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COMMON SOURCE OF ERROR IN
SEEING AND BELIEVING.

A Lecture

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

SUNDAY LECTURE SOCIETY,

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SYLLABUS.

1. The influence of preconceived idea and of feeling to vitiate observation.

Illustrations :

- a.* Illusions of Sense.
- b.* Hallucinations of Sense.
- c.* Erroneous observation.
- d.* Miracles.

2. The influence of feeling and belief to vitiate reasoning.

- a.* Individuals.
- b.* In communities.

3. The relation of feeling to intellect in the progress of the race.

COMMON SOURCE OF ERROR IN SEEING AND BELIEVING.

I PROPOSE not in this lecture to enumerate and discuss all the mistakes which we are liable to make when we see and draw conclusions from what we see—all the fallacies, that is to say, to which observation and reasoning are exposed; I purpose only to note and illustrate now one very common and prolific source of wrong observation and inference. It is certain we do not see and judge rightly by instinct; too often, although we have eyes, we see not truly, and although we have reason, we use it to come to wrong conclusions. Reason, we know, man claims as his almost exclusive prerogative, defining himself—for he has that advantage over other animals—as pre-eminently the reasoning animal; and one need not cavil at the definition so long as it is not understood to mean that everybody reasons rightly, or even commonly bases his beliefs upon reason. To say of the great majority of persons that they reason at all in the highest sense of the word is to say what is not true, since their opinions are plainly either got by inheritance, or engrafted by education, or moulded by particular life-experiences, or imposed by authority of some kind, and are then worn by them, as they wear their clothes, after the fashion. Governed by their habits of opinion as they are by their habits of life they find it as hard a matter to change the one as to change the other. If all men reasoned truly and adequately on every subject, it is evident that all men would be agreed, which is not quite the case; we should not be meeting here this afternoon to broach opinions which will not be perhaps in harmony with those which have been preached from a thousand pulpits this morning; the heresy of yesterday would not be, as it often is, the common sense of to-day, and the common sense of to-day the nonsense of to-morrow; the majority would not have found it necessary to stone, burn, poison, cut asunder, crucify, or otherwise silence the voices of the few who, in the succession of the ages, have not

failed to appear from time to time to inspire and to raise men to higher planes of thought and duty; the world would have been without the history of its noble army of martyrs of humanity.

This being so, it is a good thing, I think, from time to time to make a particular study of the common errors to which we are liable in observation and thinking, and to take note how far wrong they may carry us. My attention is drawn often and forcibly to this matter, because, in the course of my professional work, I meet with persons who, of sound understanding in respect of all ordinary matters, entertain some extraordinary delusions in respect of one or two subjects, and cannot be convinced of their errors by the plainest evidence and argument. Naturally one asks oneself how it comes to pass that they form and entertain notions which are absurd to the common sense of mankind, holding to them in the face of conclusive disproof, and notwithstanding that they cannot find a single person in the world to agree with them. The vulgar saying is that they have "lost their senses," but it is not so; their senses are in full work, but somehow they fail to perform their proper offices. In seeking the explanations of these remarkable distractions of mind one comes to perceive that, after all, these people have only carried to an extreme pitch, to an insane height, a kind of faulty observation and reasoning which is common enough among persons who are not in the least out of their minds. 'Tis not true perhaps, as is sometimes said, that everybody is a little mad, but it is true that everybody makes day by day the same sort of errors in observation and reasoning as those which lead madmen to their delusions.

I go at once to the heart of what I have to say by laying down the broad proposition that in looking at things a person sees what he believes he sees, not necessarily that which really is: his notion of what he sees may correspond with the reality or not, but in any case he does not see the reality purely; he sees it through the idea or notion which he has of it. Had I been born blind, and were my eyes opened at this moment for the first time to see a human face before me, I should not know it to be such by my sense of sight alone: I know a human face, when I see it, only because of the training in seeing which has been going on ever since I was born, the unceasing, if unconscious, education which I have had. The idea has been organised gradually in my mind—abstract, so to speak, from a multitude of impressions—and when it is stirred into activity by the proper impression made upon sight it instantly interprets that impression, so that I recognise

