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RECENT  
THEOLOGICAL ADDRESSES.

A Lecture

BY

JOHN MACLEOD.



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## RECENT THEOLOGICAL ADDRESSES.

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THEOLOGY is a subject which appears to have a strange fascination for most minds. It is a subject discussed with more or less eloquence, not only in divinity halls, but in city taverns and country inns; in the clubs and palaces of the wealthy, as well as in the cottages of the poor. And even in our asylums you will meet with as many theological opinions as there are patients; for it is a curious circumstance, that in all forms of insanity theology plays a very prominent part. Those patients, for example, who are classed among the *hypochondriacs*, and suffer from *melancholia*, live in perpetual fear of hell; and those, again, whose symptoms are the exalted delusions of the insane, are known best by their religious exaltation. The former, always wretched, live in religious terror; the latter, apparently happy, believe themselves to be divinely inspired—to be, in short, the prophets and Messiahs of their generation. For this, as well as for other reasons, scientific men study mental phenomena from a physiological point of view, and endeavour to cure mental diseases by restoring the healthy action of cerebral organisation. I do not wish you to infer from this, however, that if there were no diseased brains there would be no theology; but, I think I may say, that if there were no unhealthy cerebral action, there would not be so many conflicting theological “opinions.” When we survey the whole field of theological disputes, and

observe how diametrically opposed, even members of the same church are to each other, we may well feel surprised, how in this age people can be so intellectually blind as to believe in those manifest sophistries with which divinity professors endeavour to illumine each others' souls. How is it possible, we might ask, that those professors of divinity who have recently displayed their ingenuity in flatly contradicting each other, and themselves—how is it possible that they can either believe in themselves or in each other? We can, no doubt, understand how a man can impose upon himself; but we feel rather surprised that he can so easily impose upon others. Here, to begin with, is Professor Calderwood: he is, we believe, what is called *an intuitionist* in philosophy; and yet observe how he contradicts the very spirit of his own philosophy in his strictures on the late Mr Mill's character. A living dog is better than a dead lion; and those who bark loudly at Mr Mill's memory, would not dare to open their mouths against him when living. Mr Calderwood, like others of the same class, attributes Mr Mill's want of religion to early training; but if, as Mr Calderwood says, the religious and moral sentiments are intuitive—born with a man, independently of any training—why does he make early training answer for so much in the case of Mr Mill? Or, if he attributes so much to early training, then on what ground can he expect the conversion of the "heathen" to Christianity? To be sure, the aid of miracles can be called in, and divine intuition can be propped up by divine grace! If Mr Calderwood could appreciate the results of modern science: if even he would study the *ethics* of Aristotle, he certainly would renounce the metaphysical jargon of the middle age.

But this is only by the way. Let us now turn to those five professors of divinity who have favoured us with their highest efforts—who, indeed, have piped

unto us on their pastoral reeds, but piped so much out of tune that we could not dance. We have had two "addresses" from Glasgow, two from Edinburgh, and one from St Andrews; and really, with the exception of the one from St Andrews, those "addresses" are like the effusions of city missionaries to audiences of uncultivated boors—not like what we should expect from men who profess to grapple with the thought of the nineteenth century. All the men we refer to belong to the same church, and we should reasonably expect them to agree on matters of faith and religion; but in point of fact we find that, with all due solemnity, they contradict each other. Here is Dr Caird, in that sublime, melo-dramatic style of his, declaring that a trained theologian is a trained bigot; and we can fancy the mock-solemnity with which he denounced "narrowness." But Dr Dickson immediately retorts that a trained theologian is the final court of appeal in theological matters. Dr Charteris, in his mild, cautious, and amiable manner, says that he thinks society cannot subsist without dogmatic theology, but that it might be considerably simplified in the way of curtailment and elimination. Then we have another thunder-peal from St Andrews, warning us of the falsehood of extremes; for did not Aristotle say long ago that all extremes are false—that the "mean" only is the law of our being? But then, what does the priest of "*The Sacred Heart*" say to all this? In the name of an infallible Pope, he declares that there are no extremes in religion—that religion is a thing absolute without relativity, and that absolute dogmatism is its legitimate expression. The first question a man of science and a man of culture would ask is—are these men in earnest, or are they mad? Do they all profess the same religion, or are they rival sects worshipping so many rival gods? Surely the proverb, that "doctors differ," has never been more exemplified in the history of theological disputes than in these latter days.

