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ON THE HINDRANCES

TO

PROGRESS IN THEOLOGY.

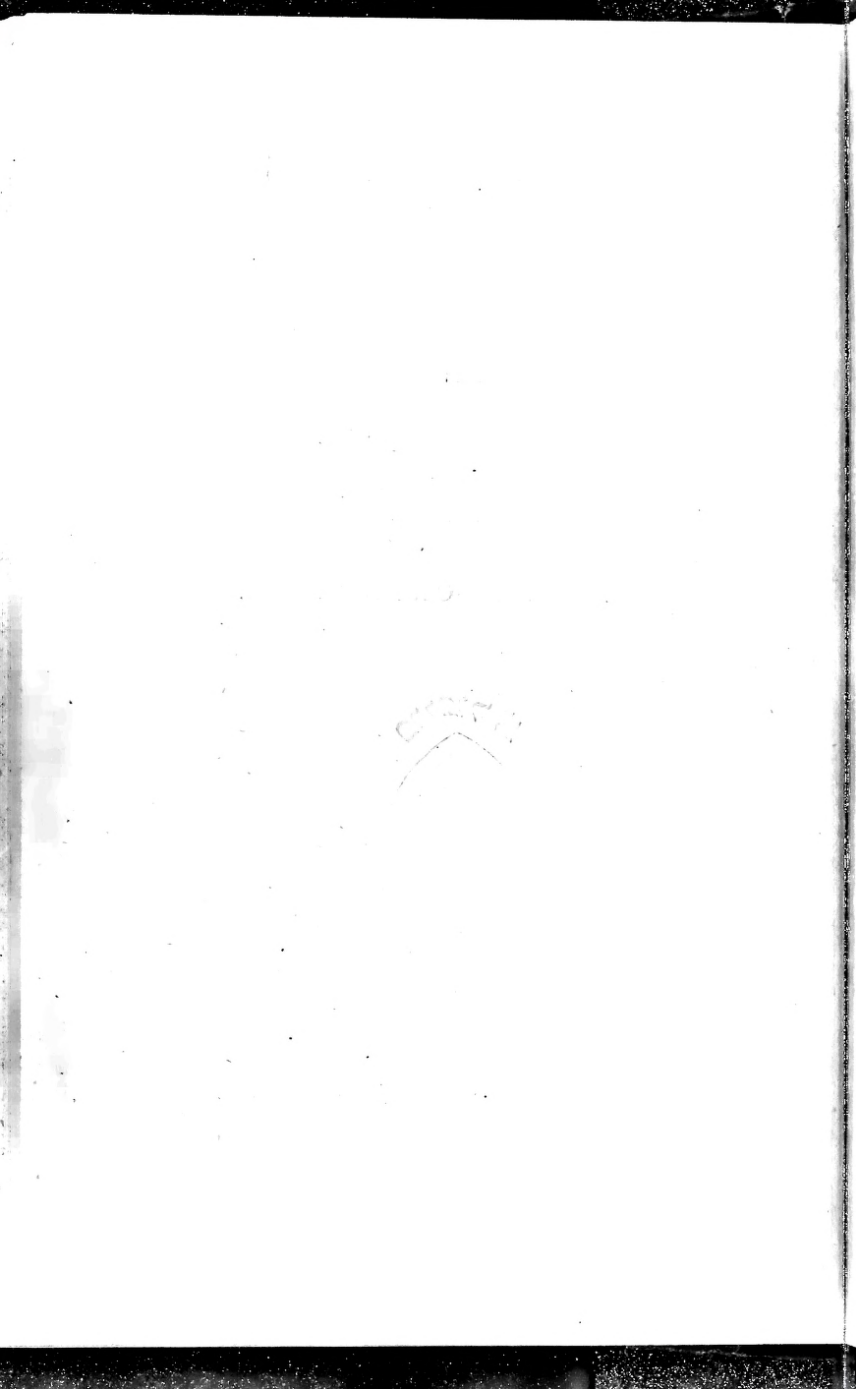
BY THE LATE

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HINDRANCES TO PROGRESS IN THEOLOGY.



