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THREE LETTERS

ON

THE VOYSEY JUDGMENT

AND

THE CHRISTIAN EVIDENCE SOCIETY'S LECTURES.

BY

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THREE LETTERS, &c.

SIR,—Many doubtless have read with pleasure the article upon Mr Voysey's trial, which appeared in the *Examiner* of February 25th 1871. Many, too, will echo the ominous words with which it closes: "Every such judgment tells more against the Church than against the individual condemned: it puts another nail into its coffin,"—and in truth the last charge against Mr Voysey (derogation and depraving of Holy Scripture) leaves the clergy in a most perplexing situation. All knew them to be muzzled slaves, and yet hardly thought that the muzzle fitted as closely as the Lord Chancellor is determined to make it. One result I venture to predict from the Voysey judgment—the opening of people's eyes to the immense gulf that now separates the two antagonists, Orthodoxy and Free-thought. Hitherto it has been the object of many well-meaning persons to make this appear less than it really is—as not so very serious after all. However much many have tried to patch up an unreal agreement between them, it is from this moment impossible—henceforth it is "guerra a cuchillo," and there is no discharge in that war, one or other must yield. How many amiable but weak attempts have been made to reconcile Scripture with science, as the phrase is; to shew that the two can go arm in arm without dispute or jostling! Good-bye to all such pleasant dreams! We are now told plainly that the Church's living

to. Can anything be more characteristic of the perversity of our ecclesiastical rulers than the way in which the Ritual Commission has dealt with the Athanasian Creed? Has it granted any relief to the laity who are still compelled to listen and be damned? So far from it, that a dispute has actually been carried on in the *Times* between certain members of the said Commission as to what its real opinion upon the subject was. The same mulish obstinacy meets us at every turn. Not a jot nor a tittle will our rulers surrender. We laugh at the Papal "*non possumus*:" it is just the same here. Relief and concession have to be forced from them. Surely the events that have lately passed before their eyes should act as a warning. Let them think of the French statesman and his vain boast, "*Pas un pouce de notre territoire, pas une pierre de nos forteresses.*"

It is of no use to be for ever beating about the bush—lip salve never yet cured heart-disease; and religious belief in England (as our forefathers understood the words) is paralyzed at the core. The whole question of miracles will have to be faced sooner or later, and the more our minds get accustomed to this fact the better. The present is an era of rapid changes. Events that appeared at one time impossible, now take place in the natural order of things, and the only cause for wonder is that they have been so long in coming. And thus it is that the present is called an infidel age, wanting in reverence and respect for religion. Is it so? Let the great debate upon education bear witness. Did the people ask for education without religion—were they satisfied with merely secular teaching? The immense majority for religious instruction proves to me that we are just as our forefathers—a stubborn generation, not a faithless one: our hold upon religion is as firm as ever. We cling to it with the grasp of death. We are quite as God-fearing as they; but, and here

minds are becoming awakened, their judgments unfettered, their eyes opened, their ears unstopped, and the first use they make of their liberty is to turn upon their spiritual pastors and masters with the direct question, "Are these things so?—we have heard these words for many a long year—from our childhood the same story has been in our ears. We enquire of our fathers—of the years that are past, and all tell the same tale—they have known none other. Is it then all true, 'are these things so?'"

All over the land is this query pricking and stirring men's hearts—diverse in form and mode. One puts it in this shape, another in that. One can stomach this—his fellow stickles at that. The Bible is torn piecemeal. Brave is the man who can swallow the whole at a gulp, and feel none the worse for it—but alas! for this degenerate age—*οἶοι νῦν βρότοι εἰσι*—such hearty digestions are rare indeed.

I remember once sitting upon a fallen log in the backwoods of America, and discussing Bible matters with an old Buckeye (as the Ohio men were then styled) and the only thing that troubled his primitive imagination was the tale of Samson and the foxes—"the darn'd skunks" as he called them—it was impossible—he was sure he himself could never have done it, and he had trapped and hunted ever since he could draw a trigger.

Caricature you will say—no rude image nevertheless of men's thoughts in this present age. Each one has his Samson and the Foxes—his own particular objection, doubt and difficulty, and be sure the day is not far distant when the long pent up murmurs will swell into one loud chorus of dissent, which the clergy and ministers of every denomination will find impossible to stifle, and very hard to answer.

