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THE VOYSEY CASE,

FROM AN

HERETICAL STAND-POINT.

BY

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THE VOYSEY-CRUISE

BY JOHN W. VOYSEY

HERETICAL STAND-POINT.



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THE VOYSEY CASE,

FROM AN HERETICAL STAND-POINT.

IF the National Church is unable to fill its pews, it has at least succeeded of late in filling the air with gossip. Its recent history has been a series of public scandals. The excommunication of a heretic is followed by the insult of the bishops to a Unitarian invited by themselves to assist in the revision of the received version of the Bible, and this is succeeded by the legal reprimand of a Ritualist, all combining to impress the country with the idea that the Establishment has come to a pass when "apostolic blows and knocks" have become the normal condition of its existence. The most salient feature in the most important of these events was, perhaps, its inevitableness. The most zealous adherents of the church plainly recognised that if Mr Voysey were brought to trial, orthodoxy could not gain its case except at a heavy cost. They saw that the trial would be the means of circulating the heretic's opinions, and would invest him with the eminence of a martyr. But the church had no choice. If a clergyman with such views could retain his pulpit, there could be no reason why Socinians or simple Theists should not close their several chapels, and reinforce the rationalistic party in the church to an extent that would destroy its distinctive character and supernatural authority altogether. So the church

was placed at the mercy of the Vicar of Healaugh, and could only be saved from reviving an antiquated procedure, sure to injure itself more than him, by the quiet resignation which he refused to accord. There is a Bavarian fable of a boy gathering strawberries, who treated with rudeness an aged woman who met him with a petition for some berries. In return for this unkindness the old woman gave the boy a fine casket, out of which, however, when the boy opened it, came two small worms, which grew in size until they coiled about the boy's limbs, and drew him far, and ever farther, into the dark forest, where he still wanders in the toils of the mighty serpents. The myth may express more than the lesson of Bavarian mothers that small sins swell into fatal habits; it may describe the miserable necessities which, in the course of time, may be evolved from the rich casket of power obtained by a church for its scorn of reason. Bound fast in the coils of that superstition and bigotry which it has preferred to progress and charity, it is drawn into the dark forest to which its selected masters belong, and cannot free itself even at the bidding of obvious self-interest. The trial came, and with it the incidents which have filled all heretics with delight. For some days Mr Voysey virtually edited the London papers, and turned the *Times* into a rationalistic tract. There was enough orthodox irritation at this, but it is difficult to rage a fact out of existence. Nor can it be shown that this advantage was unfairly gained by Mr Voysey and his fellow-free-thinkers. This charge has been made in various quarters, and, since it involves the chief features of importance in the case, it may be well to consider it more closely.

Soon after the judgment of the Privy Council was delivered, the *Times* in a leading article, atoned for the wide publicity which it had been the chief means of giving to the views of the heretic, by a remonstrance which states the case of those who censure Mr

Voysey's position plausibly enough. The *Times* says :—

“Before the most conspicuous tribunal in the world—for Rome itself can show no such hearings, no such judgments, or so many readers—Mr Voysey preaches the Universal Creator and the Loving Father of all, in clear and lucid contrariety to every doctrine that could seem to contradict, qualify, or obscure the first teaching of Nature, and, as he believes, the essential truth of Holy Writ. Nobody can complain that Mr Voysey has this seeming advantage. Ours is an atmosphere of discussion. It is our boast to try all things, and hold fast to that which is good and true. But if Mr Voysey, and free inquirers in general, may be congratulated upon a success which is the very utmost they can have expected,—the success of a fair trial and a world-wide publicity,—it remains to doubt whether this success, such as it is, has been lawfully obtained, and whether Mr Voysey's position be as good as he believes his teaching to be. Had he any right to deny all the distinctive doctrines of his church, claiming at the same time to be held an honest subscriber and faithful minister, with no other possible hope than that he might thereby proclaim his denial the louder and further to all the world? We cannot think so.”