WHEN one considers the great amount of intelligence and active thought existing in modern society, especially as compared with the past, one is apt at first to be surprised that so little progress has been made amongst people in general in religious, or more properly speaking, in theological questions. Those who venture upon such questions, to think for themselves and to doubt, or in any very serious degree to modify, the old and long received dogmas, are still the easily numbered few ; whilst the unreasoning, quiescent and bigoted recipients of the orthodox beliefs are the overwhelming majority. It may help to encourage those of you who are for making progress in theology as well as everything else, and possibly to awaken profitable reflection in those who have hitherto been indifferent in the matter, if I offer you this evening some considerations serving to account for the still great preponderance of the old beliefs.

In the first place, then, notwithstanding the admittedly wide-spread intelligence of the present day, I think the comparatively slow progress of theology is due to the very imperfect education which has been and still is generally received. It must be observed that the active intelligence amongst us is not due to the education in the technical or scholastic sense of the term. Whatever improvements have been made in the methods and subject-matter of

teaching, have been made within the last fifteen or twenty years, and such improvements have not affected those who have advanced to the middle stage of life, and whose thinking constitutes the character of the present generation. When they were at school scarcely a single step had been taken out of the old rut along which scholastic education had dragged its slow course for generations. There was nothing in it to quicken the mind or to form those habits of thought which alone constitute a liberal, broad and national intelligence. Boys in the middle classes learned a little Latin, less Greek, some Geography, scraps of naratives called History, under the designation of Astronomy the names of stars they never were taught to identify, and were in many cases pretty well drilled in Arithmetic. Girls learned still less of what was useful; in arithmetic seldom got beyond reduction, and became prodigies if they reached the rule of three (as it was called); but were thought to make up for the deficiency by acquiring the power of tinkling dance music and battles of Prague on the piano, of drawing on paper straight lines which did not lie evenly between extreme points, and circles whose radii were anything but equal to one another, and of making embroidery and other fancy articles the taste of which was an offence to gods and men. In all this education received by both boys and girls, there was nothing to teach them observation, analysis, reflection, comparison, reasoning, or any of those intellectual processes which are essential to the full exercise and development of our rational nature. Of course there were exceptions to this. Here and there were teachers far before their time, whose pupils, if led through the same routine course, had breathed into them a spirit of enquiry which has made them assume a place amongst the most progressive of the day. These, however, were the exceptional cases, and education was for the most part such as I have described it.

Fortunately, however, there were influences at work

in society ready to meet these boys as soon as they left the school for the business of life, which were calculated to do *in part* the work their school education ought to have done. The great discoveries of science, applied to manufactures and commerce, had already begun to change the whole aspect of social life. The most active thought had become necessary to conduct the ordinary affairs of business. Accurate observation and reasoning had become as necessary in the shops and the mercantile counting-house, as in the study of the savant and the philosopher. Information became essential; the cheapening of the newspapers supplied the want, and with the commercial information, they furnished other kinds of intelligence. Thought thus became amazingly quickened, and the intellectual activity of the present day has ensued.

But now, observe, this kind of intellectual activity, thus superinduced, does not necessarily extend itself to all subjects coming within its sphere. On the contrary, being called forth for a specific purpose, it is very apt to confine its activity to the purpose for which it has been called forth. It does not assume the character of a general habit of mind, but is merely a particular instrument employed for a particular end. It is analogous to the development of the physical powers. The physical powers may be developed by proper training altogether, so that whenever anything has to be done by any, or all of them, it will be done with the full and most perfectly developed powers; but instead of this general education, we may develop for a particular end some one or the other of these powers alone, that of the arm for working, hammering, &c., or of the legs for running, walking, or say, turning a lathe. Just so is it with our thoughts—there are the general and the special education; and the special education may be very complete for its purposes and yet leave the thoughts without those habits of general application which are essential to the completely rational man.

