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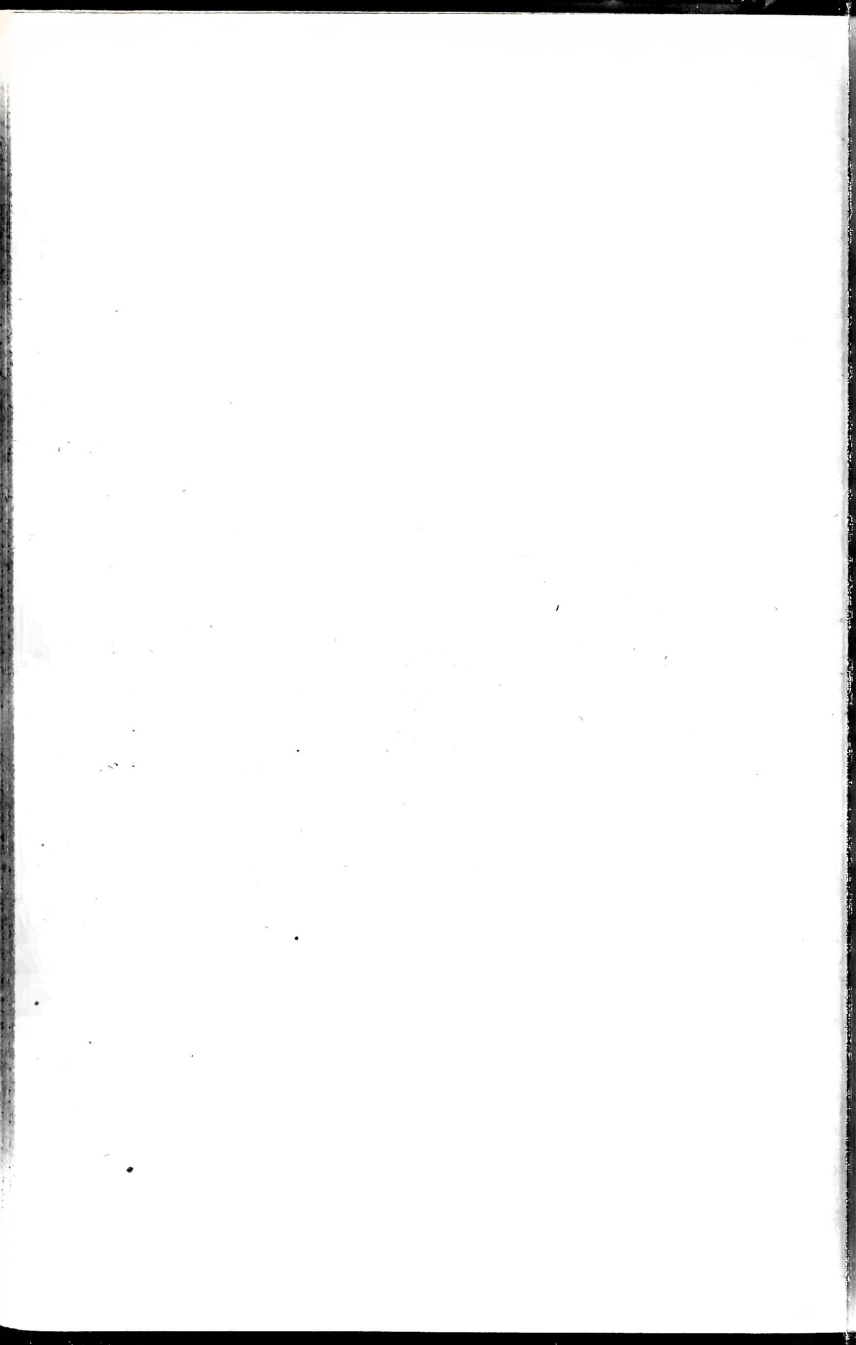
ON THE
FORMATION OF RELIGIOUS OPINIONS.

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ON THE
FORMATION OF RELIGIOUS OPINIONS.

I PURPOSE this evening to discourse to you upon "The Formation of Religious Opinions." The subject is closely connected with, and arises out of what I was saying last Sunday evening. I shall therefore quote the same passage as a text, 1 Cor. x. 15, "I speak as unto wise men; judge ye what I say." But what I aim at to-night is to make some practical observations that I think we are too apt to lose sight of. Indeed, people seldom follow any principle or rule in forming their opinions upon questions of religion. They pick them up at hap-hazard; or simply retain what they had been taught in their youth. And even where they come to a resolution to investigate the subject, and form a judgment for themselves, they seldom go about it systematically. One person recommends this book, another person recommends that book. They read them, and adopt the opinions which seem the more probable, or to which particular circumstances incline them. But it is very seldom they can give you a reason which will bear strict scrutiny and investigation why they have chosen one opinion rather than another.