Passing by the naïve confession implied in this passage, that the eminent prosecutors and the Lord Chancellor cannot hope to gain by publicity as much advantage for their orthodox views, as Mr Voysey for his heresies, let us examine the main charge brought against the integrity of the expelled Vicar's position. It is no secret that Mr Voysey had to make up his mind to press his appeal between parties which urged him to anticipate an inevitable sentence by a surrender, and those who besought him to demand the decision which has been obtained. The latter party probably regarded the course they advised as perfectly consistent with a belief that even if Mr Voysey

had gained his case, it would have been his truest course to leave the church. Even if it could be shown that, by means of legal technicalities, a teacher of Mr Voysey's opinions could manage to escape expulsion from the church, the far greater moral question remains, whether a man of earnest convictions, especially one who believes it his especial task to maintain them publicly, is justifiable in adhering to formularies plainly not framed to represent those convictions, and, at best, capable of expressing them only by strained and unusual interpretations. But conceding that the thirty-nine articles are not the honest physiognomy of Mr Voysey's faith, there were other elements in the relation in which he found himself to the church which rendered the practical question of duty far more complex than the theory of his accusers admits. It is by no means the whole of Mr Voysey's case that he courted the publicity which a trial would secure for his views. As Vicar he was related not only to the church, but to the nation of people which that church is endeavouring to enlist in its service. His position made him for the moment the representative and spokesman of the religious rationalism of England, and the only one who could demand and wring from the church an answer to a question of paramount importance to every free inquirer in this land. The question is, What is the exact price which the National Church demands for its advantages? How much of the young man's freedom, how much of his natural reason and conscience, must be laid down at this step and at that step on the path of promotion?

Undoubtedly, it is deplorable that there should be any such question as this, but that it exists is not the fault of the rationalists in the country, but of the church itself. If the terms of the contract between the clergyman and the church have become so confused that it is no longer certain whether an entrance to holy orders signifies an acceptance of the articles in their

ordinary sense, it is because the church itself has long been indulging its eminent beneficiaries in heresy. Such indulgence has not been without advantages to the church. If the church had, during the last two generations, separated, like sheep and goats, all who held to the creeds and articles in their popular sense, and those who subscribed them under unusual interpretations, it would certainly have lost the prelates and scholars who have most reached the heart of the people and won the attention of the world. But if it is an advantage for a church to be represented in the world of thought and literature by such men as Whately, Arnold, Baden Powell, Thirlwall, Stanley, Jowett, Maurice, and Kingsley, this is an advantage that, like every other, has to be paid for. The church has long paid for the champions thus drawn from the literary and philosophical classes by offering them terms upon which they could enjoy the large opportunities it could give them for their congenial work. This indulgence of heresy was extended even to the protection of the writers of the *Essays and Reviews*,—a book which denied the supernatural authority of the Bible, the depravity of man, the benefit of Foreign Missions, and miracles, and whose heresies were so formidable that even the American Unitarians declined to republish it in that country. And when the prosecution against Bishop Colenso also failed, it seemed as if there were no limit to the toleration of free thought in the church. The Unitarian and Theistic Chapels seemed left without a *raison d'être*, and such young men as were inclined to the ministry were freely saying, "Surely we can have no fear in entering a church which tolerates Arian and Theistic bishops, Darwinian deans, and Socialistic canons."

But inside and outside of the church there has been an increasing perception that this state of things was morally indefensible. The increase of casuistry was a ruinous rate at which to obtain toleration in the Establishment, and the prospect of securing a church repre-

senting all phases of religious thought was marred by the danger that such an institution when it came would equally represent the average Jesuitism of the nation. The real believers in the articles in their obvious sense, and they who utterly rejected them, alike felt that Dr Colenso and Dr Wilberforce could sit upon the same episcopal bench only by some mere trick, and that to one or the other the creed was not a real face but a mask. Rumours were afloat to feed the misgivings of sincere men of all beliefs. It was whispered that one divine was in the habit of shifting the reading of prayers to his subordinates, and that a certain bishop was in the habit of prefacing his reading of the creeds with the announcement that he read them not as a believer in them, but as an officer of the Queen. It is creditable to the honesty of the country that those who were interested in keeping the standard of church orthodoxy vague, were not strong enough to overcome the determination that the vagueness should end, and if the apparent policy of the church to embrace all varieties of opinion were proved to be final, that its formularies should be altered to suit the fact. To compel this issue and decision no case could have been more perfect and opportune than that of Mr Voysey. The church had indeed tolerated all his heresies, but it had tolerated them as distributed through many individuals, each of whom held his segment of rationalism in connection with such an eminent or even courtly following, or held it with such dexterity of statement, that he could not be made a fair test, and remained in the church as its bait for clever young men. But all these heresies converged at last in one man. The honest orthodoxy of the church at last saw all the Broad Church heretics with one neck, that neck being Rev. Charles Voysey's; and the outside world saw that the destiny of the church depended upon whether that neck could be cut off or not.

