect to exterminate our humble society here until he has dealt with those who in his own Church are fraternising with heretics. We may return upon him "the Lord's question" to Balaam—"What men are these with thee?" Here, for instance, is the Rev. Dr. Mark Pattison of your own Church, who answers for us your threat of endless despair, telling us that to act in any way "because God is stronger than we and able to damn us if we don't," argues "a sleek and sordid epicurism." Here is the late Professor Baden Powell who tells us that "in nature and from nature, by science and by reason, we neither have, nor can possibly have, any evidence of a Deity working miracles." Here is the present Bishop of Exeter who declares that men who do not use their reason in perfect freedom without restraint from any external authority,

are "under the law." "Such men," he says, "are sometimes tempted to prescribe for others what they need for themselves, and to require that no others should speculate because they dare not. They not only refuse to think, and accept other men's thoughts, which is often quite right, but they elevate those into canons of faith for all men, which is not right." And finally I will quote from a man who occupies the highest educational position in Great Britain,—a man to whom this nation has entrusted a position of influence in the training of young men, second to none on earth. I refer to the Rev. Professor Jowett, the Head Master of Balliol College, Oxford. In words that should have their weight for every mind that hears me, he says:—"The suspicion of Deism, or perhaps of Atheism, awaits inquiry. By such fears a good man refuses to be influenced; a philosophical mind is apt to cast them aside with too much bitterness. It is better to close the book (the Bible), than to read it under conditions of thought which are imposed from without. Whether those conditions of thought are the traditions of the Church, or the opinions of the religious world—Catholic or Protestant—makes no difference: they are inconsistent with the freedom of the truth and the moral character of the Gospel."

Do not imagine that I have got these testimonies from the Vicar's clerical brethren by garbling their thoughts as he garbled mine: you will find such

thoughts the main burden of the "Essays and Reviews," from which I have taken them. I suppose our accuser does not wish his Church to monopolise rationalism, nor think that such thoughts become sound if one only wears a surplice. Consequently I have a right to ask him, "What men are these with thee?" Are you quietly submitting to them, fraternising with them, getting your living from a church that exalts them, and then denouncing as blasphemers and sensualists humbler people who are animated by the same spirit and honestly carrying out the same principles? Is it the high Christian spirit to hush up the heresies of a Bishop or a Dean, and then turn with fury on the press that gives their views fair play; to threaten with vengeance from Heaven English gentlemen who refuse to aid in barring freedom of speech out of this Athenæum; or is it Christian to conspire for the injury of an institution because it will not turn itself into a prison to restrain and punish thought and inquiry?

It may be Christian, but it is not like Christ. It is not the spirit of him who said, "Of yourselves judge ye what is right," and "The truth shall make you free." It is not that of his early followers, who said, "Try the spirits; prove all things, hold fast that which is good; where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." Intolerance burned the books of Copernicus, and the bodies of scholars, in the past, and it may

still trample on the book it cannot answer, and doom to hell-fire those whom it can no longer burn with earthly fire ; but it is in sharp discord with the civilisation of our age, which protects the freedom which is essential to the elucidation of truth, and inharmonious with that spirit of inquiry which is the great need of our time, and the charity which is the need of every time.

Of these tendencies of our age our Society is one result among many,—an inevitable result. We are not prepared to adopt any sectarian shibboleth whatever. We admit ourselves unable to comprehend the divine existence, while we feel the reality of that supreme influence which is expressed by humanity in the word God. We find in the Bible a sacred revelation of the human heart—able to stimulate into activity our own hearts, but we cannot call that book the Word of God in any sense that would localise or limit the spiritual sunshine which has illumined every race and period. While we love to think upon Christ, and study his words, and recognise his unparalleled grandeur, we decline to call ourselves “ Christian,” technically, because, in the first place, we do not wish to separate ourselves from those brought up in other religions—Israelites, Hindoos, Mahommedans—among whom Christianity has for ages carried fire and sword, unwilling to raise any name by them historically associated with their subjugation and suffering, as a bar

to that common Religion of Humanity for which we long and hope. Nor do we wish to raise any sectarian name, like Christian, which would imply that the religious culmination of our race has already taken place in the distant past. We believe that in religion, as in knowledge and civilisation, the law is progress. That indeed is the essence of our faith in God. Jesus called himself by the name of no preceding religion or sect; neither did the disciples or apostles call themselves Christian; that word has no sanction in the New Testament. In the day when souls are breaking their ancient bonds they cannot live on memories of days that have set, but keep their faces ever to the sunrise. There shines the light that can alone transfigure the life of to-day, and in its glory Moses and Elias will again ascend, in it Christ and all the Prophets and Saviours of the world shall be glorified.

This is our cause. We have no fear for it. We love it, for it means to us reverence for all that is sweet in the past and pure in the present; we have faith in it, for it means to us pursuit of truth and fidelity to it; we rejoice in it, for in it we see germinating the freedom and fraternity of man, and in it all the great hopes of Humanity climbing to fulfilment.

NOTE.

Without undertaking to speak for the Committee of the Athenæum, who are able to speak for themselves, it may be well enough to say here that our Society regards the contract for the hall as purely a business arrangement, made in accordance with the usage under which the building is let for orderly meetings of various characters, and not in the least as implying any sympathy with our opinions on the part of that Committee.