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ON THE
EFFICACY OF OPINION
IN
MATTERS OF RELIGION.

BY THE
REV. W. R. WORTHINGTON, M.A.



"Est genus hominum, qui esse primos se omnium rerum volunt
Nec sunt." TERENCE.

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ONCE upon a time there was a great controversy as to the comparative merits of knowledge and opinion. That controversy has been stirred again in our own day ; or rather it has not been stirred at all, but judgment has been given upon it with but scanty regard to the arguments. The "religious world" has declared in favour of opinion. Theory rides in its coach, and Fact trudges on foot. This venerable error which so long discredited philosophy, and which it is the crowning glory of philosophy to have got rid of, is the besetting sin of the science (falsely so called) of theology, and is doubtless the chief reason why, with modern thinkers, the profession of theology has fallen somewhat into disrepute.

Generally speaking, we profess to esteem truth above everything. If a man is on his trial for murder, the witnesses are sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, to the best of their knowledge. But if the question is as to the sanity of the murderer, *skilled* witnesses are summoned to give their opinions upon the state of his mind. The value of their opinions is measured by their capacity to form

an opinion, and their capacity is measured by their knowledge of cases in point. But often their opinions are opinions only; they cannot be implicitly relied on; they are mere makeshifts which the court is compelled to put up with, so long as perfect knowledge is not to be had. This is an unsatisfactory state of things; and in this and similar instances (which are plentiful), opinion, compared with knowledge, appears to disadvantage.

Its inferiority may be inferred in other ways. In some things, *e.g.*, political questions, truth is evolved from the conflict of opinions; and, beyond all contradiction, the end is more precious than the means. Further, when truth is known and established, all controversy upon it is at an end; there is no room for disputing; men are of one mind about it who were at odds so long as it was a matter of opinion. The harmonising power of knowledge is a circumstance greatly in its favour.

Passing into the region of theology, we are surprised to find a totally different set of principles at work. We find opinion to be the 'be-all and the end-all' there,—dissent from the reigning opinion counted for a crime—knowledge studiously depreciated or valued only as it is subservient to opinion—reason, as it is absurdly cried down on the side where it is strongest, as absurdly cried up on the side where it is weakest—the oracle of society not the well-informed scholar, the shrewd observer, the original thinker, the candid reasoner (a kind of men who have a strong aversion to hazarding opinions), but the voluble man of orthodoxy, who for anything anybody knows belongs to no school,

But that where blind and naked Ignorance
Delivers brawling judgments, unashamed,
On all things all day long :

and we naturally ask, "How can such things be, and

“what can orthodoxy have to say for itself?” Its defence will take some such line as this: *That* Revelation is not like other things, and not to be judged of by ordinary rules. *That* religious opinions, not being capable of demonstration, belong to the province not of knowledge, but of faith. *That* right faith, and consequently right opinions, are essential to holiness of living. We will take these propositions in order.

I. From the position that Revelation, being a thing *sui generis*, is not subject to ordinary laws, to the position that it *is* subject to whatever laws orthodoxy may please to impose upon it, is but a step. Fruits of this doctrine we see every day. Who has ever attended to a controversial sermon or perused a controversial treatise, and not been completely bewildered with the amazing *arbitrariness* that characterises them? the violent associations of ideas, the axioms that are axiomatic in nothing but their insusceptibility of proof, the foregone conclusions wrung from worse than doubtful premisses, the fallacious demonstrations of the truth of “the Gospel,” the imaginary exposures of the folly or the knavery of the captious objector? Leaving such absurdities, let us ask these questions: Given that Revelation is a thing *sui generis*, in what does its distinctive character consist, and how does that distinctive character affect the value of opinion as such?

The knowledge of divine things differs, I presume, from the knowledge of all other things either (α) in the method of acquiring it, or (β) in the nature of the knowledge acquired—or both.

(α). The way in which a thing is communicated to our knowledge has nothing whatever to do with the character, utility or importance of the thing itself. Knowledge is knowledge, however we come by it. Had the law of gravitation been revealed to Moses

instead of being reserved for the observation of Newton, it would have played the same part in the universe, and have afforded the same exercise for men's faculties that it does now. Had gunpowder been a supernatural and not a natural invention, it would still have been subject to the same conditions, and have answered the same purposes for good and evil as at this very moment. Opinion gains nothing on this ground.