The general spirit of one's culture and mental character has more to do with the adoption of opinions in the majority of cases than anything else.

Some men are naturally very narrow-minded, and the education they have received has not tended to correct the narrowness. They will incline, therefore, to whatever is narrow and bigoted. Others, again, are generous, liberal, and free: whatever partakes of their own generosity, liberality, and freedom will therefore seem to them to have a preponderance of evidence on its side. Some are learned in ancient literature, and have thoroughly imbibed its spirit. What harmonises with this will seem to them as true. Others are addicted to metaphysical speculations, and can only discern truth in what presents itself under the formulæ sanctioned by their school. Whilst others have the purely scientific spirit, and require all religious opinions before they accept them to be subjected to the tests of their special methods. And thus it is each one has certain predilections which very materially influence him when he thinks about religious questions and endeavours to make up his mind as to what is true. They look at the questions subjectively, rather than objectively—study them in relation to their own thoughts and feelings rather than as they are in themselves, and resting on evidence which needs to be examined simply according to its own merits. And this will be the case with a large number for a long time to come.

To form an independent rational opinion upon any subject affecting the higher interests of life requires an amount of training and leisure few possess. The majority must take their opinions at second hand, and they will naturally take those which are most in accordance with their own tastes, inclinations, and culture. It is just the same, for example, in questions of politics or legislation, as in questions of religion. These questions depend upon a scientific knowledge of human nature, its laws and tendencies, upon a thorough knowledge of all the circumstances,

the conditions physical, intellectual, and moral of the country, and a foreseeing sagacity capable of calculating the effects of a given measure upon a country in such a condition and in such circumstances, the people of which are subject to those fixed laws of human nature. Now, I suppose there are not fifty members of the House of Commons who possess this knowledge, or who attempt to study these questions scientifically. Yet we all hold some opinion or other about the questions. And the opinions we hold are adopted just in the same way as the majority adopt their religious opinions, *i.e.*, according as they agree, harmonise and are in accordance with our tastes, inclinations, tendencies and general culture. And opinions upon very many other subjects are adopted by the mass of people in just the same way.

But you will see that there can properly be no certainty about opinions so received. Their truth or untruth will be a mere matter of chance, depending upon accidental circumstances. And it is unworthy of a man capable of thought and reasoning, not to form his opinions upon a rational and trustworthy method. It becomes, therefore, each one of us to seek out the true method by which our religious opinions may be formed.

The methods by which real students have formed their religious opinions have always been the methods they have followed in their philosophical enquiries—indeed, religious opinions have never been anything more than the outcoming of the various systems of philosophy in this region of religious thought. It was, for example, the imaginative philosophy of Plato, modified by neo-Platonism and the Alexandrian school which determined the theological or religious opinions of the Church of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries. The method of inquiry pursued by the philosophers was the method adopted by the theologians, and the resultant philosophy and theology

were one harmonious whole. So again the special philosophy which embodied itself in the writings of Locke, found its religious expression in the theological school of the English Deists, in the Unitarianism of Priestley and Belsham, and in certain broad, or, as they were then called, latitudinarian sections of the reputed orthodox churches. So, once more, the transcendental philosophy which Coleridge did so much to bring into reputation, has furnished F. D. Maurice and his school with their method and the basis of their system, and is greatly influencing the thinking and forms of religious opinion amongst many who are striving hard to retain their orthodox position. At the same time the severe method of positivism is working in another direction and revolutionizing the religious opinions of all who come under its influence.

These illustrations, then, will serve to show you that the very first step for us to take, when seeking to form our religious opinions, is to determine upon the *method* by which our enquiries shall be conducted. The method will inevitably determine the conclusions at which we shall arrive.

But here a certain school interposes and claims for its method an absolute control over our inquiries. It says, "God has given us a revelation in a book, and the only method we ought to pursue is to take a grammar and dictionary, ascertain the precise literal meaning of the book, and accept that as the absolute truth and rule." But let us see if this method be as conclusive as they seem to suppose. We will take a precept, not a dogma, and that one spoken by the highest, truest lips, Matt. v. 38, &c., "Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth—(you will recollect that that is a law laid down for the guidance of courts of justice, see Ex. xxi. 23, &c., so that Christ is here referring not to taking personal vengeance, but to getting one who has injured

you punished by law): but I say unto you resist not evil (by bringing him before the magistrate); but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away."