This, then, was a much greater aim than that mere publicity for his opinions which, the *Times* says, was the utmost success Mr Voysey could hope to obtain.

He and his friends aimed to compel the Church to show its hand, and their right—their duty—to do so was as clear as their intention was manifest. Are we told that a man ought not, and need not, to enter holy orders without knowing distinctly the terms of the contract to which he commits himself, and that if he discover afterwards that he cannot fulfil his part of it he should quietly resign the corresponding advantages? To this it may be replied (1.) that, for the reasons already stated, the clergyman cannot—or hitherto could not—know just what he was committing himself to. The Church itself, by the retention of the more eminent or dexterous heretics, has confused the sense of subscription at the very moment that it has increased the inducements to it. Does the subscriber commit himself to the opinions of Dr Pusey or Professor Jowett?—to those of Dr Liddon or those of Dean Stanley? It is not the Voseys who have produced this confusion. Nay, (2.) so far from aiding the young divinity-student, before whom the same Church lays the *Essays and Reviews* and the Prayer-book, to avoid the error of committing himself to its work prematurely, it waylays him at a period of life when his future conclusions cannot be foreseen, and with proffered fellowships and livings bribes him to take the dangerous step. If he hesitate, the Church eagerly rebukes his hesitation, and lures him on to the false position, instead of encouraging the utmost caution. From the first moment that it gets hold of a single finger of him the Church watches him jealously to manipulate his mind for its own purposes. No sooner does the student begin to follow Archbishop Whately's advice, and misgive that he may not mistake, than the Church addresses itself to the work of repressing the misgivings, and furthering the mistake until it is irretrievable. No sooner does the youth begin to doubt and inquire than he is surrounded by weeping friends and sighing parsons, who grieve over him and pray over him, until, envying perhaps the old martyrs who were

simply burnt, the sensitive heart yields itself to fetters forged from its own affections. If any one thinks that this is an exaggerated statement of the fact, let him read the life of Dr Arnold, written by Dr Stanley. A sceptic from boyhood, Arnold no sooner turned his eyes upon the doctrine of a Trinity than he doubted it. Straightway clerical friends whisper, and mourn over him as if he had been guilty of some crime, and at length they hit upon a plan for him. It is not to warn him that if he enters the Church it will be a risk to his own character, and a danger to the Church: the scheme is,—and John Keble is to be credited with it,—Let us make haste and harness Arnold in the Church! Before he has time to think any more, get him in a living, and committed to parish work! (3.) The youth thus bribed and ensnared into the Church, if, as in the case of Mr Voysey and many others, he discover that he is out of his place, has been seriously wronged. The best years of his preparation for the work of life have been devoted to a career which he must now abandon; and this grave injury is enhanced by the grossly unjust disabilities which legally close against one who had entered holy orders the awards of political life, and the professions in which his special studies might still be of some service.

These, then, are the facts which have to be considered in estimating the rights and duties of a man in the position of Mr Voysey, who, having entered the ministry of the church in good faith, arrives at conclusions whose consistency with the articles he has subscribed is questionable. Surely he has a right to decide how he can make the misstep, for which he is in the smallest degree responsible, the most conspicuous warning to other young men who are being lured into holy orders, of the fetters that await them; and it is difficult to see how he could do so more effectually than by compelling the Lord Chancellor to pronounce solemnly that the simple and clear views of natural religion held by himself are forbidden to

the beneficiaries of the National Church. The decision is given, and our feet rest upon truth more firmly than before.

It remains to inquire whether that decision, while showing us more clearly where we stand, reveals a moral and religious state of things worthy of England, or worthy of the intelligence and the conscience of this age.

To what does the judgment of the Lord Chancellor amount?

