RATIONAL CHRISTIANITY:

ITS NATURE,

ITS PRESENT RELATION

TO

EXISTING CHURCHES,

AND A

PLEA

FOR ITS

SEPARATE ORGANISATION.

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ITS NATURE, ITS PRESENT RELATION TO EXISTING CHURCHES, AND A PLEA FOR ITS SEPARATE ORGANISATION.

Rational Christianity—considered as a science is strictly governed by induction. It discards all claims to the supernatural, as on the one hand wanting in evidence, and as being on the other plainly contradicted by the ever enlarging knowledge of the dominion of law, which presenting as it everywhere does, in whatever direction scientific investigation is extended, an absolutely unbroken continuity, and an absolutely irresistible supremacy, abundantly warrants the conclusion of its absolutely undeviating universality. Whatever principles embodied in the teaching of Christ, or in the current traditions of Christianity, are, by experience, proved to be beneficial in their operation are accepted. Whatever is found to be of a contrary tendency is rejected.

In this way amongst a heterogeneous admixture of other and worthless or mischievous elements, there are discovered in Christianity many, if not most, of the elements of a perfect religion. Or in other words it is found that Christianity contains, to a very large extent, the actual laws of religious life as they exist in nature; just as chemistry contains, to a large extent, the actual laws of the elements of matter. Moreover, in many points, in which deficiency exists, there is found to be, at least, an aptness to coalesce with what is wanting: even if it is not more correct to say, there already exists the undeveloped germ of it. If, for example, some of the sterner virtues are slighted or discouraged in the teaching of Christ; yet, since experience proves their value to the well-being of society, the love of our neighbour prompts their exercise. These laws of the religious life, thus extracted from Christianity, supplemented and developed where necessary, constitute the principles of Rational Christianity.

Nor is to be thought that in this way the name is unwarrantably appropriated, or that any violence is done to the nature of Christianity. Although, as was inevitable to a religion originating eighteen hundred years ago, it has entangled itself with philosophies current then, and at the different periods through which it has passed; still the simple and elevated principles upon which it is based, are, in reality, quite independent of these, and more in harmony with the results of modern science, or, at least, not less so than with them. So that no essential or peculiar feature of Christianity is sacrificed by replacing exploded philosophies by those of the present day. For example, Christ taught that the whole of religion was comprehended in love to God and love to man. And he evidently regarded the government of God, and his relation to man, as of a personal character. But the replacing of this personal element, by that of unchanging law, does not make the character of God less entitled to be loved: nor does it lessen the elevating influence of loving God, the fountain of all goodness, with all the heart and all the mind. It raises indeed our conception of the infinite greatness and incomprehensibleness of God, but does not diminish our estimate of his goodness. And even if science should warrant the conclusion that God has no personality at all, that he is but the grand sum total of all goodness, the first great Christian law would stand with undiminished authority. The theory of the atheist is certainly not inconsistent with the universal obligation to love with all our heart and mind and strength, all apprehended goodness of every kind. And it is self-evident that man rises in the scale of humanity, just in proportion as his whole consciousness is alive with the love of all that is pure, and noble, and true, and beautiful, and good. But this rational self-commending obedience to the first great Christian law fulfils all that is essential and peculiar to Christianity therein. So with respect to the second great command, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Does modern

philosophy lead us to the conclusion, that the mind bears exactly the same relation to the brain that sight bears to the eye; and that therefore our existence is limited to the present life? The value of true Christian benevolence and beneficence is not lessened for the life which we have; but its purity is rendered more apparent when all hope of future recompense, for the sacrifices it here makes is taken away. It is placed beyond doubt then, that a man "does good hoping for nothing again"; or, in other words, that he is in very deed, and in the best sense of the word, a Christian.

When rational Christianity is thus separated from other elements in the concrete mass, it will be found that it retains all that is peculiar to Christianity. While on the other hand there is nothing peculiar to orthodoxy, as distinguished from rational Christianity, which is not common to Judaism, or other less perfect system of religion, while there is scarcely anything peculiar to it, as distinguished from rational Christianity, which can plead the sanction of the master, and positively nothing that is peculiar or essential to his teaching. Rational Christianity, therefore, need not fear any investigation of its title deeds.

