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REASON

VERSUS

AUTHORITY.

BY

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“ Prove all things ; hold fast that which is good.”

Thess., v. 21.

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THE present is a sceptical age. We do not, as in former times, believe, but criticise. Faith, in these days, has no province, but the whole area of human expectation is limited to the range of our reason. If a truth can be shown to be probable, we accept it. If it is not, in our estimation, reasonable, we reject it. We assert, in short, that the instrument and method of our apprehension is the same, whether the thing to be apprehended be an episode in Homer's Iliad or an incident in Luke's Life of Christ.

If we interpret aright the intellectual position of those who urge this as a sign of our spiritual decadence, they are, in some sense or measure, prepared to affirm that reason is unrelated to the subject of religion. We should not, they think, consider the propriety or impropriety of a given religious observance, the reasonableness or unreasonableness of a supposed religious obligation, the credibility or incredibility of an affirmed revelation from heaven, but, with regard to such matters, our reason is to be held in abeyance. Within the sphere of our higher life, we are not to argue, but accept; not criticise, but believe; not ask for evidence, but proceed upon authority.

Taken absolutely and universally, this instruction to us for our guidance needs, we think, but to be touched to be disproved. If everywhere and at all times, within the sphere of religion, reason is to be quiescent and faith supreme, either we must adopt every creed, however opposite, in turn, as the advocate of each presses it upon us, or we must, under all circumstances, abide by our original religious impressions, and refuse to relinquish them whatever a deeper experience may say in opposition. In the former case, it will be our duty, to-day, being urged thereto by the Protestant, to denounce Mariolatry, and, to-morrow, pressed by the Catholic, to bow down, in utmost reverence, to the Virgin Mother. In the latter, it will be incumbent upon us, whether we are the children of Protestant or Catholic parents, to ask no questions and to listen to no persuasion to change our religious sentiments, but accepting them at first without inquiry, and abiding by them ever afterwards irrespective of their hold upon our judgment, to reduce the problem of the growth or retrogression of Protestant or Roman Catholic sentiment in this country to the question of the relative fruitfulness of Protestant or Roman Catholic parentage.

If they who affirm the supremacy of faith and the unrelatedness of reason to religion do not affirm it always and everywhere, they, then, affirm it sometimes and somewhere, and the question, of course, is when and where. In reply, if we ask the Protestant, he informs us that our reason is to give place to our faith when we read a certain book, but that our faith is to give place to our reason when we read any interpretation of the book which is not our own. The Catholic, in opposition, says, with much show of sense, that if we need an infallible book we must, being often ignorant and always liable to err, need, from the same consideration, an infallible interpreter,

and offers us that which he esteems to be so. If we relinquish our reason, however, since we cannot assent to both, we can assent to neither. The double assertion of our duty to accept and not to question is equivalent, in force, to the single assertion to question and not to accept. Where there are two authorities, each of which denounces the other and claims exclusive obedience from ourselves, it may or may not be fortunate, but it is inevitable that we should withhold our faith till we have exercised our reason.

Regarding the position more leisurely, we think that whether or not it may be otherwise defensible, it is not to be expected that we should admit it merely because they who assert it have the strongest possible impression that it is so. They may, as they no doubt most unquestionably do, very sincerely believe that they are not, but, unless they are prepared, in addition, to affirm their personal infallibility, they must admit that they may be, mistaken. The positive certainty which they assert themselves to possess in an inward impression which they consider transcends their reason, they must, nevertheless, when affirmed by others on behalf of an opposing conclusion, and, therefore, in their case, on behalf of their own, allow, at least, admits of question. Since Jew and Gentile, Catholic and Protestant, Christian and Heathen, have, in turn, been so assured of the truth of their convictions as to die for them, and such convictions have, necessarily, been not merely dissimilar but professedly antagonistic, it is evident that no conviction can be so strong, and no fidelity to it so persistent, as to yield, therein, any, much less a perfect, guarantee, that their faith is a synonym for the truth.