Now, I ask respecting these precepts, as I have asked before on frequent occasions, does any sensible person in the present day think they are to be obeyed? Are we never to prosecute at law those doing us an injury? If any one prosecute us for an unjust claim are we not to defend our cause? Are we to give to every beggar? And are we never to refuse to lend to those who want to borrow? There can be but one answer, and that answer will be in direct contradiction to the precepts. I ask then upon what ground, by what authority, these plain, simple and direct precepts of Christ, spoken in unmistakeable language, are modified or set on one side? It will be said, one's common sense sees they are inapplicable, and would be unworkable in the present day in our circumstances. Precisely so. But see what this involves. You apply your common sense, or reason, or judgment, whatever you like to call it, to these precepts and set them aside by its authority. Then you apply your common sense, reason, or judgment to other precepts, and by its authority pronounce them still obligatory. You have left your grammar and lexicon, and you are trying these precepts by tests furnished by your own mind. Their authority really rests therefore not upon the claims of him who spoke them, but upon the judgments you have formed respecting them. It is you who pronounce them binding or not binding in virtue of some test your judgment has supplied.

Now, what I say, and what the whole drift of this discourse is intended to shew, is that it is of the first importance that in selecting this test by which moral precepts, doctrines and religious opinions of all kinds are to be tried, you be guided by right and rational principles or rules, in other words that your method of enquiry be sound and good.

In searching for this method it is a fortunate thing for us that we have the history and experience of upwards of two thousand years to help us. For we are thus enabled at all events to see where and how others have failed, and to avoid the same blunders. All the old systems of opinion have broken down and failed to hold their ground against the advancing tide of progress. Each one in turn has given place to something fresh and has never revived excepting under a new phase and with great modifications. The system of St Augustine, for example, is said to have been revived by Luther and other Reformers. And without doubt the statement is partially true, but no one who knows the writings of Augustine and Luther would say the Augustine theology of the sixteenth century is precisely the same as the Augustine theology of the fourth. The questions are looked at, argued, and concluded upon under different phases, under different modes of culture. It is not the theology of Augustine, it is the theology of Augustine moulded, modified and permeated by the spirit of the sixteenth century. The old questions come up, but they come in a new dress, and they are discussed from a different standing ground. And so it has ever been, a constant flux of systems, succeeding and superseding each other, but the old questions ever returning to be debated over again.

Now, how is it that all these discussions and philosophies have failed to settle these questions or to give us, at least, some points settled which should be debateable no more for ever, and from which we

might set out upon fresh and more extended inquiries. The answer appears to me quite plain. They failed because their methods of inquiry were vicious from the very beginning. They started upon untested assumptions, and built up their theories by imaginative reasonings, the elements of which were furnished by their fancies alone. Sometimes, indeed, they would appeal to facts of consciousness or of man's history, *i.e.*, facts of the inner or of the outer life; but when they did so, they interpreted them by assumptions or fancies wholly gratuitous, and the facts therefore became as worthless as their fancies. Thus, as an example, the Semitic and Western conceptions of God assumed his similitude to man in mind, while not also in body. Now, that assumption once made the remaining conceptions, and the interpretations of his proceedings would legitimately follow according to what men at the time being found in themselves. Accordingly, at one time his government was represented as that of an arbitrary despot; at another time, as that of a constitutional king, his actions being limited by supposed principles of eternal right and fitness; at another, as that of a still more merciful sovereign striving to find a remedy against the terrible mischief done by his too severe law; and now recently as a father governing his family and never chastening but in love. But each and all of these representations are equally true for those who have believed them, and equally founded upon a purely gratuitous assumption, *viz.*, that there is such a resemblance between the mind of God and man that you may reason from the principles, modes of thought, and of action in the one, to the principles, modes of thought, and of action in the other.