the object.* If my idea were very active and at the same time did not fit the reality, it might mislead sight, making me mistake the identity of a face which I saw—just as Don Quixote, possessed with his fixed idea of giants and enchanted castles, mistook the sails of a windmill for the arms of a giant—or even, in a more extreme case, making me actually see a face where there was no face at all. You have perhaps seen a person who has been put into what is called the mesmeric state and noticed the extraordinary illusions which he can be made to suffer: the operator bids him take a glass of simple water, assuring him at the same time that it is exceedingly bitter and nasty, and he forthwith spits it out as if it were poison, with every expression of disgust; he is told that a wasp is buzzing about his face and he instantly makes frantic movements to strike it away; he is introduced to a stranger as his mother or sister and he immediately embraces her. There is scarcely a mistake of sense, however extravagant, of which he may not be made the victim if he is duly susceptible and the operator skilful and confident. Now what is it which takes place? This: the idea suggested by the operator becomes so very active in the subject's mind, takes such exclusive possession of it, that all other ideas are inhibited or silenced; they are inactive, in abeyance, asleep, so to speak, unable therefore to comment upon or correct it; accordingly the person sees, hears, or otherwise perceives all impressions through the active idea, which interprets them instantly into the language of its own nature; being the only part of the mind which is then sensible to stimulus and in function, it cannot of necessity reveal anything which it does notice but in terms of itself. The person does not see the real thing but his notion of what the real thing is; and that does not in this case accord with what really is. Here then is an experiment which plainly shows us that an idea in the mind may reach such a pitch of exclusive activity as to put to silence other ideas and to completely befool the senses. It is what happens also to the madman who, having the delusion that he is the victim of a malignant persecution, sees or hears his persecutors pursue or threaten him where no one else can see or hear anything of them.

I now go a step further and note that something of the same sort takes place in dreams. When we are asleep we see nothing

* The common saying that "seeing is believing" may then be applied in a double sense—not alone in the understood sense that we believe by what we see, but also in the sense that we see by what we believe.

outside us; our eyes being shut it is impossible we should; nevertheless we do see very remarkable scenes if we dream, seeing them too as if they were outside us and more vividly perhaps than we do see real things when we are awake. What happens is that the thoughts of the dreamer as they occur to him become instantly visible as sensory presentations; the idea of a thing, so soon as it becomes active, takes form as the sensible object, is translated into the outward reality; the idea of a person, for example, becomes the seen person, the idea of a voice the heard voice. So before the dreamer's eyes as a visible pageant, a scenic show, moves the train of succeeding ideas; it is as if each vague thought which came into the mind as we walked along the street absorbed in reverie was visible as an actual scene; in which case it is plain we should be surrounded by an ideal world which would be the real world to us, while the real world would be faint and shadowy or quite unperceived. Now this happens the more easily in dreams for two reasons—first, because the active idea has for the time almost exclusive possession of the mind, the rest of it being asleep, and, secondly, because the closure of the senses by sleep to all outward things, preventing that distraction of them by other objects which is taking place more or less during waking even in the deepest reverie, leaves them at the mercy of the idea. Here there is another instance where an idea or notion vividly experienced imposes itself upon sense, becomes an actual hallucination.

Take another case: people don't see ghosts nowadays when they go through churchyards by night, as they used often to do in olden times. Why is that? It is because, not believing in ghosts, they do not expect to see them: they have not in their minds the idea of a ghost which may step solemnly forth from behind a tombstone or glide away like a guilty thing ashamed. 'Tis an instance of the excellent philosophy which is never wanting in Shakspeare, that he makes Hamlet see his father's ghost at midnight, when the air is bitterly cold, not a mouse stirring, on the lonely and rocky platform before the castle of Elsinore, after he had been informed in solemnly impressive tones of its previous appearances, when he himself is there in a tremor of expectation to see it, and immediately after Horatio's exclamation "Look, my lord, it comes!"

Again: there is an event which has happened sometimes to dying persons, well fitted to make a solemn and startling impression on those about them. When at the point of death or nearly so, the dying person, gazing intently before him, as if he saw some one there, may pronounce suddenly the name of a long dead

relative, exclaim perhaps "Mother," and soon after expire. Naturally people suppose that the spirit of his dead mother has appeared to him, and are happy to think that he has joined in a better world those who were taken away from him in this world. So they take comfort to themselves when they lose by death one who is near and dear to them in the belief that although he shall not return to them they shall go to him. That may or may not be, but certainly the apparition is not proof of it, since it is no more than one of the hallucinations which a dying person is liable to have; for when he is near death and the failing functions of his brain portend their near impending extinction, wandering thoughts of the far distant past, impressions of childhood perhaps, seemingly long effaced, but never actually effaced, may flicker in the mind and, taking visible form as thoughts take form in dreams, be seen as visions. You will remember that Shakspeare makes Falstaff, when dying in a London tavern after a life of the most gross debauchery, a worn out old libertine, go back in this way to the memories of more innocent days and "babble of green fields."* These broken reversions, as I may call them, are the last ebbing functions of the brain which, as Shakspeare puts it, then

"Doth by the idle comments that it makes
Foretell the ending of mortality."