These thoughts passed across my mind upon reading a paragraph in the *Times* of last April 26th, headed "Christianity versus Scepticism," and giving

time for the authorized teachers and expounders of Holy Writ to come down from their lofty pedestals and stem the torrent which is bursting in upon us from so many and such different quarters. Sooth to say—it is none too soon. For the temper of the present age is not to be played with, pooh-poohed, or put aside with the cold remark, “we have heard this before, the Church and the World never did agree, nor ever will.” So much the worse for the Church then—if she cannot lead men, she must give up all thoughts of driving them. If she can return a satisfactory answer to all that is implied in those words, “are these things so,” well and good, if not, she must give place to those that can. Let her look well to her armour and the joints of her harness, for new times bring new weapons, and unless she can forge something very different from aught that her armoury has yet supplied, I fear that perilous days are in store for her. Theologians can no longer shelter themselves behind the ample shield of Bishop Butler, or fly for refuge to Paley and Lardner. Archbishop Thomson himself confesses in the notes to his “Bampton Lectures on the Atonement,” that “the Analogy of Bishop Butler by no means covers all the ground contested at present,” and yet he finds a sufficient defence in the works of the two writers above mentioned. Truly this is going down to Egypt for help, a staff no better than a broken reed. I look upon this fact of Divines turning Lecturers as the greatest compliment that could be paid to the spirit of Free Enquiry which is now abroad. That the missiles with which modern Criticism has for the last thirty years been fighting the great battle of Free Thought should have at last pierced the pachydermatous hide of slumbering orthodoxy; and so stung Prelates and Preachers that for very shame they can no longer keep silence, is indeed a thing to make a note of. And moreover that they should

SINCE last I wrote to you, Sir, the oracle has delivered its response—*Bos locutus est*—eleven doughty champions of orthodoxy have shown us with what vigour they can repel the assaults and stem the tide of infidelity, which, as they assert, is rushing in upon this devoted land ; and after a careful perusal of their several lucubrations, I am bound to confess that the great doings of Dame Partington and her mop have received in them a fresh illustration. Every one knows the story of the starving peasants in France previous to the First Revolution, when their bitter cry for bread reached at last the gilded halls of the Tuileries, and the Queen, amazed at the importunity of the “wordy peoples,” asked naively, why, if they were without bread, did they not eat those dear little buns which her Majesty, and the other grandes dames du Palais found so palatable. Now it seems to me that our hierarchy are pretty much of the Queen’s way of thinking, as I shall show further on. For years past a storm has been brewing in fitful, violent gusts, striking upon the Church’s venerated fabric from every quarter of the compass—doctrine after doctrine challenged—time-honoured traditions assailed and overthrown—old landmarks obliterated—the veil torn ruthlessly from so called mysteries—practices hallowed by the superstitious reverence of past ages stripped of their tinsel covering, brought forth and exposed to the garish light of day—“what was once rejected as heresy now all but recognised as Dogma,” and become the common talk of men, until at last the culminating point is reached in the Voysey case, and our spiritual guides and leaders are forced, *per fas aut nefas*, to confess that silence on their part is no longer becoming ; in fact, impossible.

How many vexed questions, how many perplexed and anxious thoughts have the last ten years awakened in the breasts of men—a restless uneasiness, one knows not why or wherefore, has grown up in

the so-called facts which we have been taught to believe in about the Christian religion, facts indeed, or ecclesiastical fictions? Are we to look upon what we find recorded in the Bible as true in its history, true in all its details as our teachers have always told us? Is the old saying, 'Gospel true,' to pass any longer current amongst men?"

What is the reply? The querists, serious and earnest men (sceptics though they be), are seeking for some solid, wholesome mental food to strengthen and nourish both their hearts and intellects, and, as I said at the beginning of this letter, the Archbishop and his coadjutors when asked for bread, deal out buns instead, and moreover stale buns, of a somewhat puffy and indigestible kind. Let an unprejudiced reader go through these eleven lectures (they should have made up the baker's dozen) and point, if he can, to any doubts dispelled by them, to honest difficulties openly and manfully faced.

A few words shall substantiate this. The lectures are broken up into three groups, the *first* treats of three subjects—Materialism, Pantheism, Positivism; the *second* of science and revelation, and the nature and place of the miraculous testimony to Christianity; group the *third* embraces the following subjects—the gradual development of revelation, the alleged historical difficulties of the Old and New Testament, the mythical theories of Christianity, the evidential value of St Paul's Epistles, Christ's teaching and influence on the world, the completeness and adequacy of the evidences of Christianity. Such is the Bishops' answer, such their mode of dealing with the religious problems of the present day, and I maintain that as controversial writings (it is in this light only that I am viewing them) they are valueless, and worse, they are damaging to the sacred cause which they have been put forth to defend. With one or two exceptions, hardly any of the real difficulties

fathers after the sober fashion of by-gone days, but who can no longer believe all that their ancestors did, or follow them in their blind unquestioning faith, their docile submission to their spiritual pastors and masters. Sad will it be if ever the thought and intelligence of this land revolt from the Church's teaching, as no longer answering to their spiritual needs and aspirations, to that yearning for greater breadth and freedom, that passionate desire for the Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth, which has seized upon so many hearts at the present day, making itself heard in the oft-repeated question, "are these things so?"