Neither can we consent to the relinquishment of our reason in our religion from the affirmed necessity of an exact intellectual conception of God, and the

impossibility, by reason, of attaining to it. Were it true that a certain intellectual conception were essential to the divine favour, it would, of course, follow that we might expect the Divine Being to supply us with an unquestionable method of attaining to it. On the other hand, it is to be inferred that if the Divine Being has not placed within the reach of men generally an infallible method of arriving at an absolute knowledge of him, it is because it is not necessary to his favour that they should possess it. The question, then, is, which of the two is the more reasonable alternative? and the answer, we think, is obvious. Which of the many existing and opposing conclusions, from Catholicism to Rationalism, shall be ours, in our youth, will be dependent upon the accidental circumstances of our birth, and, if we are not to reason but acquiesce in our original religious impressions, will continue to be so always. But, if so, there can be no more unquestionable method of knowing God without than with our reason—rather, the alternative to which we fly will be worse than that from which we flee. The assertion that we should judge for ourselves renders it possible that we should mistake, but the assertion that we should not judge for ourselves makes it inevitable that the greater portion of mankind must do so, and, according to the theory of those who affirm the necessity for an exact intellectual conception of God, to their eternal ill-doing.

We must, also, we think, reject the argument that the subject-matter of religion is of that kind which precludes the competency of our reason. Admitted that the divine existence is not cognisable by our senses, it does not therefore follow that we should accept the opinions of other persons with similarly imperfect bodily organs, but, simply, that we should listen to them upon this as upon other questions

with a view to form a correct opinion of our own. Admitted that the certainty of a future life is not to be proved by our reason, so, neither, on the other hand, can we be certain, though we may feel so, without it. He who tells us aught which we could not know without his telling, must bring proof to us that he has special or exclusive information upon the subject, and the only part of us which is capable of dealing with proof is our reason. Admitted that theological truths cannot be known but must be believed, the conclusion to which it leads is, not unreasoning acquiescence in anything or everything which may be affirmed, but a rational endeavour to discover that which, if not certain, is most probable. There may or may not in the circumstance that we cannot know God fully without a revelation, be ground to expect one, but, even upon the supposition that one is to be expected, whether or not it has been given, and if so, when and where, and what its purport, must be matter of opinion; and inasmuch as experience teaches us that men are positive upon such questions, not in proportion to the breadth, but the limitation of their vision, the strength and extent to which a conclusion thereon is positively affirmed is the measure of the necessity for calling it into question.

Relinquishing our, so far, merely defensive position, and assuming the initiative in the controversy, we think we are justified in saying that the *primâ facie* argument is opposed to the conclusion. If there is a distinguishing mark of Divine Authorship, it is the relatedness of the means to the end, and the subordination of the lower to the higher methods of nature. The unreasoning trust of the child, however, is not equal to the intelligent appreciation of the man, and the higher purpose of our life is not in eating or drinking, or buying or selling, or marrying

and giving in marriage, but in the right understanding and performance of our spiritual relationships. But if our reason is the highest endowment, as it unquestionably is, with which the Divine Being has favoured us, and if, even in the estimation of those who differ from us, the highest purpose of our life is not in the enjoyment of the present but in preparation for the future, it would seem that if our reason were intended to serve any purpose whatever, it was, in any case, intended to guide us in the matter of our religious hopes and expectations.

This impression is confirmed, we do not hesitate to say, by the circumstance that the same persons who call upon us to suspend our reason, nevertheless find themselves under the ceaseless necessity to appeal to it upon the subject of our religion. If we remind the Catholic, for instance, when he presses us to assent to his proposition, that the Protestant also puts in a claim, he brings to our mind the modern origin of the Protestant, calls him a schismatic, and, generally, uses his best endeavours to prove that the Protestant claim is inadmissible. If, on the other hand, we inform the Protestant, when he calls upon us to urge his authoritative dogma, that the Catholic has anticipated him, the Protestant proceeds to remind us that the Catholic is an image worshipper, quotes secular and ecclesiastical history to bedaub his church, and, imitating his Roman Catholic compeer in this at least, uses all his art to persuade our judgment that he is, and that the Catholic is not, entitled to prescribe our religious opinions. But, if it be true that we should not reason, why do they each play the part of tempter, and solicit from us a judgment? Is it not singular that our reason should be unfitted to deal with a subject, and yet that, upon it, the several parties to the affirmative should never hesitate to appeal to it.

Surely, of all the transcending mysteries of life, that which most transcends is the mystery that each should systematically deny the competency of an authority to which they appeal, repudiate a right which they equally recognise, advance and withdraw, according to the conveniences of their argument, the intellectual position, upon which, they assert, hangs the eternal destinies of their race.