I might go on to multiply instances of this production of hallucination by idea, since they are to be met with in all quarters. You have heard perhaps that there has lately been an apparition of the Virgin Mary at Father Ignatius's Monastery of Llanthoney Abbey, which was seen first in a meadow by four boys of the Abbey, after that by a brother of the Abbey, and last of all by Father Ignatius himself. This is his account of what he saw:—

"About eight o'clock on Wednesday evening, the 15th inst. (after the last service of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin) we all

* It is very doubtful, however, whether Shakspeare ever wrote what is now the received text. In the first authentic edition (1623) the words were not "a babbled of green fields," but "a table of green fields," which was nonsense. It was changed by an anonymous critic to "a talked of green fields," which Theobald altered into the present reading. Thirty years ago, however, an annotated copy of the edition of 1632 was found, which, among a great number of corrections of the text, substituted for "a table of green fields," the words "on a table of green frieze"—*i.e.*, "His nose was as sharp as a pen on a table of green frieze." Dr. Newman makes use of these discrepancies for the purposes of his argument in *Grammar of Assent* (p. 265), and it is from him that I quote them.

came to the porch door. I held the processional crucifix. With me were the brothers, Mr. Rouse, and a gentleman from Oxford who had visited the Monastery for the purpose of endeavouring to see the vision. The boys were kneeling in front of us, Sister Janet was kneeling in the meadow. It was a very wet night. We were singing the 'Aves.' We had sung three 'Aves' in honour of the Holy Trinity, and we had just finished a fourth to the Blessed Virgin, when, all of a sudden, when I was not expecting anything of the kind, I saw a tremendous outburst of light from the dark, heavy clouds over the farm building. It seemed to burst right upon the buildings. The light was all in bulging circles. In the very centre of the light there appeared, coming down upon us, a human form. It was a very commanding, stately figure. I could only see sideways. The face was turned towards the bush. I could only see it momentarily, as it were in the 'twinkling of an eye.' But in that moment it stood out so distinctly and startlingly that I am sure that it was darker than the light. Had it been clothed in cloth of silver, or cloth of gold, it might have produced the same effect—the darkness against the light. There was an intense reality about the figure. It was momentary, as I before said, and yet it seemed that it might have been an hour's vision, so intensely real was it. In the majesty of the figure, and in its being dark against the light, it reminded me of Doré's picture, 'The triumph of Christianity over Paganism.' There were flashings of light about the figure. In a moment, as I looked, it vanished. Before it vanished it had appeared as if it would have descended upon the church door or the church roof. I feel sure that it must have been the figure of the Blessed Virgin, because, although I could not discern the dress it wore, I could see that it was fully draped; whereas in the visions which others have seen, when they have seen a male figure, it has always appeared with simply a cloth round the loins, as our Lord is represented in baptism, and at other times. I also feel sure that it was the Virgin, because the figure appeared immediately after we had sung the 'Ave' in her honour. The figure also had its face turned towards the bush, where our Lady had first been seen. I have further confirmation in the fact that about two or three minutes afterwards the Blessed Virgin's figure was seen by the gentleman who was watching with us, and by one of the boys, nearer to the ground."*

* *South Wales Daily News*, September 13th and 27th, 1880.

"These," he says, "are extraordinary and absolute facts. The sceptic may and will scoff, but his scoffing will not explain or diminish the truth or supernatural character of these absolute and incontrovertible facts * * * No amount of contradiction, ridicule, or unbelief can alter the fact that Monday, August 30th, 1880, between the hours of 9 and 11 a.m., *the Blessed Virgin appeared in dazzling light to four boys and did what no earthly being could do before their eyes.*" With such positive and incontrovertible testimony of eye-witnesses, are you of so little faith as to doubt that the Blessed Virgin appeared? Probably you have great doubts, as I have; and perhaps I may venture to think that I shall carry your sympathetic doubts with me in my sceptical interpretation of another vivid vision of an apparition in circumstances particularly favourable to its occurrence.

The vision in this case happened to a woman whom we may believe to have been predisposed in some measure to hallucination, since we are told of her that she had once had seven devils cast out of her; a story which, in modern scientific interpretation, means that she had once been insane and had recovered. In all likelihood, therefore, she was one of those persons, susceptible or sensitive, as mesmerists call them, whose unstably balanced nerve-centres were easily liable to take on that sort of irregular action which issues in hallucination and delusion. The woman I refer to is Mary Magdalene, who visited the sepulchre of Christ on the third day after His burial, and who, according to the gospel of St. John, saw two angels in white sitting, the one at the head and the other at the feet where the body of Jesus had lain. I say according to John, because the stories of the resurrection told by the writers of the different gospels differ considerably in details; amongst other things, not agreeing as to whether there was one angel or whether there were two angels, or as to the persons who saw the apparition or apparitions. Discrepancies in the stories of supernatural phenomena are not of course to be wondered at; they are the natural results of an inspiration more than natural pouring itself into natural channels. Those, however, whose understandings are informed by observation and experience of nature, not by inspiration from outside nature, may suspect perhaps that Mary Magdalene, having an excitable brain, was the victim of a hallucination. She ran to the sepulchre in hot excitement, eagerly expectant to see something extraordinary, and she saw something extraordinary: a flitting impression on sight, probably the "linen clothes lying there, and the napkin that was

about the head not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself," suggested two angels, and the ideas of the angels so suggested took visible form, dominating the sense, just as the gleaming whiteness of a tombstone suggesting the idea of a ghost to the walker through a churchyard by night was transformed instantly into a ghost.