(β). What is really distinctive in the knowledge of divine things is the transcendent importance of divine things. Their interest is universal and everlasting. Moses was inspired and Newton was inspired; but whereas Newton was inspired to teach science, Moses was inspired to teach religion. The source of their teaching was the same; the channel by which it came to them may or may not have been the same too; it is in the subject-matter of their teaching that we are conscious of so momentous a difference. Now, in every concern of life we observe that the value of knowledge rises, the value of opinion sinks, in direct proportion to the importance of the subject-matter. In proportion, therefore, as God is supremely great, so the knowledge of God, which in the intellectual signification of the words is theology, in their moral signification, religion, is not only of infinitely more importance than knowledge of any other subject, but of infinitely more importance than any opinion on the same subject. We find then, that, far from annihilating the rule I contend for, the peculiar character of Revelation only intensifies its force. The New Testament speaks clearly enough to the same effect. As regards opinion: "Whosoever killeth you will *think* he doeth God service." "*I verily thought* with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth"—things for which we read that the Apostle obtained mercy only because they

were done "*ignorantly* in unbelief." As regards knowledge: "This is life eternal, that they *know* (1) "thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." "God will have all men to be saved, and "come to the *knowledge* of the truth." The reason why the unlearned and ignorant men who had been with Jesus were enabled to smite so effectively the philosophies of heathendom was that their conflict was not between so many sets of opinions, in which they would possibly have been worsted, but between sets of opinions on the one hand and a set of facts on the other. The superior weapon won.

II. The incurable uncertainty of so many religious opinions, which in the eyes of the philosopher is their weak point, constitutes, in the eyes of those who are not philosophers, their principal attraction. The philosopher would argue that an opinion being, as it were, a temporary implement, an endeavouring after truth, is good for nothing when it ends in itself, serves no ulterior purpose, does not further the discovery of the truth which it relates to, inasmuch as that truth is beyond the grasp of the human intellect. To the authority of the Church, in such a case, he would pay little regard, knowing that all the heads in the world put together are as incapable as one head of solving a problem which has been proved to be insoluble. No amount of gazing will avail to bring the invisible into sight, and why strain our eyes in vain, or, what were worse, shut them and pretend to see? The religious world will reply, as one man, that these uncertainties and difficulties and impossibilities were intended to try our faith; that there is no room for faith where there is no room for doubt. Which, in the first place, is a begging of the question; for while

(1) *γινώσκουσι* is the preferable reading in John xvii. 3.

allowing that there is something to be said in *my* favour, it supposes the question already decided in *yours*: in the second place, the founder of a religion who designedly leaves difficulties in the way of its being received must in all reason share the blame of its being rejected; as the master who leaves money about to try his servants' honesty may thank himself to some extent if they steal it: and, lastly, about the things which are really necessary to salvation, there is no doubt whatever. For religion in general is based upon certain fundamental principles which are beyond the reach of dispute; to which the Christian religion in particular adds certain historical events, the proof of which is to be looked for not in faith, but in history.

III. It will be alleged that much of what we have called the knowledge of God really is resolvable into opinion; and that so far we must admit opinion to be conducive to righteousness of life. Thus we have said that religion is based upon certain indisputable principles; *e.g.*, that God is true. Supposing, then, a man to be of opinion that God is not true, he will, in all probability, either be a liar or be in a fair way of becoming one. But that God is true, I contend, is no more a matter of opinion than that things which are equal to the same thing are equal to one another is a matter of opinion. Truth is an attribute of God, which may have been for any number of ages unknown, but which being declared is instantly accepted; it is seen at once to be an essential part of his being, an inseparable concomitant of his name. To deny it, as to deny the axiom about equal things above mentioned, is not heresy but insanity, not to be argued either with or about. The same may be said in regard of any other of the divine attributes, justice, mercy, omnipotence, omniscience. The same cannot be said in

regard of speculative opinions, Arian, Athanasian, Sabellian, or what not, about the composition of the godhead. That which commends itself to the conscience of mankind stands on a distinctly higher level than that which commends itself only to the intellects of particular men. In the first chapter of the epistle to the Romans the apostle denounces those heathen whose immoral practices had so blunted their moral sense as to render them indifferent to what by nature they knew of God. But of their theological opinions, if any they had, he takes no notice whatever. For opinions are not faith; "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved," does not and cannot mean, "Hold my doctrine of the atonement, or you shall not be saved." Not in this sense is practice founded upon doctrine: is it not nearer the truth to say that all human righteousness is founded upon, in other words, is a following of, the divine righteousness, by his conformity or non-conformity to which every child of man shall be judged?

Hitherto we have considered what may be called respectable arguments in favour of opinion. There are one or two more of a different character behind, unavowed indeed, but which, in practice, I believe carry considerable weight.

It is curious to observe how the man who has made up his mind on a point invariably deems himself entitled to set at naught the man who keeps his judgment in suspense. It is true the hesitation of the latter may be due to his knowing both sides of the question, the positiveness of the former to his knowing only one; but your thorough-going dogmatist does not care for that. He has his opinion, and with him opinion is a royal road to moral and intellectual superiority. All he wants to make him perfectly happy is to get a number of people about him to share his ideas, confirm one another's convictions,

and enhance one another's conceit. The conceit of such cliques—the portrait of them in 1 Corinthians iv. 6-10 is unmistakable—is as unlimited as it is ridiculous. Now, the “religious world” is simply a big clique. How it hugs itself in its self-complacency! how coolly, almost innocently, it passes its censures on those who are not of it! with what a thrill of pleasure it welcomes a stranger who unexpectedly speaks its language! with what terror and disgust it listens to arguments tending to a conclusion it has rejected! All the while “understanding what it says” and whereof it affirms” as much as animalcules in a drop of water understand about the gulf-stream. A little sound knowledge would abate its infatuation; what reason, then, it has to be in love with opinion, when opinion responds so heartily to its self-love!