Some curious people have waited patiently for Dr Wallace's "address;" but whatever others may think of it, I find not much there to distinguish it from those of his brethren. The same confusion of thought which characterises those of Glasgow, is characteristic also of our Edinburgh divine, which he may attribute, however, to the ambiguity of language and the proneness of men to misunderstand him! There is certainly a confusion of thought and a confusion of metaphor in some of the doctor's utterances. Take the following, for example: "The point at which ecclesiastical history commences is, when the church comes forth a completely moulded organism from the matrix of apostolic activity, with a specific constitution and a definite deposit of faith, to mingle with the other forces that conspire to give form and direction to human progress." Now, if this is intended to present a definite image of the church, I fear that, to most minds it will appear as extravagant as those winged creatures, half animal, half human, dug from the ruins of Nineveh and Babylon, and so graphically described in the *Apocalypse*. We have, within the limits of this short sentence, references made to *obstetrics*, *geology*, *physical forces*, and *apostolic activity*. But this confusion, as we have said, may have arisen from the imperfection of language as a vehicle of thought, although we suspect that a redundancy of language rather than of thought, is the besetting sin of the Theologians. Notwithstanding all this, there are evidences in Dr Wallace's address, of vigorous and manly thought, as well as of a philosophical breadth of mind; and there can be no doubt that when he has studied *history* scientifically, that is by the method of *filiation*, he will discover the operation of many "forces" in the evolution of European civilisation which will enable him to see that the Christian Church is one of the latest forms in which the religious instinct of mankind had been manifesting

itself, and not by any means, as he thinks at present, a divine incarnation formed in "the matrix of apostolic activity." He will also see, what so many of his brethren refuse to see, that there is nothing absolutely new in Christianity at all, except the organisation of the church—and even that organisation was but the ghost of the old Roman Empire. Now, we should have no objection to the church if it were put in the same category as all other human institutions are, and regarded simply as a product of human progress; for in that case it might, like other institutions, be improved or entirely recast. But the position the Church takes up is this: "The Church is the kingdom of God on earth, founded by men divinely inspired." We ask for the proof of this, and we are told that "Christianity is a revealed religion, that it has a special divine authority, and that the Church is founded on that authority alone." Now, when we examine the claim of Christianity to be a *revealed* religion, we find that it is exactly similar to the claims of all other religions, whether ancient or modern; and when we examine into the intrinsic merits of its ethical code, which certainly must be the test of all religion, we find nothing there but such as existed in all former religions. Even the Cross, of which so much has been made by the Christian Church, is not a new feature in Christianity: it was the emblem of *e* amongst the Ancient Egyptians and Babylonians, and was worshipped with as much veneration by the inhabitants of Chaldea as by Dr Caird and Dr Dickson. But there is something worse than all this; the documents by which the Church seeks to establish her claim to be a divine institution, are the Old and New Testaments. We examine these documents and find that they are in all matters of importance, contradicted by the most elementary results of modern science. And again, the *history* of the Church as a whole, leaving out of account the saintliness of

individual characters, for that can be produced as evidence in favour of the most barbarous creeds,—I say the history of the Church, as a whole, does not bear out its claim; on the contrary, it is the deadliest evidence against it; for no institution has ever been formed on more tyrannical principles than the Christian Church.

Now, the reason we dissent from the Church is, not because the Church is a bad thing in itself, but because its claims and pretensions outrage common sense; and these men who spend their lives in advocating claims which they cannot help knowing to be mere delusions, are simply conniving at error, and tampering with truth. I am aware that most Christian ministers believe, and indeed it is an established principle among the Jesuits, that one may lawfully employ error or deceit, or propagate a delusion, if by so doing, a "useful end" can be secured. I remember distinctly with what profound contempt I listened to an "exposition" of this principle in one of our divinity halls, and I determined then, that whatever might happen to me personally, I should never lead men to mistake falsehood for truth, even if it should gain their "salvation." "Not to undeceive is to deceive. The giving or not correcting false reasons for right conclusions, false grounds for right beliefs, false principles for right practice, the holding forth or fostering false consolations, false encouragements or false sanctions, or conniving at their being held forth and believed, are all pious frauds." And what man, with a soul in him, can do all this even if he were backed up by a shower of gold from the "Baird Trust?"

