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THE INFLUENCE OF DOGMA
UPON RELIGION.

A REPLY

TO SOME REMARKS MADE IN CONVOCATION
DURING THE DEBATE ON THE ATHANASIAN
CREED, APRIL 24, 1872.

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"Now the axe is laid at the root of the trees."

MATTHEW iii. 10.

DURING the debate on the Athanasian Creed last week in Convocation, one of the speakers is reported to have said, "Dogma and Religion must go together; and the Church cannot unlearn her dogmas." Statements, so plain and concise as this one, are of great value, and bring out in sharp outlines the chief points of contrast between conflicting opinions or principles. We may be thankful to any bishop or priest for coming forward in this way and throwing down the gauntlet for us to take up. The sooner that both sides in this great dispute between authority and individual freedom see the real issue which is at stake, the less time will be wasted in endless petty discussions about particular doctrines.

I therefore take up the challenge, and will this morning endeavour to prove that religion and dogma do not necessarily go together; that, if anything, dogma is a hindrance to religion; and that

the cry of "*Non possumus*" is the death-knell of any church.

(1.) Religion and Dogma do not necessarily go together.

Not to mention the Unitarian body, a large portion of whose ministers and laity have no articles and creeds, no written dogmas at all, we will only speak for ourselves. Religion surely means a sense of the being of God, a belief in His goodness which inspires veneration, obedience and love on our part, and a consciousness of our hearts' desire to conform our lives to His holy will. This is not intended to be a definition; but, I think, people of every creed in Christendom will admit that so much at least is included under the term "Religion."

That this devout reverence towards God, this entire confidence in His fidelity, lies absolutely at the very foundation of *our* present movement cannot be gainsaid. Many, it is true, have joined us only because they see the falseness and corruption of the prevailing beliefs; and some few have joined us, not through sympathy with our religion at all, but from sympathy with our principles in the search after truth. But with these exceptions, the rest of that large and influential body who are with us, have undertaken this great work from religious motives; because they love God, and would fain deliver the Christian peoples around them from their unwholesome dread of God, from their gloomy superstitions, and from their degrading and demoralising ideas of the Divine dealings with men.

Does this religion depend on dogma, or does it not? I answer, this religion not only does not depend on dogma, but owes its very existence to the subversion of dogma. It is born out of the instinctive rebellion of our own reasons, consciences, and hearts, against dogmas which we saw to be false, immoral, and cruel. So far from such a religion and dogma going together, speaking for ourselves, they could not exist side by side. Either the dogma would kill the religion, or the religion crush the dogma. We owe all the light and beauty and gladness of our religion to our having been able to renounce the dogmas of orthodoxy, and to our determination never again to be bound by any of them.

And this leads me to say a necessary word or two about the term "dogma." Dogma must not be confounded with *doctrine*. Doctrine is merely a technical term for an opinion, say a formal opinion, and in theology doctrine is therefore a theological formal opinion, the expression of a thought or idea about God, or about our relation to Him. Now it is easy to see that there can be no religion without doctrine, *i.e.*, without some thought or opinion about God; and that every one of us who is religious must have doctrines in his own mind as the basis of his religion. In our case, there is such a general *consensus* of doctrine or opinion as to draw us together, and enable us to worship together, with a very great degree of unanimity, in the words of one book. But nevertheless, each one's doctrine is his own to hold or to change as he pleases, and is held only to

grow wider and deeper in meaning, or to be abandoned for another which has been found to be more true. There must be many shades of doctrine amongst us which, if they ever came to be petrified into dogmas, would explode our society into fragments; but we have a bond of union deeper still than our doctrines, we are bound together mainly and most securely by our principles, by the principles on which we consider that all doctrines should be held. The most important of these is the principle of perfect liberty given and received all round to each one to hold his own, without fear of illegitimate pressure or interference, and above all, without fear of God or hell-fire. Such a bond of union, never before tried so thoroughly, so radically, will, we believe, be found strong and lasting—infinitely better than that delusive uniformity in which all churches have placed their trust.

Doctrines held on such terms of perfect individual liberty, and by each one in the hope of going on learning more and more of religious truth, and of changing the partial truth of to-day for the more complete truth of the morrow; doctrines which are thus being continually brought to the test of reason, and into the clearer light of advancing science, can never be identified with dogmas.

Dogmas are doctrines turned into stone, of which Church walls are built, to shut out the rest of the world, and to imprison those who take shelter behind them. When a doctrine is taken up by a community or Church, signed, sealed, stamped, ratified, and

passed into law, then it becomes a dogma. Dogmatism is the death of deliberate thought, because it is the enforcement of doctrine. It makes little difference whether the doctrine be enforced by Act of Parliament, and its infringement made punishable by pains and penalties, or whether it be urged upon the acceptance of men under threats of God's displeasure, or with bribes of heaven hereafter—if it be enforced at all, it becomes dogma. And one of the most hopeful signs of our times is that the very name of dogma is execrated by the wise, and dreaded by the loving. Dogmas are the stones by which priests and people in all ages have killed their prophets. While it is the very nature of doctrines to be ever changing, dogmas have congealed them in deadly frost. Doctrines are the living thoughts of living men; dogmas are the lifeless forms of thoughts which are dead, curious only as the contents of a long-closed sepulchre. Doctrines have the power of immortal life and ever increasing beauty and variety; dogmas once written down with the iron pen of Church authority on the stone of stumbling and rock of offence, become first ghastly and then grotesque by the ravages of time.