And it is noteworthy that while rational Christianity is thus seen to embody all that is essentially Christian, it is also true that Christianity did exist in its infancy apart from a belief in a future state. There were at Corinth some who said that "there is no resurrection of the dead"—1 Cor. xv. 12; while others taught that the resurrection was past already, 2 Tim. ii. 18; and even of the eleven disciples some doubted the Master's resurrection, Matt. xxviii. 17, which would probably carry with it doubts of their own. The tone of the narrative forbids the idea that this scepticism, at that day, was regarded as invalidating their discipleship. St. Paul, indeed, as was natural in one who had lived as a pharisee and was the son of a pharisee, stoutly opposed this feature of sadducean philosophy; but even he never once treats

it as a fatal error, nor hints at excommunicating those who held it. How long this opinion survived, or how far it may have prevailed in the early church, there appears to be now no sufficient data to determine; but clearly, neither in the estimation of its adherents nor of its opponents, was a belief in a future state of existence regarded as essential to Christianity.

But Christianity is much more than either a science or an art. It is a moral and religious force having a character peculiarly its own, distinguished from all other religious influences by strongly marked features, especially, by its intense benevolence and beneficence.

Principles underlying it there necessarily must be; but these were never very clearly defined by its founder, and never attempted to be systematised by him. The undiscerned law of its own life, in a good degree, gave it form, and preserved to some extent its symmetry; even in spite of the injurious effects of erroneous modes of thought and systems of philosophy, which too early, too frequently, and too extensively distorted and disfigured it.

This grand living power of goodness, the purest, noblest, and best, which has ever been known in the world, is, by the systematic application of rational principles, purged of polluting and diluting elements, brought out into healthful and vigorous exercise, developed in accordance with the law of its life, supplemented where necessary, and applied to the multifarious and complex circumstances of our individual, social, and political relationships, and will yet be made the salvation of the world. This is Rational Christianity.

What now is its position in the Christian Church?

Its avowed disciples are but few, although its unavowed adherents are, it is believed, to be found in very many churches, and constitute collectively a body of no inconsiderable influence in numbers, intelligence, and piety.

Up to the present time, however, so far as is known to the writer, no single congregation exists where they can find a congenial home. Everywhere they are liable, either to be expelled, or treated with so much disrespect, if they plainly avow their convictions, that the course of wisdom generally appears to be, to keep their peculiar opinions to themselves; or to confide them only to a few bosom friends, and to labour on so long as they can do so without violating their consciences: doing what quiet Christian work their hands find to do, and waiting for the time when their distinguishing opinions may win for themselves their rightful place in the church; content in the meantime to submit to the discomforts of their position, and often to undeserved suspicion and ungenerous treatment, brought upon them simply by their want of sympathy with the feelings, opinions, and sentiments of the majority.

Should the reason be sought for this intolerant antipathy to Christian rationalism, which has hitherto so effectually restrained its open avowal; it is to be found in the mistake, which has unhappily so universally prevailed, of regarding the belief of the supernatural as an essential element of Christianity. The fact, however, remains, that this intense antipathy is, at present, and is likely to remain, an insuperable barrier to the healthful development of rational Christianity, within any of the existing churches.

And, even if it were not vain to hope to overcome it, there are other insurmountable obstacles to the two systems working properly together. They are in fact mutually incompatible. The one makes the well-being of the future life the basis of its system, and the other regards solely the interests of this present life. The one therefore draws its motives mainly from the future, the other exclusively from this. The one regards religion as a service to be rendered to God, for his happiness and well-being. The other esteems it a matter (so far as man is concerned in it at least) as alone affecting his own happiness and well-being, and

that of his fellow creatures. The one regards prayer as intended to produce an effect upon God, and therefore makes it to consist of actual requests for his assistance. The other regards it simply as intending to influence himself and those of his fellow men, who are connected in some way or other with the act, and therefore, confines it to aspirations after blessings for himself and others, which do not involve any interference with the laws of nature in their accomplishment, and which in fact are not perhaps properly addressed to God at all. They with the poet regard prayer as:—

> "the soul's sincere desire,
> "Uttered or unexpressed,
> "The motion of a hidden fire,
> "Which trembles in the breast."

It follows, therefore, that rational Christianity must look for a home of its own. Whether the time is ripe for its disciples to make the attempt to provide one, events must prove. One thing is clear, it cannot expect to make a home in the churches in which it has been born, and where it at present merely lives on sufferance.