This dominion of the idea over the senses, which has its consummate effect in the production of hallucination, is really the most fruitful source of error and defect in common observation, an ever active, and never to be neglected, cause of fallacy. Men see not the reality purely, but see it in the coloured light of the notions which they have of it. Hence no two persons see an event exactly alike; two witnesses go into the witness-box and give widely different accounts of the same transaction at which they were present together; two newspaper reporters, of different politics, believing themselves sincere and truthful, send home to their respective employers nearly opposite accounts of the same occurrences; in each case there is the individual mind behind the eye. Has any one got a belief, no matter how he got it—whether through his understanding, as he flatters himself he gets all his beliefs, or through his feelings, as he actually gets most of them—his mind yields willing access to all facts which are in keeping with it, and very unwilling access to any fact which does not consist with it, insomuch that the belief comes to determine much of what he sees, to govern his actual observation of things. The stronger, moreover, the feeling associated with a preconceived idea or belief, the more completely does it rule sense and vitiate observation. What infatuated lover ever fails to see "Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt?" What excited onlooker at a spectacle of horror could ever give an accurate account of it? At one time it was a firmly-rooted superstition that the wounds on the body of a murdered person would bleed afresh when the murderer was made to touch the corpse, and witnesses testified frequently to having seen that happen. Two respectable clergymen, for example, swore at a trial in the time of Charles I. (1628-9) that the body having been taken out of the grave and laid on the grass, thirty days after death, and one of the parties accused of murder required to touch it, "the brain of the dead began to have a dew or gentle sweat arise on it, which increased by degrees till the sweat ran down in drops on the face; the brow turned to a lively flesh-colour, and the deceased opened one of her eyes and shut it again; and this opening of the eye was done three several times; she likewise thrust out the ring,

or marriage finger, three times, and pulled it in again; and the finger dropped blood from it on the grass." Here was evidence against the accused which, if true, must have convinced even him that he ought to be hanged. Of course, it was not true; the witnesses, however, were not wilfully or wittingly deceiving, they were themselves deceived; they saw not the real thing, but the imagination of what the real thing was. One may be permitted to judge, by this example, of the value of the unsifted testimony of the believer who has seen a miracle. 'Tis not that he has really seen a miracle, but that he has made a miracle of what he has mis-seen.

It may be urged perhaps in respect of miracles that it is extremely improbable, if not impossible, that several persons attesting them could be deceived in the same way at the same time. On the contrary, nothing more easy in certain circumstances: a great wave of emotion passing through a number of people, as emotion does pass by the quick infection of sympathy, will carry belief with it and make them see and testify to a quite impossible occurrence. Hence miracles have always abounded where there was a great fever of religious enthusiasm. The greater the heat of feeling the less the coolness of observation and the more plentiful the miracles. Nay, it needs not much heat of feeling to see a miracle if a number of persons be collected together intently expecting to see something extraordinary happen: the ghost seldom fails to appear where the spectators are gathered together to see it. Every religion has had its miracles and its multitudinous witnesses to them. We do not believe it any the more on that account; we ought indeed to believe it rather the less, since the miracle is presumption, if not proof, of bad observation by the witnesses. The lowest religion will have the most miracles, a higher religion will have few of them, and the highest of all will probably have none at all. What we may fairly conclude from the testimony of hot believers is that, by reason of their strong belief, they were not witnesses to be depended upon, as observers. The interest of miracles at this day, I take it, is not that which could attach to an occurrence out of the fixed order of nature, but that which attaches to the study of the defective, irregular, or actually morbid action of the human brain, especially under conditions of unusual excitement; it is not whether the body of a dead man which had lain in the grave until it had begun to putrefy came to life again, but why people thought and said so. When the belief in miracles has become extinct they will be received by psychology into its domain

and they will be of lasting interest there. Indeed, it will be a most instructive study of the future to elucidate and set forth the exact relations of beliefs in supernatural phenomena to defective or morbid functions of the brain. Supernaturalism will take its proper place as an interesting chapter in psychology.