Now that is precisely what we find (with daily increasing exceptions, however, thank God) to be the effect of the training or education forced upon men by the business pursuits of the present day. The special training for business does not extend its influences over the general habits of thought, and consequently men may be found most intellectually efficient within the sphere of their active life, who beyond it shew no more rationality than children. The want of early training affects the whole sphere of their thought excepting in that one direction in which the necessities of their circumstances have compelled them to become rational. As I have said, there is a great increasing number of exceptions to this statement, where men of all classes and pursuits are exercising rational habits of thought upon all subjects coming under their notice ; but still, I have described what up to this time has been the prevailing fact. And the fact explains at once the slow progress made amongst the majority of people in theology, or, as it is generally termed, religion. They have received their creed in the mass, there has been nothing in their education to lead them to enquire into the truth of either this doctrine and that, or of the system as a whole. They listen to the teachings they receive from Sunday to Sunday with absolute credulity, leaving all their faculties of reasoning in abeyance ; or if exercising them, exercising them upon the most insignificant points. Or if they attempt to reason and enquire upon the vital points, they never bring to bear upon the subject the same acuteness of observation and analysis, the same closeness of comparison and reasoning, that they employ in their business concerns. They treat religion as altogether a different kind of thing, and indulge in all the loose habits of thought their unsound education left untouched. And so, when we consider all the other influences at work, we cannot wonder that such men remain fixed in their old superstitions, and become sometimes even the bigoted opponents of progress. Their education has determined their destiny.

And all I have said of men applies equally to the case of those women whose household affairs are of sufficient magnitude to require the exercise of much attention and judgment. Indeed, such women are often better situated than men for acquiring general rational habits of thought, for the objects they have to attend to are of a more miscellaneous character, and less likely, therefore, to confine the application of the rational powers to one narrow and specific line. But then, on the other hand, there are other causes, chiefly arising out of the affections, which counteract these more favourable circumstances, and which nothing but an early training could in the majority of cases correct. And thus it comes to pass that amongst both men and women rational opinions make but slow head-way, and only here and there are found those, who, having risen above the education of their youth, become rational in matters of religion.

The second cause I assign for the slow progress of religious thought is fear—blind, unreasoning, superstitious fear—which extends its influence over all persons not yet redeemed from its curse. Fear has been the prime and most effective motive power in nearly all, if not all, the religions of the world up to the present time. In some of them its agency was overwhelming. God, or the gods, were represented in an awful aspect full of vindictiveness, revenge, and cruelty. Men trembled at the thought of them. Their religion became a mere effort to appease the divine displeasure, or to purchase the divine favour. Oriental speculations had considerably modified these conceptions when Christianity arose and became (at all events as presented by its founders) the gentlest form of faith the world then had known. The teaching of both Christ and Paul, so far as it is ascertainable, presented the character of God in a benign relation to the world, and encouraged trust and love rather than fear. One dark and gloomy doctrine however was still retained, which although neutralized

in the loving spirits and teaching of these noble men, became developed into fearful forms under the influence of the fiery and dark minds which succeeded them. I refer, of course, to the doctrine of eternal punishment. That doctrine I am compelled to own both Paul and Christ distinctly taught. I should be glad to think that the philanthropic apostle, and above all that the gentle, loving Jesus had given no countenance to the immoral doctrine. But all honest criticism forbids me from doing so. The methods of criticism adopted by those who hold the contrary conclusion seem to me altogether subversive of rational interpretation, and would leave every document at the mercy of the interpreter.

Now, the doctrine they sanctioned, and which the whole of the New Testament teaches or recognises, has ever since been made more or less an efficient instrument of terror. In the hands of the best men of the church it has been used merely for the purpose of restraining vice or stimulating faith. But the darker spirits have used it with Satanic power to mould men to their will. Especially has this been the case in times of doubt, heresy, and schism. Then with all the vehemence of eloquence, and with all the invention of art, its awful, sulphurous terrors have been drawn forth before the affrighted imaginations of men, in the expectation that the fear of the horrible torments of an endless life might preserve them within the orthodox fold of Christ. In the present day such representations are much modified, and the fear arising out of them is consequently less active. The genteel, tolerably-educated minister of your city churches would not venture to deal out flames and fiery darkness as his fathers did. It is only in some out of the way parish, situated at what seems the world's end, in some little conventicle where the preacher is innocent of a day's schooling, that you now hear of eternal damnation in all the fulness of its horrors. Yet the influence if it has a strong hold of men's, and especially of women's feelings.

Fear has always restrained enquiry. The anathemas of the church long held back the mind of Europe from enquiry into the protestant dogmas. "What if the Church's dogmas should prove to be true? The eternal perdition would be incurred by the doubting of her creed." The same fear virtually operates now. "One's first concern is the salvation of the soul. What if one exposed it to jeopardy by pursuing these inquiries about the incarnation, the atonement, the inspiration and authority of the Bible? Leave such questions alone, and tread not on such dangerous ground."