No wonder then that, as doctrine after doctrine died and was buried in the sepulchre of dogma, the collection of thoughts scattered over centuries, but which the dogmas now present for our acceptance *en masse*, should prove to be nothing but a jumble of incoherent and contradictory propositions. The miserable keepers of this museum of ugly relics in

our own times are only still more to be pitied than the unhappy men whose business it was, in the sixteenth century, to build for them a new gallery, and place them in their new niches. Whoever it was who wrote the Thirty-nine Articles began at least with a noble *Te Deum*, simple and grand, the earnest utterance, no doubt, of a heart overflowing with reverence and love. "There is but One living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible." He had only written three lines however, before the religious emotion which had inspired them, fled suddenly away when he was compelled to grope amongst the ashes of the past, and divide the invisible One into three pieces, and then put them together again like a dreadful puzzle.

But his grief and perplexity are not to be compared with the despair of those who have to face all these embalmed relics to-day, and to tell the people in solemn time and place that they are all alive and will live for ever. Can we think without pity of one, who knowing, *e.g.*, what the Athanasian creed contains, is obliged to confess: "The Church cannot unlearn her dogmas." To be placed in such dire and distressing antagonism to the tide of thought in the nineteenth century and in England is far worse than to endure the worst penalties of modern martyrdom. But what will not "Dogma" do? It is backed up by authority. All these mummies of creeds and articles stand and preach

to us the dreary echoes of long-dead thought, they tie our hands, direct our steps, and force words upon our lips. Galvanized by Acts of Parliament, and by the still more coercive authority of a spectral Church, they can make slaves of us as we go, can scare us into submission, if a daring thought should venture to rebel, and can, even to-day, darken our last hours by visions of a fathomless despair. No words of mine can describe their fatal power in such vivid imagery as that of the old Hebrew Psalmist. "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name be the praise, for Thy loving mercy and for Thy truth's sake. Wherefore should the heathen say of us, 'Where is now their God?' As for our God, He is in heaven, He hath done whatsoever pleased Him. But their idols are the work of men's hands. They have mouths and speak not; eyes have they and see not. They have ears and hear not, noses have they and smell not. They have hands and handle not; feet have they and walk not; neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them, and so are all they that put their trust in them."

(2.) And these words bring me to say, in the second place, that dogma is a hindrance to true religion. Think first what is its influence on the preacher.

The enforcement of doctrine, whether by acts of uniformity, by thirty-nine articles, by subscription of clergy, by solemn oath of clerical fraternities, by trust deeds, by inarticulate signs of assent or dis-

sent on the part of pewholders in any Church—directly or indirectly—the imposition of dogma and its practical enforcement on the preacher’s utterance is a mischief indescribably deep and subtle. No arguments can ever justify the anomaly, the absurdity and the cruelty of telling a man who desires to preach the truth, that he must think in a particular groove, and speak in conformity with particular written or unwritten propositions; to be met, at the moment of the discovery of some beautiful idea, by this kind of caution, “It is all very good, but it is not orthodox, you know,” or that “it may be ever so true, but it is not safe,” &c., is to sentence a man to lasting hypocrisy, or to temporal ruin. Besides this, every limit put upon the freedom of his utterance diminishes the value of every statement of his own true conviction, and casts discredit upon whatever he may honestly say. How can you be sure that your preacher in his moments of greatest fervour is not saying what his heart belies, if it be in the power of any of his hearers to turn round upon him and say, “You dare not preach otherwise if you would.” It is therefore for the best interest of all opinions whatsoever, to leave the preacher absolutely unfettered.

But if you have a tongue-tied clergy you must have a hood-winked laity. If you have falsehood in the priest, the people will learn to love falsehood, to prefer the poison of a lie to the nourishment of truth.

But quite apart from this corruption, dogma most

surely hinders religion, both in its essence and expression. Have not hundreds and thousands been thrown into frightful confusion and perplexity by the dogma of the Trinity, not because it was a *doctrine*, but because it was a *dogma*, to be believed under peril of damnation? Have not their hearts sunk within them in trying to master a problem which one moment's free thought would have made them toss aside with ridicule and scorn, but which the awful dread of hell fascinated them to study?