Thus much then with regard to the action which idea may exert upon the senses; an action plainly so strong sometimes as to subdue them into a complete subjection to it. In any case it is almost impossible for one who has a preconceived notion in his mind to help seeing in an event that only which is agreeable to the notion, that which sorts or suits with it. Those who have not thought of this tendency as an active source of fallacy in observation, and realised how deeply, widely, constantly and unconsciously it works are not qualified to weigh the value of testimony; they are like those who should accept without question an assertion that the trees and grass were blue from one who was looking at the country through blue spectacles. To denote, moreover, this action of idea upon sense vaguely as imagination or even as mental carries us no further forward; to rest satisfied there is simply to make a word do duty for a conception; there is neither explanation nor definite meaning in the statement. Whether we like it or not, we shall have to acknowledge, first or last, that the process is at bottom physical, and that we can have no explanation worth thinking about until we find out what the physical basis is. Unhappily we are yet a long way from that discovery; we must be satisfied for the present to figure grossly to ourselves what takes place in the intimate, most delicate and hidden operations of nerve molecules, by the help of conceptions derived from the grosser operations in physics which we can observe and manipulate. When the impression on sense vibrates to the same note as the idea, we may say, it is perceived and intensifies the idea—that is to say, is assimilated mentally; when it does not vibrate in unison with it there is no response, it is not perceived; the active idea responds to the note that is in harmony with it, just as the string of a harp gives back in consonant vibrations its proper note when that note is struck near it.

I proceed now to mark the operation of the same sort of error in the higher region of thought—in reasoning, that is, about what we get from the senses when we have got the facts correctly. Even then we are liable to go all wrong in the opinions or inferences which we form. The predominant bias sways the judgment. Two persons shall have the same facts presented to them, and

shall not differ as to the facts, yet it is notorious that they will, according to the bias of their respective opinions, feelings, interests, differ widely in the conclusions they draw from them, just as two judges will give very unequal sentences for the same kind of offence. How is it that the one sees a conclusion plainly and thinks the other, who does not see it, blinded by prejudice to the most obvious truth? The reason of course is that each looks at the circumstances from his own standpoint, and sees only or mainly that which is in accord with the bias of his mind, overlooking that which is not; he sees vividly the reasons which support his opinion, and which the other sees dimly or not at all; he sees only dimly, or not at all, the reasons which go counter to it, and which the other sees vividly. Now, how would a third person, undertaking to bring these two to the same conclusion, go about to accomplish it? Certainly he would not treat them as purely reasoning beings, and encourage them to go on arguing, by which they would only heat themselves the more, but he would handle each as if he was anything but an exact reasoning being; he would not consider only the truth of what he had to say to him, but would take account of his feelings, principles, prejudices, character, and endeavour to bring this truth into the best relations possible with these predominant lines of disposition, making it pleasing or agreeable—that is to say, able to agree—and so to get it accepted; he would in fact persuade by agreeing more than by convincing, remembering the adage—

“A man convinced against his will
Is of the same opinion still.”

Dealing in this insinuating way with both he brings them gently and skilfully over their difference to the same conclusion, and that the right conclusion if the affair be properly managed. One must have the feelings of a person engaged in favour of reason before he can see reason, must prejudice him in favour of an argument before he can feel the force of it. Is not this a proof how very far man is from being the good reasoning machine which he imagines himself?

There is not a day, not an hour of the day perhaps, in any one's life which does not yield examples of this sort of biased or one-sided perception and reasoning. The moods of the moment notably colour strongly our views of the character or issue of an event, notwithstanding that the dry light of reason ought to demonstrate a plain and certain conclusion. Optimism or pessimism is a matter of temperament, not of reason; life-despair may

be the intellectual expression, and suicide the outcome in act, of deranged organic feeling in a sadly tuned temperament. In that extreme state of morbid depression of mind which we call melancholia the sufferer cannot perceive a ray of hope, a glimmer of comfort anywhere; he sees every undertaking, every scheme, moving towards the same goal of ruin; he can follow the arguments which prove that his fears are groundless, but they produce no effect upon him; they reach his understanding, but they do not touch his gloom-enshrouded heart, and accordingly they "no more avail than breath against the wind." Assuredly we credit ourselves with a great deal larger measure of reason in the formation and change of our beliefs than ever enters into them. On the one hand, strong and convincing argument will sometimes not compel belief; on the other hand, a change will sometimes take place in an individual's belief, while the reasons in favour of it are as strong as ever; as Cardinal Newman has remarked, he does not know how or when the belief has gone, but he finds out some day that it is gone; the perception of the old argument remains, but some change in feeling in himself arising out of condition, age, interests, occupation, &c., has worked a change of belief.