Such dangerous ground!—that is of course, assuming, before the enquiry, that these orthodox dogmas are true. But what if they be untrue? Which will be the dangerous ground then? And how can you tell whether they be true or untrue until you have thoroughly investigated the matter? Should they prove to be untrue, and untrue I thoroughly believe them to be, they must be working intellectual and moral mischief in your souls. For every lie entails intellectual and moral mischief. But it is of no use to tell a large portion of the orthodox this. The fear of losing the soul has so taken possession of the feelings that it shuts out all reason, all commonsense, and leaves them the miserable victims of their superstitious delusions. They turn a deaf ear to all argument, evidence, and proof of every kind, and see nothing but the hazard of eternal woe in the questionings of reason. They have no confidence in the divine fatherhood that the gospel of John tells them about;—no confidence that the God of truth will guide aright the mind seeking to know the truth, much less have they any confidence in the rational faculties with which man is endowed, and in the certainty that all honest enquiry must bring a blessing of some kind with it. But that grim devil the ignorance of barbarous times conjured into existence, and those dreaded torments over which he presides, frighten them out of their seven senses into

the irrational act of clinging tenaciously, as if for their life, to the unexamined dogmas of orthodoxy. One grieves to see the gentle nature of women so abused, but grows indignant when men, pretending to a higher intellect and a stronger understanding, show the same foolish weakness. And yet all around us the dark superstition is keeping both men and women, parsons and people, from all thorough-going rational enquiry. It is as powerful in this respect amongst large masses as ever; and no doubt it will require another generation before the multitude arise above it.

In the third place, I think an ignominious love of ease, comfort, or peace of mind, keeps a large number from enquiry. There are very few who love truth for its own sake. It is courted rather for the fortune it brings, the blessings of a physical and spiritual kind. Most seek some ulterior end, and above all ease, comfort, peace of mind and great enjoyment. Now if you do not harass your brains by entertaining doubts and making enquiries, orthodoxy will furnish you with these desired blessings. On cheap terms it will assure you of the salvation of your soul and God's present and eternal favour, and in addition will bring you the approbation, sympathy, and regard of the respectable people around you. But if you once set off upon the dangerous road of free enquiry, instantly all these blessings disappear, and there is no saying to where you will be led. Knowing this, the majority of quiet well-to-do people are very careful to shun enquiry.

And the mischief feared lies in two directions: first, in the dogmatical. When verities which have been venerated for ages are once called into question and doubt, their mind loses all its anchorage ground, and seems to itself like a ship out at sea in the midst of a storm. Whither it will be driven no one can tell. And there are again two things which distress it; the one is the uncertainty and suspension of faith into which it is brought. Most minds rebel at this.

It requires thorough mental training and discipline to be able to suspend one's judgment without pain during the examination of evidence. We become impatient of it, and want to settle down on the one side or the other. The mind wants rest; but as long as enquiry lasts there can be no rest—no reposing on assured truths—no drawing of comfort from sweetly consolatory doctrines! It is all hard work, and moving on from point to point. And so rather than embark upon such troubled waters, shoals of men superstitiously keep the harbour of the old faiths. There at least, so long as they do not doubt, they find quiet and comfort.

And then the other thing which keeps them from enquiry is that they find many are led when once they loosen their moorings, lengths which seem to them perfectly horrifying. Some who once were good, sound, orthodox believers have become what these people call perfect infidels; and mistrust of themselves, apparently, or mistrust of the truth, leads them to fear such if they once set out might become their own fate. Some could go as far as Robertson of Brighton, but it would be dreadful to get to the length of Martineau! Some could go as far as Carlyle, but it would be ruin to think like Stuart Mill! Some could accept of the theism of Newman, but the positivism of Comte would be perdition! So each and all have their several bugbears of infidelity which terrify them from thought. It does not seem to occur to such people that it is just possible that those who have gone the lengths they fear to go, may have reached the truth. They only think of the consequences to which they presume it will lead. "Oh, say they, we could find no comfort, no ease, in such horrible doctrines, however true they might appear. All peace would be thrust from our souls for ever."