Treated as fanciful speculations, or as modes of expressing theologically some subtle metaphysical abstractions, these old creeds could do but little harm; but as dogmas required to be believed for one's soul's salvation, they have done irreparable mischief to religion, alienated many and many from the very thought of God, driven them for shelter from Him and His awful mysteries to the arms of a comprehensible and kind-hearted man, and have forced the nations of Christendom into an idolatry scarcely less injurious to religion than the paganism which it supplanted. If mankind are really at a hopeless distance from God, and alienated from Him by their ignorance and sin, dogma only adds wofully to their miseries, dogma builds a wall between God and man over which every prodigal son must climb, who would "arise and go to his father." Every step which we take under its guidance is, by the confession of its own priests, full of darkness and danger. Clouds of heaven's wrath are waiting to burst in fury upon

our unfortunate heads, pit-falls beneath our feet lie hidden to entrap us into some shocking Sabellian heresy, or some Homoiousian shade of a deadly Arianism. For this and that and the other dogma, however hopelessly contradictory, "is the Catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved."

Now where is religion all this time, that we have been picking our way over this morass and that desert, and climbing over the walls of dogma to get ourselves saved? To me it looks like the religion of the lowest physical type, if it be religion at all. It is fetichism and not religion. It is the worship of ourselves, not of God; it is devotion to our own safety, not to His blessed will; it is the apotheosis of bribery and corruption. But it is dogma and dogma only that thus debases men. Left to themselves they would be *ashamed* to believe those very creeds which "the Church cannot unlearn." They would hide them away as symptoms of mental and moral disease, lest men should scorn them for their folly or shun them for their madness.

Dogma has, alas! laid its fetters over the very worship of mankind, and forbidden aspiration which it could not sanction, has silenced praises which it did not enjoin. If our thoughts of God rise and expand, our forms of prayer and praise are still petrified and all but lifeless. If we have outgrown those conceptions of the Divine Being, and of the early origin of our race, on which the liturgy was based, we are still tied down by dogma to repeat

the same old weary platitudes, and to utter the same senseless lamentations, which once suited our unhappy forefathers. If we have grown more brotherly towards our fellow-men, under the blessed sunshine of the Father's love to us all, we are still bound, on the Church's highest festivals, to curse all Arians and Unitarians, and all the millions of the Greek Church, with a bitter curse, and to pollute our very praises to the Almighty Father by anathemas against our brethren.

(3.) It does not require much courage to predict the near dissolution of any Church offering such obstructions to true religion, and, moreover, declaring that she "cannot unlearn her own dogmas." Bad as the Church of England may be, we must not believe she is so bad as that, or that any Anglican High Churchman is her spokesman. The Houses of Parliament, and not the Houses of Convocation, have the laws of the Church in their own hands. The Queen, and not Christ or Peter, is the real head of the Church, and so there is some chance of her unlearning her own dogmas. Not merely a chance of unlearning these particular ones, which are now embalmed in the Thirty-nine Articles and Creeds, but a chance of her divorcing herself for ever from all dogmas, and of allowing doctrines to resume their proper place, as the living thoughts of living men, whose goal is the truth, and whom neither terror nor greed can hinder from its pursuit.

Has the past no lesson to teach the dogmatist? What are his own dogmas, and what is the origin of

his own creeds? Were not each and all in turn the heresies of the successive ages in which they first appeared? Did not the dogmas of the dying systems struggle long and manfully against the new opinions, and was not their fall certain only because the new opinions were more true than those which they displaced? Neither priests of Jupiter nor silversmiths at Ephesus could keep *their* petrified dogmas from sinking in the sands of time, and going down into the darkness where all that is dead must finally be laid.

Tell us, ye chief priests and rulers, you will not, you cannot unlearn your dogmas, then we tell you that your day has come and is gone.

The thing that will not grow and keep pace with the march of intellect, that cannot move with the progress of scientific knowledge, nor expand with the enlarging hearts of men who have found a loving God for themselves, that thing, we say, must die, it is dead as soon as it ceases to move onward. Your best, your noblest dogma of all, if it be dogma and no longer living thought, is dead already, and you cannot for long pass off that lifeless corpse for a living man, dress it how you will, and paint its withering parchment with the glowing carmine, prop it up in your busiest thoroughfares, and give it attitudes like the attitudes of the living throng; speak for it too, be the interpreter of its wakeless silence to the ears of men and women who have been scared by its cold fixed gaze; but you will not long succeed in deluding your fellow-men. They

will soon find out that you have been playing upon their childish and groundless fears, that you have been amusing yourself in the twilight at their expense, and they will sweep you and your mummified creeds quickly, and perhaps rudely, out of the pathway of mankind.

If religion itself were worthless, dogma would never give it worth. But if religion still holds its own amongst human hearts, men will find one for themselves which shall best accord with the highest and not with the lowest aspect of their nature, one which can lead them on instead of drawing them back. But one thing they will not do. They will not give up their manly souls to the dictates of the dead, nor suffer themselves to be enslaved by those whom they have once discovered to be the dupes of their own fears, who shamelessly confess that for all time to come, no one among mankind will ever discover any truth about God and man not already known, and that no one will discover any error in the little patch of dogmas round which the Church has built its ugly stone wall. What? errors in Paganism, errors in Judaism, errors in Mahometanism, errors in Brahmanism, errors in Buddhism, but none in Christianity? No, not one!

“The Church cannot unlearn her own dogmas.”

Then the Church is dead. Cover her tenderly, bury her reverently—but pile over her tomb the stumbling blocks of creed and dogma, which she had strewn in our way.