I shall not go on now to give any more illustrations from individual experience, because I am anxious, in the time which remains at my disposal, to point out how this source of error in reasoning infects the belief of whole peoples, and leads them to the most illogical conclusions. Do we not oftentimes see nations swept by epidemics of feeling and belief, good or bad? Have wars been rational undertakings, or have they not been, in nine cases out of ten, the results of insane suspicion and insaner folly? When one looks quietly back at the history of man's thoughts and doings upon earth, considering at the same time his claim to be pre-eminently a reasoning animal, it is impossible to help being amazed at the utterly irrational belief which professedly rational beings have formed and sincerely cherished. More wonder, perhaps, that as they were so irrational as to form and hold them they were ever rational enough to get rid of them. It may be said, no doubt, that as they got better knowledge they abandoned them, but I doubt whether knowledge has nearly so much to do directly with human progress as we are in the easy habit of assuming. It has always been as positive a piece of knowledge as it is now that every one must die—that to be mortal is not to be immortal—and that when a person is dead and buried he does not come to life again; that certainly is as long and sure

an experience as human beings have had, since it dates from the beginning of experience; yet, in spite of that experience, the greater part of those ranking amongst the most civilized and enlightened of the earth, and marking therefore the highest watermark of human progress, solemnly believe at this moment that there have been men who have not died, and others who, after being dead, have come to life again. And at great expense, and through many perils, they send missionaries into all parts of the earth to teach that wisdom to those whose sad ignorance of it they compassionate. The very creed of the Christian is that the God whom he worships became a man, was crucified on the cross, died and was buried, and on the third day rose again and ascended into heaven. That is a matter of solemn belief, but can we truly say that it is a matter of rational knowledge? Looked at in the dry light of the understanding, we must admit that there could not well be a doctrine more improbable, more revolting to reason. How it strikes the unbiassed minds of those who have not been trained from youth upwards to accept it we know by the experience of the Jesuit missionaries in China, who found the dogma of a crucified God so great an obstacle in the way of conversions that they quietly suppressed it; they preached Jesus Christ triumphant, not Jesus Christ crucified. It is beyond question then that there is in man a power deeper and stronger than knowledge which decides in some cases what he shall believe, and that the most complete contradiction of observation and reason which it is possible to conceive can be accepted as a solemn truth, if it be in harmony with the prevailing tone or feeling of mind. Thereupon all the powers of the understanding are brought into play, not to prove it by a searching trial of its worth, but in order to find out reasons why it should be believed. Meanwhile, all the reasons in the world against it will not seriously touch it so long as there is no fundamental change of feeling; when that takes place, however, the whole fabric of belief tumbles easily to pieces without any serious assault being made upon it. So far from rational improbability being a difficulty to theological faith, the greater the mystery the greater the faith of the true believer, until he reaches the logical climax of sublime credulity in the acceptance of Tertullian's maxim—*Credo quia impossibile est*, I believe it because it is impossible.

Look back for a moment at the beginnings of Christianity. How little had knowledge to do with its origin and progress! It was born of the heart, not of the understanding of mankind, in the

stable not in the Academy or the Lyceum. The great and learned of that time looked down on it with scorn as a pernicious superstition, and it found acceptance among the poor and ignorant, the publicans and sinners.* Let us note well the meaning of that: the greatest revolutionary—or rather evolutionary—force which has moved human society was not the product of the intellect, but was an outcome of a glowing feeling of the universal brotherhood of mankind; a feeling so deep and strong and true that it has inspired and kept alive to this day many beliefs which outrage the understanding. Can we believe then that the next great revolutionary force which shall move society afresh will spring from the understanding and be governed by its rules? It needs little reflection, I think, to show that a great social reform will never come from a Senate or a House of Lords or other sort of upper chamber, however cultivated and benevolent its members. No; the impulse will come deep out of the heart of the people, announcing itself many times beforehand no doubt in blind yearnings, in wild explosions of social discontent, perhaps in reckless uprisings of turbulence and violence, a great unreflecting force, which it should be the function of intelligence to guide in the right way. You may stop a revolution which has been hatched in the intellect, by cutting off the heads of the few who have knowledge; you will never stop a revolution which has been bred in the heart of the people by cutting off their heads. Instead of denouncing wildly the social interest and visionary aspirations which find outlets in communistic, socialistic, nihilistic, and similar doctrines and disorders, it would be more wise to try to understand their meaning; since it may be they are the blind,

* "It is profitable to remind ourselves," says Dr. Newman, "that our Lord Himself was a sort of smith, and made ploughs and cattle-yokes. Four Apostles were fishermen, one a petty-tax collector, two husbandmen, one is said to have been a coachman, and another a market gardener." Peter and John are spoken of as "illiterate men and of the lower sort." Their converts were of the same rank. They are, says Celsus, "weavers, shoemakers, fullers, illiterate clowns." "Fools, low-born fellows," says Trypho. "Men collected from the lowest dregs of the people; ignorant, credulous women;" "unpolished, boors, illiterate, ignorant even of the sordid arts of life; they do not understand civil matters, how can they understand divine?" says Cœcilius. "They deceive women, servants and slaves," says Julian. The Fathers themselves give similar testimony as to their brethren. "Ignorant men, mechanics, and old women," says Athanasius. "They are gathered," says Jerome, "not from the Academy or the Lyceum, but from the low populace." Of meaner sort and more despised than the Communists of Paris; and yet they overturned the world!

