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“THE DUTY OF INSTRUCT- ING THE CONSCIENCE.”

A SERMON

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

AUGUST 18TH, 1872. BY A

CLERGYMAN OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

[From the EASTERN POST, August 24th, 1872.]

On Sunday last, in the absence of Mr Voysey, a Minister of the Church of England officiated, and preached on “The Duty of Instructing the Conscience,” taking for his text, Romans xiv., pt. of 23,—“For whatsoever is not of faith is sin.”

Some persons have understood this statement to mean that all actions are in their nature sinful that do not spring from a principle of Christian faith ; i.e. that all the works of unbelievers “have the nature of sin,” as the 13th Article of the Church of England says. Whatever Divines, however, may allege for this theory, it must be evident from a consideration of the whole scope of the chapter, that St. Paul here means nothing of the kind. He is treating of persons who are in doubt as to the lawfulness or unlawfulness of certain proceedings ; though he himself, he says, is persuaded of their lawfulness or indifference, yet it would be wrong for anyone to do them who thinks them unlawful, “for whatsoever is not of faith is sin” ; i.e. whatever action is ventured on without a full persuasion of its rightfulness is wrong in the doer of it ; which is no more than what Cicero tells us when he says, “Nothing ought to be done concerning which you doubt, whether it may be rightly done.” The declaration of Paul, therefore, comes to this, that in any case it must be wrong to act against the persuasion of one’s own conscience. A statement which

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none of us would be likely to deny, for if one doubts of the rectitude of an action, to persist in it notwithstanding such doubt argues a deliberate carelessness as to whether one's actions are right or the contrary, and as to the criminality of such conduct, I think there is no room for difference of opinion.

But then arises the question, can we be always sure that when we act on the prompting of conscience we are certainly right? That is, are the affirmative dictates of conscience a safe guarantee of the rectitude of actions? Experience, I think, compels us to answer this question in the negative. To do what our conscience forbids is clearly wrong; but it by no means follows that to do what our conscience prompts is clearly right. Although subjectively a man may be held guiltless who has acted conscientiously, and yet erroneously, yet objectively it is evident the action itself derives no sanction from the edict of conscience. And since experience has so often taught us this lesson of the defectiveness of conscience, it is a question whether a man can be held guiltless who gratuitously makes his own conscience the measure of actions beyond his personal and proper sphere. Certainly he cannot be acquitted of arrogance and presumption.

Examples of the fallibility of conscience crowd upon us from all quarters. Louis IX., perhaps the most sincerely conscientious man that ever existed, made no scruple in robbing heterodox bankers. Many a one has conscientiously persuaded a Hindoo widow into suicide. It is needless to rake history for instances of this kind, especially as common experience shows us the same thing every day. A pious family in Tyburnia thinks it wrong to open the piano on Sundays, when an equally pious family in Saxony finds its conscience unwounded in listening through the harmless afternoon to the public band, playing Straus's Waltzes. In fact, conscience changes with the latitude; the incoherent collection of sentiments which a man calls his conscience, North of the Tweed, forms a curious contrast with the equally heterogeneous convictions of dwellers South of the Seine.

Some persons endeavour to evade objections of this sort against the absolute authority of conscience, by alleging that there is pre-supposed a belief in God and goodness. But it is evident this is only shifting the difficulty from one shoulder to the other; for what is your standard of goodness? Goodness is

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what your conscience approves,—and conscience is your opinion with respect to what constitutes goodness. We are, you perceive, going round in a circle. It has been shown by numberless reasoners that there is no innate infallible test on these matters; morals have varied from age to age according to the world's progress, and their historical development is as traceable as that of the intellect.

Now what is the result of all this? Not as some of the Sophists once alleged an utter Scepticism as to the difference between right and wrong, nor a denial of the utility and authority of conscience in her proper sphere. Nothing we have said affects the validity of the rule of St. Paul and Cicero with which we set out, that where we are not fully persuaded of the rectitude of an action, to do it is wrong. But the confession of the errors to which conscience is liable, at once involves the positive duty of informing the conscience; if, as some say, conscience is the great judge in the human breast, it must certainly be as much our interest as our duty to see that the judge is as fully instructed as possible; it becomes a man's duty in short to convince himself of the correctness of his creed, by examining its grounds and weighing substantial objections against it. Our creed is to our conscience as the motive power and governing-wheel to a machine. Conscience prompts us to act in such or such a manner because of certain beliefs and opinions. As a sweet stream will not flow from a bitter fountain, so neither can a truth-loving and charitable conscience result from a bitter creed, when such creed is personally realised.