Let us examine one argument which is so frequently resorted to by the so-called advanced theologians. They say: "Here is the Christian Church—she is a great historic fact, and has shaped the course of events during the last eighteen centuries, and in the present



her teaching is at the basis of our social life and institutions." We accept these facts, at least with some qualifications; and we admit that religion has, in all ages, been the most powerful element of cohesion in society—that element which binds, or ought to bind, humanity together in reference to their common origin and common relation to the universe. But that is one of the chief reasons why we cannot accept orthodox Christianity, no more than we can accept Buddhism or Mahomedanism as the ultimate exposition of that relation in which we stand to the entire order of things. How can the piety of modern times be forced into the nine-and-thirty articles of Christendom? Is not Christianity, like all other religions, ancient or modern, a mere fragment of thought born in an age when the universe itself, as well as man's relation to it, were clearly misunderstood? And although the ethics of Christianity, elevated by long experience and increasing intelligence, still survive in our social relations, just as the laws of Justinian survive in the basis of our civil legislation, or the civilisation of Phœnicia survives in our mercantile law and colonial activity, yet that is no more reason why we should accept Christianity as the ultimate expression of religious thought than it is a reason that we should regard the Institutes of Justinian as the court of final appeal in all our civil causes. Both have no doubt been the growth of ages of experience, and hence their authority; we are thankful for all they have bequeathed to us, but there have been larger growths since; and it would be as absurd to make Christianity, in its orthodox sense, represent the modern religious thought of Europe, as it would be to make the Institutes of Justinian represent the more enlightened principles of modern jurisprudence. In what sense does Dr Caird of Glasgow, for example, represent the "pillar saints?" or why should he be asked to wear a dress of goats skins because that kind of clothing has some historical

connection with piety? Or if Dr Dickson is supposed to represent the Apostle Peter, or Dr Charteris represent the Apostle John, wherein lies the resemblance? There is none, either in mode of thought or in manner of living. They believe, no doubt, in the practical moral precepts which are at the foundation of the most primitive social organisations; but in matter of faith and rational conviction Dr Caird differs as much from Dr Dickson as they both differ from the Apostle Peter. O reverend fathers, it will not do; you might have learned from your own creed that new wine cannot be put into old bottles; and you can no more recall the theology of Augustine and Calvin, of Paul and Peter, than you can recall the civilisations of Egypt or Phœnicia, of Greece or Rome. You can no more force the human mind to accept your creeds than you can make men wear goat skins, although we admit both were historically connected with piety.

But what shall we say of Principal Tulloch? His references to Mill, Arnold, and Strauss, are interesting, and show that he is a man who can appreciate the highest culture of our age, and at the same time fearlessly confront its greatest difficulties. We have nothing here of the rhetorical mock-seriousness of Glasgow, which evades difficulties by fine epigrammatic leaps. We have reasoning—not dogmatic, but philosophical, and conducted in almost a scientific spirit. In our age, as in the age of Diogenes, it is a rare thing to meet with an honest man; and in the light of science, how many theologians could be called honest? For my part, however, I am willing to regard Principal Tulloch as a very honest and a very excellent man—a man of thought, of refinement, of culture. I am glad also to see that he agrees with an opinion I expressed here a few Sundays ago—viz., that when the history of this century will have been written, the name of Strauss will be one of the most prominent in it. But I hasten from this to another