There is yet another reason. Dethrone opinion, and what becomes of the privilege of persecuting? The exercise of this blessed privilege is two-fold: as it pertains to persons in authority and to persons not in authority. Whenever the State has persecuted, it has done so for reasons of State. It is an error to suppose that in the good old times the State kept a conscience, and in that conscience believed it to be its duty to punish all who dissented from its religion. Thus in England, Romanists and Dissenters were persecuted simply because the State thought it impossible for Romanists and Dissenters to be loyal and peaceable citizens. As soon as it began to perceive that they both might be and were as good citizens as any English churchmen the persecuting laws were doomed, notwithstanding the efforts, the too-successful efforts, of ignorance and bigotry to prolong their sinful and despicable existence. Now in mental as in bodily concerns, individuals, like States, obey the same instinct of self-preservation. Opinions, existing upon sufferance, are endangered by the presence of opposite

opinions. Hence the impulse to persecute opposite opinions. Persecution and dogma have ever been brethren in arms. For three centuries, during which the Church itself was the victim of persecution, the Christian conscience was satisfied with the apostolic *regula fidei*, which, avoiding abstract dogmas, recited just such facts connected with the past, and such convictions respecting the present and the future, as were profitable for personal holiness. Heretics contravening the rule were fought with their own weapons. But in after-days, when the Church had won its way to empire, and was in a position not only to teach, but to enforce its teaching by the arm of the law, then heterodoxy was dealt with in another spirit, and orthodoxy regulated by other standards. Inevitable controversy conceived and brought forth councils, and councils being finished brought forth definitions of doctrine. These definitions were nothing else than encroachments upon common land, which, once enclosed, could never again be thrown open. And so, by degrees, the vast system of dogmatic theology grew up, not so much by development as by accretion, out of which it was as hard for the inquirer to disentangle the simple truths of the Gospel of Jesus, as it would be for a Yorkshire villager of the last century, if suddenly resuscitated in this, to identify the site of his cottage home in the stupendous manufacturing borough that has swallowed up the neighbourhood. Failing to find what he wanted, he must go where the authorities sent him. Failing to obey his orders he was speedily taught what prayers for magistrates, that they might have "grace "to execute justice and maintain truth," meant. The Reformation, while it purged our Church of much that was Popish in detail, did not purge away what was worst in Popery, viz., that Popish spirit which speaks thus: "Believe as I do, or take the conse-

“quences.” In the place of one Pope it only set up a multitude. The result is, that while the State has abandoned the practice of persecuting, individuals, with rare exceptions, have not. True they have not such scope for their energies as they could wish, but they go manfully to work, considering “the diversity of times and men’s manners.” If they cannot kill their brethren by way of doing God service, they can pick their pockets for the same pious object. If they cannot hang, they can give bad names. If they cannot visit you with a sentence of the “greater excommunication,” they can send you to Coventry, which does nearly as well. Now, that a clique, which would be nothing if not numerous and noisy, should have the power of subjecting its victims to so much unmerited annoyance, sometimes to the extent of ruining them in purse and prospects, is intolerable enough; but infinitely more intolerable, because so deadly in its effects, is the tyranny thus exercised over men’s minds. Right dear in the sight of the clique is the stifling of inquiry. The intellectual light of the world is put out in the blaze of its brightness. The intellectual salt of the earth, in all the freshness of its savour, is trodden under foot of the vulgar. The branch of original and independent and healthy and vigorous thought is by rude hands cut down and cast into the fire. Everywhere we are confronted with the miserable spectacle of—

art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,

which made the soul of Shakespeare weary of his life. Why? as Cæsar says of the “great observer” who “thinks too much,”

such men are dangerous.

Danger! danger! is the monotonous cry of the bigot who, in the same breath in which he professes

an unbounded confidence in his convictions, unwittingly gives his profession the lie.

To conclude. The pre-eminence popularly assigned to opinion, as it is false in principle, is detrimental in practice: detrimental to knowledge—for, to take but one instance, there is no more stubborn impediment to a right understanding of the Scriptures than a pre-conceived theory of inspiration; detrimental to charity—for while opinions are cherished for their own sake, opinions destined never to become certainties, so long on their account will people bite and devour one another, until they are at length consumed one of another. Thus do religious opinions defeat the purpose of religion; which is to lead us to the “knowledge of the truth,” and to promote “peace on earth, good-will towards men.”



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