Many reasons may be urged why no unnecessary delay should be incurred in doing so. In the first place there is the individual comfort of having a home of our own, where we shall no longer be treated as inferiors to be tolerated; but where we shall be free citizens in a free state, enjoying the consciousness of rightful possession, position, and influence. This is by no means to be despised. Indeed, this would be a sufficient reason in itself to warrant the attempt. Then, there is the imperative law of our Christian life, which demands that we should avow all our convictions, at all events, when there is any reasonable prospect of the avowal being beneficial to one another, or to others: a law that we cannot disobey without lowering our religious vitality. We must not at our peril hide our light under a bushel. Then there is the advantage to be gained from church life. It is equally a law of our

religious life, that intercommunion of kindred hearts and minds is necessary to its healthy development. But this intercommunion can never exist in any perfection, where there is such a great discrepancy, as that which divides the rational Christian from others. Then there is the sad fact, that thousands upon thousands, and among them some of the finest intellects both of the rising generation, and those of mature age, are being lost entirely to the Christian church, and to the cause of Christianity, through failing to discriminate between the absurdities of exploded superstitions, which are almost everywhere set forth as alone constituting the essence of Christianity, and that which is in reality entitled to be so regarded.

Mere rationalists I do not expect to be greatly influenced by such considerations. To them, however, I do not appeal. But to rational Christians, to the men who have put in practice the beneficent precepts of Christianity, and who in doing so have felt a hearty sympathy with Jesus in his blessed and noble work, I know such appeals will not be in vain. With the writer they will feel that we must set up a beacon light (which a church founded on and animated by our principles would be,) to warn these thousands of the rocks upon which they make shipwreck.

Closely connected with the last is the value of our stand-point, for giving prominence to the really essential motives of the gospel, arising from their own intrinsic excellence and loveliness. These are practically greatly obscured, by their association in the current systems, with the overshadowing supernatural.

Again, no thoughtful observer can fail to notice that although the supernatural, thus so greatly overshadows everything else, yet it is, owing to the increasing light of science, losing its power with astonishing rapidity, even among those who still honestly believe it. The future world is fast becoming everywhere an unrealisied thing. Nowhere are its outlines drawn now with a clearness, boldness, and distinctness, which formerly characterised them. Instead

of the vivid spirit-stirring thing it once was, it is fast fading into nebulous generalities which can no longer awaken the powerful emotions which formerly aroused men from their selfish sloth, or arrested them in the midst of a reckless career of vice, and guilt, and crime. Here then is a loud call for rational Christianity to step in and supply, where motives appealing to men's selfishness are needed, those real and tangible considerations, drawn from the consequences of wickedness in this present life, which its stand-point naturally leads its disciples to give so much greater attention to, and which its principles prompt them to supplement and render more effective.

The principles of supernaturalism too often lead to the conclusion that the evils caused by wicked men, are a part of the providential dispensations of God and therefore to be submitted to. And this feeling is strengthened by the great error in Christ's teaching, that we should not resist evil; an error which, notwithstanding the neutralising influence of common sense, which leads Christians to act more agreeably to the evident law of right, still paralyses the Christian Church in grappling with the rascality of the world; and leaves iniquity, to a very large extent, unchecked. Let rational Christianity come forth with the high praises of God, or goodness, in her mouth, and a two-edged sword in her hand, to execute upon the wicked the judgment written; that is to say the judgment which is dictated by benevolence, not by hatred. Let her do this, and she will soon find her efforts a potent check upon the evil-doer. Let her unite her disciples as a well disciplined force, everywhere making it one of their leading objects to checkmate the workers of iniquity: and although she must of course expect to be hated by wrong-doers, with an intensity almost passing belief, yet this very intensity of the hatred evoked is an index to the fear she will inspire, and to the effectiveness of the work she will be accomplishing.

Nor is it to be imagined that the checking and arresting evil is the limit of the good she will ac-

complish. This is but the preliminary work in turning evil-doers to paths of righteousness. Wicked men, finding themselves foiled in their wickedness, and fools, just where they had prided themselves upon their superior wisdom, will begin to suspect themselves to be fools in preferring to listen to the cravings of mere selfishness, which is the root of all sin, vice and crime, and be willing to let the higher feelings of their nature make their voice heard. In short they may thus be made willing to listen to the gospel of Christ, and be brought to learn of Him who was meek and lowly of heart; and thus, not only find rest to their own souls; but become blessings to the world, where they had been curses. Indeed no one can estimate the immense power which good men could bring to bear for the regeneration of the world, if it could thus be directed by the principles of rational Christianity.