instinctive, dimly prophetic impulses of a truth which, coming from the suffering and brooding heart of society, lies deeper than knowledge and which knowledge will one day have to reckon with. No man's intellect measures his character; from the unfathomed depths of his being comes not only that which he shall feel and do but in great measure also that which he shall think. So it is with humanity as a whole. It is feeling which inspires and stirs its great pulses, the intellect fashioning the moulds into which the feeling shall flow. How momentously important then that the people should have understanding, should learn knowledge, so that neither craft of superstition, nor craft of ruler, nor any other craft may again take possession of its forces and turn them to its profit!

We are so comfortably confident of the stability of our progress in these days that we do not give the heed we should to the lessons of the past and consider seriously, as we might well do from time to time, to what destructive issues uninstructed popular feeling may one day carry us. There can be little doubt that each of the mighty nations of the past believed that its kingdom would endure and that it was impossible its gains should ever be lost to mankind. But Rome, and Greece, and Egypt are now but the shadows of great names, and the once powerful Empires of the East have disappeared so completely that even the places where their mighty cities stood are hardly known. We may be sure that there were sagacious men in each of these dead nations who foresaw the end, perceived the causes that were leading straight to it, and raised their unregarded voices in warning to the people. But it is the eternal fate of Cassandra to be unheeded. In vain are the most obvious truths preached to a people possessed by an impulse of feeling with which they are not in harmony; the nation which is declining to its fall is as deaf to the admonitions of the few thoughtful men who perceive and try to stay its course of folly as it is blind to the plainest lessons of its own experience; elementary principles of morality and the commonest maxims of prudence go down alike before the current of feeling, and the audacious charlatan who most cleverly flatters, fans, and directs its sentiments is acclaimed and obeyed as a hero. This has always been so, and it would be taking much too hopeful a view of human nature to believe that it will not be so again. In spite of all the gains of modern knowledge, which we think so certain, but which, after all, are the real work and possession of only a few, it is not at all out of the range of possible occurrence that a

great turbid wave of superstition may overflow and overwhelm our civilization, as other civilizations have been overwhelmed before it. Do you think perhaps that the foundations of modern knowledge are laid so deep and sure that it is incredible that they should ever be swept away? Well, it is a very sanguine belief: one might have thought it as sure a truth as could well be that a person once dead will not come to life again, but while multitudes believe the opposite of that very plain experience, are the foundations of belief so very sure? Men are not moved by knowledge, let me say again, but by feeling, and were a strong wave of superstitious feeling to pass through them they would see and believe nothing that was not in harmony with it, would see and believe everything that was in harmony with it, would move on, until it was spent, a huge devastating force, so far as pure reason was concerned.

There is something too much of complacent self-deception in the loud praise which we give to pure truth and in the high-flown devotion which we loudly profess to it; we make up by our theoretical enthusiasm for it for much practical dislike and intolerance of it. Truth is not so acceptable as illusion, since we live in perpetual illusion, deceived and deceiving. We seem what we are not, and make others believe that we think them what they are not. No one speaks the truth sincerely to another, or talks of him in his presence as he does in his absence. There is no one who would not think himself grossly insulted if he had truth told of him, nor would any one who adopted the practice of speaking the truth always find it easy to keep himself out of an asylum. We hate the speaker of truth, although the truth which hurts our self-love may be most useful to us; and love the flatterer, although we know the flattery to be false and injurious. The ardent profession which we make of a love of pure truth is itself a comfortable illusion which we create for ourselves. From cradle to grave we are occupied—wisely, I dare say—in nursing our illusions, putting away one, when we have worn it out, to take up another more fitting the new desires which experience and years give us. If a person really believed at the outset of life, as he knows at the end of it, that all is vanity and vexation of spirit, would he have sufficient motive to live? Had there been no illusory prospect of Elysian fields, or happy hunting grounds, or other sort of paradise beyond the miseries of this world, where those who had suffered much and unjustly here might hope to find recompense, one may doubt almost whether faith in virtue could have been kept alive, whether

the social organism would have held together; at any rate, thousands of dreary lives would have been more dreary than they were, thousands of self-sacrifices of work, of wealth, of duty, would never have been made, the hopes, aspirations, and prayers which have consoled and sustained thousands of heavy-laden hearts would not have been. What then will be the consequence if science, as it seems to threaten, shatters these hopes as illusions? Will the multitude be able to bear the pain, to face the fearful void, of so great a loss? Will man be able to live what the Bishop of Peterborough has described lately as "a joyless existence, uncheered by the hope of a happier hereafter, undignified by the consciousness of divine descent and the heirship of immortality," if science makes him sincerely realise, as it seems to be going to work to do, that he has no hope whatever of a happier hereafter, that his descent is not divine but simian, that his last heirship is the corruption of the grave? Will not the bereaved people, craving for something to satisfy the needs of the heart which knowledge cannot give, fly for refuge in despair to some creed or church in which they may find again the hopes, and consolation, and support of which they have been robbed?