Well, and suppose it were so; did you come into this world for ease and comfort, or to find the truth and live by it? Is blessedness to be had in a false

peace, or in the living facts of the universe? Ease! Comfort! For shame! Go get you into a cradle and call out some crazy beldame from the workhouse to rock you your worthless life long. That is all such drowsy souls are fit for. And yet although all reason must condemn them, although they themselves must for very shame be forced to own that in the pure and perfect truth man's supreme bliss can alone be found, and that in this day of the disruption of parties and the dissolution of churches each one must search out that truth for himself, this bugbear of extreme Infidelity keeps thousands, and will continue to keep thousands, from all manly and honest enquiry. One grieves over their weakness, but the remedy seems far away.

The other disturbance to one's comfort and peace lies in the social direction. Men like to be at ease when their professional or business engagements are over. It is comfortable to get home, sit down by the fireside, chat with one's wife and children, read the newspapers, or doze over a glass of wine. Besides, these are acquaintances, perchance friends, amongst whom one likes to spend a pleasant evening now and then over a game at cards, or in conversation upon the social and political gossip of the day. But now, earnest religious enquiry is very apt to break in upon all this, to make one's home a scene of constant contention and tears, and to make one's acquaintances very shy and distant. If the wife have not the intellect to enter into the questions with the husband, or the husband with the wife, to what bickerings, sometimes angry discussion and wordy contentions, it leads. And then who can resist those tears and those earnest appeals, "if not for your own sake, for the sake of the souls of our darling children give up such wicked doubts!" And then the good people, too, aid the home influence. Who will associate with an infidel? Who will have anything to do with him who denies the verities of the faith? "My dear fellow, such notions are

not respectable, and I can assure you if it became known that you hold opinions so dangerous it will materially affect your business. You have a young family rising up, and cannot afford to indulge in such speculations. Besides, I confess all your friends concur with my own feeling in the matter, that is, however much we respect you, we should not like it to be known we associate with the companion of infidels. You are all right, you know, but you will be thrown amongst all sorts of vagabonds, and people will suspect that you have fallen into the vices to which Infidelity always leads. Give it up, my dear fellow, give it up, if you do not wish every respectable acquaintance to give you up."

Who could withstand such arguments as that? So the poor fellow does give it up, dismisses his doubts, henceforth walks demurely with his wife and sweet babies every Sunday regularly to church, and by and by gets held up by his minister as the very type of "That large and respectable class of intelligent men who amidst the doubts and scepticism of a licentious age hold fast by the old faiths!"

Another reason just alluded to operates with some. I referred to the low character imputed to those who depart from the old beliefs. It is the common conclusion of weak minds that he who doubts the accepted dogmas is a bad man. And even what the world calls respectable men and women, great professors of religion, think it no shame to either create or propagate all sorts of lying slanders against the infidels. Now and then this is done unconsciously of the wrong, the ignorant people not knowing that slander is a form of immorality and that to speak evil of one another without sufficient evidence is a crime. But generally the evil is known, but committed under the palliating thought that it does God service. Now the effect of this is twofold: 1st, Ignorant people who do not know the wickedness of which religious people can be guilty, believe the slanderers, and shrink very naturally from connecting themselves with such seemingly

disreputable parties. And 2dly, They are very apt to conclude that bad men cannot have found the truth. Of course the character of a person cannot affect the truth or untruth, the validity or invalidity, of his arguments and propositions. And a rational person would judge of the doctrines by these alone. But in matters of religion, as we have seen, the majority are not rational. And so these slanderers succeed in their efforts to deter the weak-minded from enquiry, and in God's name effectually do the devil's work.

Other reasons might be added to these to account for the large number shunning all enquiry upon the questions of religion; but these must at present suffice. And they are sufficient to encourage our faith and hope in the gradual progress of the truth. That which lies at the root of them all, the want of a sound judgment, a disciplined mind habituated to exercise its reason upon all things, must gradually give way before the more enlightened system of education all classes are feeling their way towards. And in time it will affect women as well as men. Those tender affections which now bind them to superstition will not always be so perverted. When woman receives the education her nature requires, the intellect will assert its proper supremacy. Already there are some noble pioneers, the vanguard of the advancing race. When the whole host has come forward, then divine, bliss-giving, beauteous truth shall be our sovereign mistress, and all men will dare to follow whithersoever she may lead.