Now, I deny that there is the least pretence in reason for this assumption. It is purely fanciful and baseless. There are no means of proving that it is true, if it be true. And therefore the whole system

of the divine government built upon it is as worthless, as uncertain, and as irrational as its base. But, say those who make and rest upon this assumption, if God be not like to man in his mental character and principles of action, what is He like? I answer, I do not know. But say they, if you do not know, what affections, dispositions, characteristics, will you ascribe to him? I answer, I ascribe none. Then say they, you are left in the hands of this terrible almighty power, in total ignorance of his intentions towards you. I reply, not so, I know many of his intentions towards me with tolerable certainty. I find that he always acts in the same way, by the same laws, causing the same antecedents to be followed by the same consequents, the same causes by the same effects, the same conditions by the same results. So far, therefore, as I know these causes, conditions, laws (call them what you please), I know precisely what God's intentions are. His intentions concerning me are, that whenever I come under any one of these laws, conditions, or causes, that the consequences he has attached to it in the order of things shall inevitably follow. And that is enough for me to know. I have no longing after the impossible, the comprehension of the Infinite and Absolute. I know, as the late Sir William Hamilton expressed it, the length of my tether. I acquiesce in my conditioned knowledge.

Now, this illustration has not been a digression from our enquiry into the right method of forming religious opinions. It has expounded it. It has shown how baseless, uncertain and fluctuating must be all systems originated in mere speculative fancies and assumptions. It has shewn there can be only one method fixed, certain, and unchangeable—that, namely, which is purely based upon facts, and brings all its reasonings to the test of facts before it finally accepts as true its conclusions. It is by this method

the whole advance in every kind of human knowledge has been made. So far as it was pursued in ancient times what was discovered by it, is as true to day as it was then. Every great deliverance from human ignorance and superstition has been wrought out by it. There is not an enlightened conception of the divine government but what may be traced to its influence acting directly or indirectly upon the mind. From its conclusions there can be no possible appeal. It is the highest and ultimate test of all truth, of all speculation, of all reasoning. What it ascertains must be true as long as the world lasts, and its judgments can never be set aside, excepting by assumption into higher and more general truths. It is the only method left to us in this nineteenth century. But now, you say, where shall we find the facts to which this method is to be applied, and upon the study of which all our religious opinions are to be formed? I answer, in the whole experience of man, in general, and in your own special experience in particular, and this experience carries us out of ourselves recollect, in virtue of the relations we sustain to the external world. Whatever is evolved in your religious experience constantly, under the same conditions that is for you a religious fact, and forms the basis of a true religious opinion—the basis of a true religious opinion *for you*, recollect, *not* the basis of a general religious opinion true *for all men*. For our individual peculiarities and circumstances constitute individual conditions which may lead to results altogether untrue in the experience of other men. Yet that these conditions may be true for you cannot be questioned. It is an individual truth affecting only yourself. You come into contact, for example, with some great and sublime object in nature which immediately produces in you feelings of reverence and awe, and suggests the idea of a present good and beneficent Creator calling forth

your love and trust. That, therefore, is the fact of your experience, and you found upon it the opinion that it is the tendency of such objects to produce such results. Now that opinion is true for you individually. But you extend your inquiries to the experience of other men, and then you find that these results do not always follow. In some you find there is the deep feeling produced by contemplating the object, but no suggestion of the idea of God. In others, the idea of God is suggested, but it is accompanied by fear and terror. So that you correct the conclusion of your personal experience by the wider experience of mankind, and instead of saying that the grand objects of nature tend to suggest the idea of God and to produce love and trust, you say these objects tend to produce these effects under certain conditions only. Your religious opinion is modified, generalized by a more extensive observation of facts. The first opinion founded upon your own experience is still true for you, because your mind is in that condition under which this love for and trust in God follow; but it is not a general truth and your opinion has to be modified accordingly.

But now, suppose you are not content to rest here. You want to ascertain which is the normal, proper and natural condition and result, that which ends, as in your own mind, in love and trust, or that which ends in terror and apprehension. Still you have nothing but the facts to guide you. You begin therefore by examining and scrutinizing more closely the facts. You find in those in whom the terror is excited some humanised conception of God which clothes him with attributes which have a malignant aspect towards man, and by examination you find that this conception rests upon the baseless assumption that God must be like man, and so like malignant and fierce men. Or in other cases you find it has

been produced by some great calamity, which has produced the impression that God delights in calamity, an impression depending upon a few circumstances and not upon general observation. On the other hand, your own trust and love rest upon no such ground. You do not pretend to know God as he is in himself; but by extensive observation you find that upon the whole his operations in nature are beneficent and good, leading to human well being and happiness. You observe that the calamities are the result of conditions which may for the most part be controlled and constitute a system of discipline which is beneficial and merciful. Seeing therefore that the real facts call forth the love and trust, and that it is fancy or an imperfect observation of a few facts that inspire the mistrust and fear, you form the generalized religious opinion that those conditions in which the apprehensions of God's presence call forth trust and love, are the true, normal, and proper conditions of man. Nor could anything possibly shake that opinion but such an appeal to the facts as would shew you had misconceived or misinterpreted them.