Here lies the strength of the position of the Church of Rome. Possessing an organization the most complete which the world has ever known, served by its ministers with a devotion which counts nothing gain that is not its gain, inspired with the theory that the meanest human soul is worthy of all its energies, it offers what seems a safe haven of refuge in the midst of the surging turmoil of doubts, perplexities, and despair, the perfect rest of absolute truth delivered into its keeping from the beginning: Come unto me, might be its cry, all ye that are weary of spirit, with many doubts and heavy-laden of heart with the burden of your fears, and I will give you rest.* It is admirably adapted by its organi-

* "Thus it is sometimes spoken of as a hardship that a Catholic is not allowed to inquire into the truth of his Creed; of course he cannot if he would retain the name of believer. He cannot be both inside and outside of the Church at once. It is merely common sense to tell him that, if he is seeking, he has not found. If seeking includes doubting, and doubting excludes believing, then the Catholic who sets about inquiring thereby declares that he is not a Catholic. He has already lost faith."

J. H. NEWMAN, *Grammar of Assent*, p. 184.

"For, since we have the truth, and truth cannot change, how can we possibly change in our belief, except indeed through our own weakness or fickleness." p. 186.

zation, its ordinances, and its doctrine to respond to all the appeals of the weak side of human nature. And I make no doubt many will flee to it in the coming conflicts. But not of the people, we may predict; not of the masses which constitute the foundation and strength of the social organism. Its converts will come from the tired votaries of fashion, weary of the dreary frivolities of their lives, and eager to replace their exhausted desires by new sentiments; from those who are educated enough to perceive difficulties and perplexities of thought, without being courageous and capable enough to face them sincerely and to think them out thoroughly; from those again who, in the mortal struggle of new thought for existence, have not the strength of understanding and character to stay through the course, but falling by the wayside, eagerly in their need lay hold of the helping hand which authority holds out to them. These and the like are the classes from which its converts will mainly come. The strong pulsations of popular feeling which make themselves felt in different nations, have no affinities with the Church of Rome nor has it shown the least sympathy with them; on the contrary they are essentially hostile to it, since it has committed what seems to an outsider the fatal mistake of allying itself with caste, privilege, power, and of alienating the great liberal forces with which lies the determination of the future: Catholic in name it has lost all claim to be Catholic in fact. It is a rash thing to prophesy, but if I may venture a prophesy here, it is that it will be by these great popular forces, not by the knowledge of the learned, that it will be overthrown in the final struggle. The French Revolution, momentous as an event, was perhaps more momentous as a prophesy.

If what I have said thus far be true, what is the function of those who have faith in the future of mankind, who are sanguine enough to nurse enthusiastic hopes of its glorious destiny? Assuredly to work well together, while it is time, to enlighten the giant, so that when he puts forth his strength he may use it wisely, to give him the understanding to direct his might in the right way. Although intellect does not move the world it should guide directly the forces which do move it, and so modify indirectly, as it will by degrees, the deeper sources in which they take their instinctive origin. One thing is certain whatever else may be doubtful: that the true and honest method to pursue is directly the opposite of that which the Churches have striven to enforce; it is not to inculcate credulity, to stifle doubt, to foster prejudice, in order that the beliefs which are may continue to be. That method we know to be

false. It is to seek truth and pursue it, at whatever cost, whether it bring us sorrow or joy, peace or tribulation. Doubt, be it never so disquieting, must go before enquiry, and enquiry before the discovery of new truth. Scepticism is guilt in the eyes only of those who fear truth, since it is the essential prerequisite of it. It is impossible to foresee what fate the future has in store for the race of man on earth; one may vainly hope a more peaceful and happy career than that which he has had in the past, since to look back through his history from the beginning unto now is to look back through succeeding chapters of wars, treachery, tortures, cruelties and atrocities of all sorts and degrees by which "man's inhumanity to man" has "made countless thousands mourn;" a spectacle of horrors so appalling that, could we compass it in imagination, it might well warrant the belief, if matters ended now, of a malevolent, not a benevolent, scheme of creation. We shall do well to cherish the hope, or if not the hope the illusion, that matters will not end here; that a brighter day will come when knowledge and peace shall spread through the whole earth, and man's humanity to man leave few to mourn; that the past traditions of a golden age, when all was plenty and peace, and the later aspirations for a Paradise to come, in which sorrow and sin shall be no more, may be not entire fable and illusion, but essentially dim forefeelings, the prophetic instincts, of that which one day shall have a measure of fulfilment upon earth.