Now it does not appear to me that the partisans of rational religion can be justly charged with failing in this duty of enlightening the conscience, since the differences which now distinguish them from the rest of the community have mainly arisen from their endeavouring to seek out the grounds on which the judgments of conscience are founded. But here we come upon a curious anomaly, the rationalists who do not consider a correct creed the most important thing in the world, at any rate they do not think an incorrect one a damning matter, they are most scrupulous in examining the round of their conclusions; while the orthodox, who for the most part think correctness of belief of vital necessity, who even venture in their public proclamations to put forth such declarations, as, "Whosoever will be saved before all things, it is necessary that he hold this," and "furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation

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that he also believe rightly that," these orthodox, who thus stickle for exactness of creed, discountenance that free enquiry and research by which only exactness can be arrived at, and while proclaiming the peril of error denounce the processes by which error is to be avoided. No one at all acquainted with the subject can deny that the most prominent representatives of orthodoxy withstand free enquiry, and too often decry and calumniate its advocates, They commonly represent that hesitation, and doubt, which are the parents of enquiry; "are diabolical temptations;" *bombshells*, as a certain prelate called them, from the camp of Satan shot into the citadel of the soul. The mass of their followers readily accept this representation, they have been content to take their creed wholesale, as it was provided for them in infancy, and no more think of enquiring into its evidence than into that of their nationality. In face of piled up masses of evidence, increased by every newspaper which brings tidings from other lands, all evincing the conflict of human judgments and the variation of that moral thermometer, which men call conscience, they congratulate themselves on retaining their old-fashioned weather-glass, which persistently points to "set fair" in all weathers. Like a boy's watch, more for show than use, it is all the same to them that it never shows the right hour. They refuse to be told that as far as keeping time goes, as far as answering to outward facts, their machine is perfectly useless. They are careless as to its use and object, while they glory in its possession. The very object of a creed and a conscience is to discriminate the true from the untrue, the right from the wrong, like the needle of a hand-compass, whichever way you turn, it should always find its way round to the north, but they have fixed their needle down for the rest of the voyage, and wherever borne still consider it a safe indicator of their course. But Nicœa is no more a perpetual test of truth than the letter N of the real north. The magnetic current of the universe is the heaven-sent force which sways the living needle round to the pole, as the heaven-directed onward march of humanity is the invincible attraction which leads the eye of a living faith to the never setting star of truth. But the orthodox sometimes endeavour to vindicate the wisdom and conscientiousness of their refusal to entertain enquiry by affirming for themselves "our conscience is fully informed already, complete instructions were laid down for us, and the limits of its safe exercise determined long ago by wise men, who

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went into all these matters you wish us to re-open; we feel quite sure of the correctness of this judgment, and do not consider ourselves bound to enter upon enquiry on our own account." All we can reply is, if this is what your teachers tell you to rely on, you are building on a simple historical fallacy, which an hour's honest reading will enable the most illiterate to refute. Your wise men, you say, went into these matters, why how many hundred new matters have entered the mental spectrum since your latest creed was manufactured. Why, man, since your old theory of the universe was concocted, an absolutely new world has come into existence; Columbus has sailed the waters, and a new race has been planted in the West, while scholarship and commerce have lifted the curtains of the east, have broken the slumber of centuries, and disclosed to us vast churches and religions which your sages never dreamt of. In the writings of those old-world teachers you may find the most difficult problems of religion and philosophy treated, and theories on which your best doctors are still unsettled, estimated, argued out, exploded, and thrown away ages before your venerable patriarchs had mastered the rudiments of grammar. While your Western fathers and schoolmen were blundering in bad Latin, and still innocent of Greek—ay! even before Greece herself had a philosophical literature—the problems had long been squeezed dry, over which some of your orthodox Divines are still addling their brains. You would not choose to sail the globe by a chart constructed on their limited knowledge, whose whole world lay round the Mediterranean, and which was adapted to the voyage of the good ship Argo. But your spiritual chart is just about as much in accordance with modern discovery, and bears about as exact a relation to truth and reality.

This then is the answer we give to our orthodox friends—this is the challenge that is borne to them, whether they will hear or whether they will forbear, not merely from a few liberal thinkers here in London, but from every corner of the intellectual and civilised world. We say, that your old theory of existence, your infallible book, your exclusive creeds are totally inconsistent with the truth and reality of things. They cannot anyhow be made to square with the patent phenomena of the universe. We do not, of course, presume to say that you are bound to accept what one or another of us may offer you in their place, but we say you are

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bound to examine, to inquire, to inform yourselves ; that you cannot, as honest men, ignore the voices and the light pressing upon you from every side ; that it is impossible for you to keep a safe and candid conscience while you resolutely blind its eyes and close its ears.