point. Principal Tulloch says that Dogmatism is the sin of our age, whether it be dogmatism in theology, or dogmatism in unbelief; and no doubt this is true. Dogmatism is a hateful thing, either positive or negative. Extremes meet; but are dogmatic theology and a rational unbelief really extremes? Bacon has said that "extremes belong to divinity!" can, then, "divinity" itself be the extreme of something else opposed to it? Aristotle would not say so, for he would ask where is the "mean?" Take the fundamental dictum of theology, the existence of a *personal* God, and on the other hand the negative conclusions of modern science that the existence of a "personal" God is unthinkable. Are these two positions extremes in the philosophical sense? If so, where is the "mean?" If my reason proves to me that the "facts" of theology are mere figments, what is extreme in saying that they are so? The priest of "the Sacred Heart" is more consistent, and says, there can be no extremes in "religion;" and in this he is also more philosophical, if he means that atheism and theism are not extremes, but simply negative and positive states of mind, having no mean state. But if he means there are no extremes in "divinity," or, as it is called, theology, then the Roman priest is quite mistaken. Say, for example, that I believe in the existence of God, well, there is nothing extreme in that mere act of belief; but if I ask another to believe this and that about his personality, his nature and character, then the conclusions I endeavour to thrust upon him are extremes, because my views may be entirely false in reference to his nature, and whatever he considers false or even doubtful, I have no right to make the basis of moral action. Now, the entire order of nature clearly shows that all so-called revealed theology is a mere figment—a vulgar delusion—since it breaks in upon the eternal laws of nature, and breaks up the history of the human race

by a kind of supernatural kataclysms, and interposes between me and God men specially favoured or divinely inspired, such as prophets and saviours, priests, and even divinity professors. As a man, as the "offspring" of the Most High, I refuse to entertain this vulgar, oriental idea of God, which would transport Him to a great distance from me—as a great monarch sitting upon a throne, and which would place between Him and me a great "cloud of witnesses," like the favourites of a despotic prince. I refuse to allow any other human nature to stand between me and the mind of God; and when "prophets" and "saviours" and "divinity professors" tell me that *they* have received a *divine revelation*, I grant the fact, but at the same time I ask, is *your* revelation a revelation to *me*? If there is only one God, and He is the Father of us all, why should I be satisfied with your revelation when I am directly in communication with the same source myself? "Oh," these court favourites will say, "Oh, you must believe in election! We are God's elect." Then away with your "revealed theology;" if you are the enfranchised of heaven, and I am a mere serf, not entitled to a vote, I stand upon the ultimate fact of my consciousness—the equality of my nature with yours,—and again I say, I refuse to accept as a fact the "divine right" of prophet, priest, or king.

But the truth is that all so-called revealed theology is a false extreme, and when it ceases to be so, it will cease, like the "divine right of kings," to exist. And what is the opposite extreme? It is *no theology at all*; and these both are false. But what is the mean? It is the study of nature and of her laws which leads us up to the knowledge of the source of our life—the being, or power, or energy, or whatever it is, upon whom we are absolutely dependent, and in whom we live, and move, and have our being. Our theology, if you wish to call it so, is simply the study

of those eternal laws amidst which we find ourselves placed, whether they be the cosmic laws outside ourselves or the moral and mental inward laws according to which we must seek the development of our nature, and establish the harmony of the inward life with the outward universe. Let us, therefore, help each other as much as we can in understanding our true place in nature, our relations to her, our responsibilities and duties as moral beings ; but let no one dare mock us, whether he call himself prophet, priest, or king, by informing us that *he* has a "divine right" to lord it over his fellows. If men knew how much they lose by depending upon others for mere "opinions," if even divinity professors knew how much happiness arises from the free and fearless exercise of the mind in its search after *Truth*, they would never more vex the ears of this wearied world with this eternal monotone of "orthodoxy," and the oft-exploded figments of revealed theology. Theology, like the ivy which entwines itself around the oldest ruins, has in all ages attached itself, with death-like grasp, to those systems of thought which are crumbling away. As long as these systems stood—as long as men believed in special revelations, and in the cosmogonies which these revelations sanctioned,—theology was safe. But those systems are perishing, or have already perished ; and although antiquaries in mental philosophy still regard them with pardonable veneration, nevertheless we must leave them to decay, for they can no more be restored than the primitive civilisation of Chaldea can be recalled, or be made to supersede that of the nineteenth century.

JOHN MACLEOD.