Nor, must it be forgotten, that to give full effect to these principles, church organisation is indispensable. Their power may be immensely enhanced by virtue of concerted action. We are all familiar with the fact, that a bridge may be broken down simply by a regiment of soldiers passing over it, if they keep step, while their united weight will produce no injurious effect if they pass over without this measured tread. So if all the rational Christian members of any one trade, or any similar walk in life, meet together in church-fellowship and take counsel, to attack whatever form of evil is most prominent in their particular sphere; pledging themselves to guard against the evil in their own conduct, and to take all proper means to expose and punish it in others, and to afford each other mutual sympathy and support in the work, it may safely be said that no evil of any magnitude could long survive. Moreover it would soon be seen whose sympathies were on the side of right, and whose on the side of wrong. This alone would be an immense advantage, in the holy war which Christianity is ever waging, against the powers of evil.

The preservation of Christianity in full vigour and

healthfulness, is another reason for the formation of a separate church, on the basis of rational Christianity. We have seen that existing churches cannot afford a home for it; and yet we are sure that Christianity must be injured by continuing in intimate association with superstitious beliefs, for which there is no longer any excuse, and which therefore cannot long be held by anyone with perfect honesty. And while we gladly recognise the abounding vitality of Christianity, which manages to live even amidst such prostration of intellect as is produced in the Roman Church; yet we cannot for a moment believe that it does not materially suffer by this deterioration of the mind; and still more, by the violence done to conscience, which must be continually increasing, just in proportion to the increase of the available light of truth. The painful exhibitions of disingenuousness, which are constantly being made to bolster up exploded beliefs, and to harmonise the results of modern science with the claims of Bibliolatry, only too plainly reveal the unhealthy condition of the religious life. And the want of power in the evangelical churches, evinced in their obviously futile attempts to stem the rising tide of Romanism, either within or outside of their own pale, is one of the saddest features of our times; for these churches have been long the home of healthy, vigorous, robust Christianity.

Nothing but the establishment of Christianity on the same basis as that upon which modern sciences rest, which is the basis of rational Christianity, can reasonably hope to secure perfect accord between Christianity and science, or to enlist the disciples of the latter in the service of the church. And anything less than this, must necessarily involve either a cramping and deadening of the intellect, or a tampering with the conscience, which is fatal to healthful religious life. And indeed, both these evils must as a rule thus be involved. On the other, hand instead of decay and decline of power, Christianity, once firmly established on a rational basis will, doubtless, exhibit a beauty and

vitality which she has never yet displayed. Her principles, released from the fetters of Bibliolatry, and from all the restraints of obsolete philosophies, will become better understood than ever; and being more clearly defined will be more easily, and therefore, more extensively applied. Besides which, as they are better understood, new applications of them will be made, and opportunities of developing and supplementing them will be discovered; and having now as a standard their own unchanging nature, misconceptions can be, and will be, corrected by repeated and multiplied observations; and thus Christianity may reasonably be expected to acquire a unity and consistency greatly supassing anything she has ever manifested, or could possibly possess, while her standard was an undefined and incoherent assemblage of old world philosophies and metaphysics. A theology in short, which having had its birth with astrology and alchemy, ought to have been allowed to die with them; possessing as it does no better foundation, and no better claim to live.

A Christianity thus firmly rooted in the great facts of religion, will have within it a vitality, that cannot fail speedily to accomplish results of startling grandeur, in the redemption of the world from sin and consequent suffering. Results which will surpass even what the supernaturalist looks for by supernatural agency, in a future world. Results which will realise the prophetic longings, aspirations, and predictions of the good in all ages and nations:—the millenial glory:—the golden age:—the good time coming:—the new heaven, and new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

In order to test the practicabilty of proceeding at once to commence a church on this footing, the writer will be pleased to be the medium of intercommunication between those who share these views, and who are desirious of doing something to give practical effect to them. But while he will cordially welcome the humblest worker, he wishes it to be distinctly understood that he does not wish to have

his time wasted by mere talkers, or theoretic disputers. He wishes to co-operate with, and will gladly welcome communications from, any who are prepared to render any kind of practical aid.

Communications may be adressed to EUSEBIUS, care of Publishers.

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