I do not, indeed, affirm of the orthodox that their conscience is always as narrow as their written creed ; in various ways the creed has submitted to a sort of smoothing down of its more horrescent parts—fashionable lectures on science and language have loosened a few misconceptions, have accustomed them to bear a little light, and the general tone of society encourages a certain laxity. It is notorious, moreover, that some have arrived at the stage of “making believe to believe.” But this, it appears to me, makes their conduct all the more disingenuous, they have seen enough light through the chinks to certify them that there is much more behind if they would only draw the curtain, but yet when their theories are challenged they immediately recur to the old barriers, they deny or prevaricate their former concessions, they count those as enemies who would be their friends, and excite a prejudice where they are at a loss for an argument ; they bolster up with all their might those institutions and societies which carry on the war against enlightenment a *outrance*. If they were truly conscientious, the light they have attained would at least lead them earnestly to examine the asserted unsoundness of their belief. But the very fact of being in their secret heart suspicious of the validity of their creed, seems to make them all the more angry with those who would call their attention to it.

As I explained last Sunday, I can make every allowance for that natural apprehension with which some view any kind of change, nor do I think that the less wealthy of the middle-class, whose time and energies are so severely taxed, are to be blamed if they are not the first in encountering such inquiries, or removing the obstacles which hinder the progress of truth. But what are we to say of those who labour under no such impediments, who have great opportunities for enlightenment, whose time even often hangs wearily on their hands for want of useful employment, who many of them have more than a shrewd suspicion of the groundlessness of the popular orthodoxy, who yet not only decline all candid enquiry themselves, but do all they can to make enquiry difficult and dangerous for others.

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We can understand the feeling which resents in others that activity of mind to which they feel themselves disinclined, we can even feel a certain sympathy with that love of ease and quiet which dreads the noisy invasion of religious and social problems,—(were it not for overwhelming evidence that shows that ere long these problems will seek a solution in a way they most dislike,)—but we cannot understand that they should consider this a mark of conscientiousness, that they should even pretend they are paying a deference to conscience when they decline the opportunity of enlightenment, when they refuse to hearken to the injunctions of their own Apostle St. Paul. For how can a man “prove all things” and study, as St. Paul says, to “have a conscience void of offence towards God and towards men”, who is indifferent to the distinction between sham and reality, who refuses evidence, who is careless whether or no the light in him be darkness, or how great is that darkness. If they simply deny that it is their duty to enlighten their conscience and that they accept the consequences, then of course we have nothing more to say to them except that they deny the very basis on which Christianity itself professes to rest. When Christianity was first preached, it was professed to be an appeal to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. Why had not those who refused to listen to evidence in that day, as good an excuse as those who refuse in this?

After all, however, it might be but small concern to the more reflecting part of the community that the orthodox should acquiesce in an unillumined conscience, and shape their lives on baseless theories, if they would be content to restrain its exercise to their own concerns, and simply forbear themselves from doing that of which they doubt the legality. But this would never satisfy them. Not happy in a monopoly of darkness, they seek to make it universal. The languid crowds of orthodoxy throng the fashionable churches, and strive to spread their system everywhere; too listless for the intellectual exertion to which we call them, their interest is, however, excited when it is a question of lording it over God’s heritage and dictating to other men’s faith, and they subscribe their handsome sums to those favoured religious societies whose chief ambition it is to run down, persecute, mulct of their honest gains, and if possible, ruin every soul within their reach who has shown the slightest sympathy with freethought. The faithful now-a-days, instead of keeping their conscience to its

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proper office of checking their own acts, and restraining the judgment for which prejudice disqualifies them, make it the chief excuse for interfering with others. One man's conscience is wounded because someone else sees fit to use the post-office on Sunday, another man has severe inward searchings because his neighbour likes to take a glass of beer. There is hardly a path of life into which they do not intrude their conscientious scruples; they would certainly have a stronger plea for their interference if they tried earnestly to enlighten their conscience. As it is they upset the world with blundering efforts to make their narrow notions the measure of other men's faith and practise, and then when their ignorant and injudicious missionaries have embroiled themselves with offended governments, they expect European fleets and armies to fly to the rescue, and carry out their delusive gospel at the point of the bayonet. Certainly before trying to make their notions palatable to the numberless votaries of Buddha and Brahm, they should furnish a solid answer to the objections raised on their own hearth. But it has been a common ruse of superannuated despots, ecclesiastical and other by enterprise abroad, to divert attention from defects and collapse at home. It was during the throes of the Reformation, for instance that the Roman Church set on foot its missions to China, India, Japan and elsewhere.

This much may suffice to show the plain duty of every man to try and inform his conscience, both on account of the truth which he thus may require himself, and as restraining that unwarrantable interference with the rights of others, and those harsh judgments against which both Christ and the Apostles protest.

The consideration of the best *mode* of instructing the conscience would be ample material for a separate discourse. I will conclude therefore with a passage which affords some indication of the true method, from the works of a renowned political writer and patriot lately deceased. "God, the Father and Educator of Humanity, reveals his law to Humanity through Time and Space. Interrogate the traditions of Humanity, which is the Council of your brother men, not in the restricted circle of an age or sect, but in all ages, and in a majority of mankind past and present. Whensoever that consent of humanity corresponds with the teachings of your own conscience, you are certain of the truth, certain of having read one line of the law of God?"