If the pertinency of their conclusion, however, is not apparent, its wondrous impertinency, if we examine it, it will not be difficult to discover. Traced to its mental base, is not the meaning of those who assert that we should not reason but believe, that they have themselves come to a conclusion upon religious subjects which they wish, whether or not it is agreeable to our judgment, to impose upon us? Is it not that the training of their youth, the prejudices of their class, or the intellectual preferences they have acquired, point in a certain direction, and that these appearing to themselves to be sacred, they cannot understand, and are not prepared to allow, prejudices and opinions which are not their own? The reason why we should not reason is, after all, simply that they wish to undertake the duty for us. The ground of their objection is, not that we should come to a conclusion, but that we should not come to their conclusion. If this be not so, wherefore do they recommend us to listen to their own polemical discourses? How does it happen that books written in defence of "the truth," as they regard it, are laudable, and only those written in opposition are pernicious? Of what other solution is their conduct capable when they permit — nay, commend — our disposition to reason, so long as it results in the adoption of their sentiments? Stripped of its unintentional disguise, the assertion that we should not criticise but accept,

is, simply, the assertion that they who make it believe that their judgment is, and that the judgment of those who differ from them is not, to be trusted.

Studiously regarded, indeed, the recommendation to us for our guidance is not more intellectually puerile than practically impossible. If the Catholic has faith in the teaching of his Church, it is not because he does not exercise his reason, but because, owing to early training, social circumstance, or tendency of mind, its claims, upon the whole, appear to him more rational than any alternative of which he takes note. If the Protestant is averse to the claims of the Catholic Church, and sympathises with the Anglican or any Dissenting formulary, it is not because he does not come to a judgment upon the subject of their respective merits, but because, however ignorant and swayed by prejudice, and however unconscious of the mental operation, his judgment, nevertheless, inclines to the one in preference to the other. Nay! our reason is the only instrument with which we can assent. Our intellect is the only part of us capable of faith. Diversity in the things to be apprehended involves no diversity in the instrument of our apprehension. Two and two are four, and the mental operation is the same, when the addition is of men or angels. The things which are believable by us, and they only, are such as appear to us to be probable, whether they be secular or sacred. Faith is not opposed to, but is the product of, our reason, alike when it relates to our anticipation of a summer shower and the second coming of the Saviour. Taste, feeling, hope, fear, love, hate, education, or the want thereof, may, as the atmosphere influences the pendulum, influence the judgment; but as the eye only sees, and the ear only hears, so the reason only can assent or dissent, whether the

proposition submitted to it be the physical relation of the earth to the sun, or the moral relation of the human to the Divine Spirit.

In conclusion, we must regard the moral as of equal value with the intellectual position assigned us by our critics. The interpretation which they who do not approve put upon the change which they correctly assert is coming over society, is that the present, by consequence, is the less religious age. Other nations and earlier races, they argue, believed more readily because they were more spiritual than we: we are more critical because we are less subject to a sense of divine obligation. Were we as desirous of doing God's will as they were who preceded or they are who rebuke us, we should be as ready as they to accept their theological opinions and act upon their sense of duty. We cannot accept this interpretation of our position. Orthodox opinion is sufficiently tyrannous and persecuting to deter any merely presumptuous person from lightly setting at defiance the opinion of the many, and asserting, from sheer pride of intellect, as it is called, a new creed. Were there no external disadvantage in professing singularity of religious belief, the force of early association, and the merely superstitious regard which we have for the sentiments of our youth, whatever they may be, would be a sufficiently penal preventive from change, for the sake of it. The ordinary interests of life are too present and pressing to admit of lengthened study of religious questions, unless the spirit within, under the impulse of some strong conviction, is constrained to give personal attention to a matter which people generally are willing to leave to the decision of others. In short, so long as exceptional attention to a subject is regarded, not as an indication of the want of ordinary, but of the possession of a special interest in it, it must be

assumed that those amongst us who see reason to change their religious attitude and stand apart, do so, not because they are less but more impressed; and they who do not understand and therefore misinterpret their motive will do well, if not because it is rational, because, by an authority which they do not dispute, it is commanded, to follow their example, and "prove all things, and hold fast that which is good."