Two much mooted points are especially prominent in the controversy we are now engaged in, viz.,—The moral difficulties that are felt in reference to some parts of the Old Testament, and secondly, the authenticity of St John's Gospel, and it is truly ominous to find them both omitted from these Lectures. We are told indeed in the Preface that a Lecturer could not be got for the first, and with regard to the latter, Professor Lightfoot, who had undertaken it, expressed a desire that his Lecture should not be published. Bishop Ellicott speaks of this as most unfortunate and regrettable—*hiatus valde deflendus*—and well he may, for after the great question of miracles there is none of such grave import as this of the Fourth Gospel. Considering how much depends upon it, one is struck with wonder at the cool audacity which professes to meet its adversaries in fair and open combat, and then shrinks from the very trial that would most have put its manhood to the test. What must the outside world think of such a proceeding? What is this, but giving great occasion to the enemies of the Truth to blaspheme? Of the whole eleven Lectures, there are only three that can be said to deal with the special difficulties of our day, viz:—The

words; but the Professor has no such fear, and he certainly manages to make a very small argument go a long way. How far this dialectical skill would avail against an unbeliever in the fact of the Resurrection appears somewhat doubtful. I would ask any impartial reader of this Lecture whether he has got out of it all that the writer thinks he has put therein. The most that can be said is that St Paul believed in the Resurrection, and fortifies that belief by recounting the other traditional appearances of our Lord, which were current in the church at his day. We now come to the Lecture which has the most direct bearing upon the chief stumbling block of our age, viz:—the question of miracles. Years ago M. Guizot maintained it as a special difficulty of Religion, to get people to believe in the supernatural. And this spirit of incredulity, like an avalanche set in motion, gathers force and intensity with each succeeding year. A singular instance of this has just presented itself in the case of Dr Kalisch, the well known Biblical expositor.

In his elaborate Commentary upon the Pentateuch (of which the first volume, containing the Book of Exodus, appeared in 1855) he describes the Plagues of Egypt as based upon natural circumstances, adding that "their miraculous character is unmistakeably observable in the following points," which he then proceeds to enumerate. Whereas, in the first part of his Commentary on Leviticus (lately published) in the chapter on "The Theology of the Past and the Future," he says plainly, "Miracles are both impossible and incredible—impossible because against the established laws of the universe, and incredible because those set forth by tradition, are palpable inventions of unhistoric times." Which now is Philip drunk, and which Philip sober here? But to proceed with Dr Stoughton's Lecture on the Nature and

Testament subserve a moral end or purpose; or he knew how impossible it now is to get people to believe in the ark's capability for holding a pair of all living creatures, the standing still of the sun, or its going backward on the dial—in Balaam's ass or Jonah's whale—in the death of twenty-seven thousand people at once by the sudden fall of a wall—or in that most stupendous miracle of the Old Testament, the recovery to life of the dead Moabite when his body touched the bones of Elisha.

Whatever be his reason, the love of simplicity or what not, this shirking of the most difficult part of his argument tells strongly against him; it is no proof of faith in a cause, to keep half of it in the dark, and every one feels that the whole Book must stand or fall together. But as Dr Stoughton well knows, one thing and one thing only, could make men accept the whole of the Bible as strictly and perfectly true, viz., the belief in its Infallible Inspiration. So long were its pages beyond the breath of cavil, none dared to raise his voice or stretch forth his hand against the sacred ark of God's truth. But this incubus once removed, this bugbear of literal interpretation taken out of the way, and henceforth men were free to make diligent and honest inquiry into the truth of what they read in the Bible, and the first fruits of this freedom we are now reaping in England.

One thing we may thank the Bishops for, the generous and kindly spirit in which they regard the scepticism of the present day; neither is this as easy a matter as one might think it. Call to mind the flood of abuse which theologians have been too prone to heap upon an opponent; their ferocious hatred of everything that bore the name of Free-thought; the determination to find therein* "a set and system of opinions, the most slavish, the most abject and base,

* Bentley's *Phileleutherus Lipsiensis*, p. 4.