But possibly some one may say, this method will answer very well in such a question as you have proposed, but will it apply to all, such as the peculiar doctrines of Christianity for example? Now, I have already answered that question in effect. For leaving out of consideration the evidences by which the authority of Christianity has to be established, involving as they do the questions of miracles, which is purely one of facts, I remind you of what I have already said about the interpretation. Every one interprets by his system of philosophy formed by his judgment according to certain methods. The ultimate appeal in these questions of interpretation is not to the grammar and lexicon, but to the principles held by the interpreter. Hence the opposite conclusions come to by men equally sincere, equally learned,

equally pious, and equally skilled in interpretation. The Calvinists, for example, the older Unitarians, and the Arminians equally believe in the divine authority of the New Testament or of Christ. They equally strive to find out the meaning of the text. They come to opposite conclusions. Why? Oh, the bigots of each party would say, because the others do not come with an open mind, but seek only their own preconceived opinions. I have, however, nothing to do with the bigots just now. The real cause is, because each comes with his own system to the interpretation, and so arrives at different results. And it could not from the nature of things be otherwise, whether men know it or not. So that in reality the ultimate appeal is to these judgments formed before consulting the oracle, and all depends upon the method by which those judgments are formed.

Take, for example, the doctrine of the atonement. Now, the Calvinist holding certain views about God's justice, government &c., interprets the passages speaking of Christ's death in one way, and gives to the atonement one meaning. The Arminian, holding modified views of God's justice and government, and exalting higher his love, interprets the same passages in another way, and gives to the atonement a modified meaning. Whilst the older Unitarian, holding other views of God's character, and exalting his love still higher than the Arminian, interprets the passages in quite another way, and does not hold the doctrine of the atonement in the Calvinistic sense at all. Now how can any one form an opinion upon these three different modes of interpretation? Only by determining the truth or the untruth of the principles upon which their system of interpretation is based; and that must be done by the method I have explained. If any one do not care for any of these systems, and wishes to determine the question simply upon its own merits, how can he do so but by a reference to

facts? Do all those who believe in the atonement get delivered, so far as we see, from the consequences of their past sins? Would the drunkard, for example, who has drunk himself into a state verging on delirium tremens, get saved from the fit which was coming upon him to-night, by a sudden conversion experienced at twelve o'clock this morning? And secondly, do none but those who so believe, amend their lives and reap all the good and happiness of the amendment? There can be but one answer to such questions, and it is determined by matters of fact easily ascertained, and from which there can be no appeal.

I trust, then, I have said enough to explain the method by which our religious opinions must be formed. There is none other left to us amidst the jarring controversies of the day. At all events, of this we are quite sure, whatever we come short of, through this method (for myself I do not think we shall come short of any then) yet whatever we do grasp will be unalterable and infallibly sure. It will rest on a basis of fact which cannot be removed. In this method is certainty, and in this alone. All others are a delusion and a snare.

But let me conclude with one caution. Above all things, in the use of this method, do not too hastily generalize your conclusions. See to it that you have a sufficient number of facts to form your opinion upon. There is no greater evidence of a philosophical mind than the power of suspending one's judgment until all the evidence is before one; as there is no greater proof of a weak mind than hesitancy after the conclusions are formed. And herein doubtlessly lies the danger to which those employing this method are exposed. Too often they want to rise to certainty by a leap. Most enquirers get impatient of delay. After a rapid glance over a few facts, selected it may be but from one class, age, or type, they rashly conclude

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that they have comprehended the universal law. They mistake the individual and it may be accidental process for the general, and therefore go blundering on into all sorts of errors. The very first requisite to the formation of true religious opinions, as of all others, is patience, caution, suspension of judgment until the whole field of facts is surveyed and nothing left out that is essential to the result. Then the conclusion, so far as it goes, will be as certain as the fact of one's own existence. And then recollect, as an encouragement to this patience and suspension of judgment, that religion may exist actively where the opinions are yet in abeyance, for truthful, well formed opinions are not necessary to religious feeling and life; although on the other hand the opinions once formed have a momentous result on the religious life.

Be deliberate then, scrutinize, weigh, compare, discount all fancies and all prejudices, earnestly judge by the facts widely inducted, and God will guide you into all truth.