It distinctly affirms 1, that "Christ bore the punishment due to our sins, and suffered in our stead," and that "He was crucified to reconcile His Father to us (that is, to mankind), and was a sacrifice,"—sacrifice also being defined as an "offering to God." 2. It asserts the existence of "original or birth sin," that such sin "exists in every one descended from Adam;" that children are by nature "children of God's wrath;" and that it was for this original sin that Christ was a sacrifice. 3. It re-affirms the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, the doctrine of a Trinity, and declares that Jesus was supernaturally conceived, that he is to be worshipped as God, and that he will return as the Judge of the earth on the last day. 4. It declares that no clergyman has a right "upon his own taste and judgment, to assert that whole passages of the canonical books are without any authority whatever," or can "expound one part of Scripture as repugnant to another." These points represent the substance of the thirteen counts which have been sustained in the indictment against Mr Voysey. They represent the plain creed freshly labelled upon every clergyman who stands in a pulpit of the National Church.

No one can read the passages from Mr Voysey's *Slings and Stones*, which are held to be in contravention with the above creed, without recognizing that they are such as are familiar in the writings of the Broad Church clergy. No one acquainted with the teachings of the leaders of that school can doubt that the new heretic

has fed upon them, or that he honestly represents the substance and tendency of their belief. It may be doubted whether Mr Voysey, before leaving the church, might not have very properly availed himself of the opportunity for retraction offered him, and asserted that he believed the Thirty-nine Articles as they are interpreted by the distinguished theologians and officials of the church, whose opinions he quoted in his defence. When he offered those quotations, the court, unable to break their force, evaded it by saying that the line of argument implied that it should try the cases of each of the distinguished divines in question. The evasion was sufficient for the convenience of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council ; but it was insufficient to alter the fact that the court *was* necessarily trying the divines in question, and was compelled to sentence them along with Mr Voysey. To each and all of them, —bishops, deans, canons, clergymen,—the Church and State with authoritative voice have said, “You hold your positions illegally and dishonestly, unless you believe that God is an angry and jealous monarch, and man a child of Satan, and unless you believe unreservedly all the statements contained in the Bible.”

One word further about the offer to Mr Voysey of an opportunity for retraction. How grand and worthy a proposition is this for a church representing the national morals to make! Only say you believe what you do not believe, says the church, and you are quite welcome to our pulpit! If Mr Voysey had followed the example of Cranmer, and put forward a retraction to be itself retracted at the end, one can imagine its character to be somewhat as follows:—

“I hereby renounce and deplore my wicked belief that God is a loving Father. I affirm, on the contrary, my faith that He is a jealous and wrathful being, who will torture untold millions of men, women, and children by fire for ever. I hold accursed my former belief, that God is just and merciful, and affirm that even the eating of a piece of forbidden apple by a

man who lived six thousand years ago, was enough to make Him damn the whole human race to eternal misery,—a curse which would have been carried into execution, had it not been for the timely interference of a certain Pontius Pilate, who, assisted by one Judas, sacrificed to God the blood of the most innocent being in the world, the sight of which blood so pleased God, that He was prevailed upon to save from the said damnation a select few at least of mankind. Asking forgiveness of the Church for all I have said to the contrary, I now declare my implicit belief that a certain Jewish peasant was born 1871 years ago without a human father, and that he was Almighty God. Also that three are one, and one is three. I believe that a serpent in Eden and Balaam's ass talked, and that Jonah resided three days and nights in a whale's belly, whence he emerged quite safe. I believe that soothsayers turned rods to snakes; in the existence of sorcerers and witches and devils. I believe that all new-born babes are totally depraved, and that God looks upon them with feelings of anger. And finally, I believe that all who do not believe these things shall without doubt perish everlastingly!"

This is a retractation which every eminent clergyman of the Broad Church really makes in the hearing of the world every time he ascends a pulpit, or officiates in any way, since the Lord Chancellor's judgment. No protest against that judgment can tear off the creed which now adheres to each of them, plainly legible in the eyes of the world. There it will adhere until they can reverse the judgment, or bring themselves to say with John Sterling—*Adieu, O Church!* The world will await with anxiety, perhaps with some sternness, their action. It may sympathise with them as they approach the dregs of their cup, but the situation admits of no concealment, and the truth cannot be compromised. Mr Voysey is their child. They have nourished and reared him. Whatever may be their views of the dogma of vicarious suffering, there will be

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