

W. J. Dawson in the Wesleyan Methodist Magazine  
for Jan. 1883

35608  
THE INTOLERANCE OF HETERODOXY, AND THE  
NARROWNESS OF LATITUDINARIANISM.

A RECENT article in this Magazine directed attention to the remarkable mutilations to which many well-known Christian hymns had been subjected, in order that they might find acceptance with the congregation worshipping at Bedford Chapel, under the leadership of the Rev. Stopford Brooke. It must have occasioned surprise and mortification in many quarters, and especially in quarters where Mr. Brooke was known simply as a competent critic and able literary man, to follow the pastor of Bedford Chapel in his crusade of slaughter against the hymnology of Christendom. We had a right to expect at least that the laws of good taste would not be violated by a public teacher whose writings bear every sign of a refined and cultivated mind. If certain hymns were unsuited to the new requirements of the congregation worshipping at Bedford Chapel, it surely would have been the fairer course frankly to pass them by in the compilation of the new collection. Such a hymn-book might possibly have formed a very thin volume, but it would have had an unity of its own. The inevitable problem arising from such a circumstance is briefly this: What can be the nature of that intellectual change whose first result, in the mere sphere of literature, is that a master of criticism sins flagrantly against the laws of criticism, and a teacher of the broadest tolerance publishes a book of hymns which, from one point of view at least, may be considered as masterly a specimen of intolerance as hymnology possesses?

The publication of a book of *Christian Hymns*, in which every trace of Christ is carefully eliminated by a cultured and accomplished critic, preacher, and biographer, would not however be sufficient in itself to justify the title that stands at the head of this paper. The circumstance is simply suggestive of a line of criticism which it may be profitable to follow out, and the material for that criticism is found in two small volumes, which bear the title of *South-Place Discourses*. South Place, Finsbury, is the locale of the well-known Unitarian chapel with which the eloquent W. J. Fox was for many years connected. His place is now filled by Mr. Moncure D. Conway, who, however, does not call himself a Unitarian. Mr. Conway, too, is a man of fine literary taste; he is well known in the literary circles of London; and his congregation, like Mr. Brooke's, is eclectic in the extreme. Mr. Brooke, however, is a new convert to Unitarianism, while Mr. Conway, as becomes the traditions of South-Place Chapel, is in the van of the new beliefs, and his congregation is composed of the Pharisees of the Pharisees in the 'advanced school' of religious criticism. The order of service adopted at South Place is printed with the sermons, and it presents a curious study. Occasionally passages from the Scriptures are read by way of lesson, but oftener the reading is from

purely secular publications. Thus the readings for a single service are as follows :

‘Declaration of the Minimite Fathers concerning the motion of the Earth.’

‘Personal Experiences of George Coombe.’

‘Professor Clifford on the Publication of Truth.’

In this instance the English Bible is entirely closed. The place of prayer appears to be given up to what is styled a meditation on such subjects as ‘Sociability,’ ‘Little by Little,’ and ‘Absolute Relativity.’ The service of song includes such lines as

‘I slept, and dreamed that life was Beauty,  
I woke, and found that Life was Duty.’

Longfellow’s *Psalm of Life*, and original hymns by A. T. Ellis, F.R.S. etc., whose discourses are printed together with Mr. Conway’s, and of whose genius for hymnology the following is a specimen :

‘None has learned, and none can tell  
When Death flits from each to all,  
And Life fails upon our ball,  
Where or whither it shall dwell.

‘This the darkness I have past,  
Darkness haunted still with dreams,  
Dread surmises, doubting screams,  
Souls staked madly on a cast.’

By way of ‘Dismissal,’ after the singing of this hymn, the congregation is invited to enter upon a somewhat analytical explanation of its scope and meaning: and we cannot doubt that it needs it. ‘Doubting screams’ is in itself a phrase so daring and original, that it alone might well absorb the entire time devoted to explanation.

But the nature of this programme of worship provokes more than a mere sensation of curiosity; we cannot but ask, Is this, after all, any intellectual advance upon the ordinary manner of worship among the orthodox? We have a right to press the question, because the assumption which underlies each of the five discourses by Mr. Ellis, and the ten by Mr. Conway, is that of complete contempt for orthodox modes and manners. When we are rebuked for our fanatical regard for the ancient customs of universal Christendom; when the prayers of the Litany, for example, are held up for scornful vivisection; when the intellectual blindness, stubbornness, and prejudice of believers are made matter for repeated ironical compliment, it is only natural that we should seek instruction from our critics, and narrowly observe the methods of our adversaries. Mr. Conway tells us that ‘the Isle of England rises from the night, its awakened eye holding the Apocalypse of Man.’ He firmly believes that the party he leads is in

the van of true progress, that already it has possessed itself of the 'shining summits' of the future, and that the world, as it grows in enlightenment, must needs follow. Is, then, the manner of service here described the best that he can offer for the future worshippers? Mr. Conway's opinions on the doctrine of inspiration may be widely divergent from ours, but surely, the sublimest sacred Book the world possesses, is scarcely treated with common fairness when, in three services out of five, it is not so much as opened. Interesting as the 'Declaration of the Minimize Fathers concerning the Motion of the Earth' may be, we cannot help thinking that the Sermon on the Mount, or even certain passages of Old Testament poetry, might afford infinitely higher *intellectual*, as well as moral, stimulus and comfort; and the 'Experiences of George Coombe' must be poor reading as a substitute for the experiences of the Apostle Paul. *The Litany* may be offensive to those who are freed from the 'superstition' of prayer, for which 'Meditation' is made not the incitement but the substitute; but what sort of substitute is a quarter of an hour's 'Meditation' on *Absolute Relativity*? The hymns of Wesley, one of which is quoted by Mr. Conway in support of an even more than usually unfair and distorted criticism, may have literary demerits as well as literary merits which are sufficiently well established, and are fairly open to criticism in common with all hymns; but what shall we say of such a hymn as that already quoted, with its 'doubting screams'?

Can a more doleful caricature of the holy cheerfulness of a Christian Sabbath-day's service be painted, than the picture of a congregation rising after a 'Meditation' on 'Absolute Relativity,' to sing such a verse as this:

'None has learned, and none can tell,  
How Life burst upon our ball,  
Whence, diffused to each through all,  
Thought upon the Wanderer fell?'

Even when a somewhat more cheerful lyric is announced, whose first lines run:

"Go, my child," thus saith the Highest,  
"Warning, cheering, day by day,"

we are carefully informed in a foot-note that 'the Highest' does not mean the Most High God; but is meant to signify merely 'earthly being. Humanity, speaking by the mouth, and loving with the heart of the wise and good, at all times and in all places.' What can be the reason of this evident uneasiness lest the name of God by any accident should slip into a hymn meant for *Divine* worship! Is there any other solution of this strange phenomenon, except the terrible hypothesis that the leaders of what they choose to term 'Rational Religion' in South Place, do 'not like to retain God in their knowledge'? Yet Mr. Conway is, avowedly, not an atheist; and if we may judge of his creed by the ten sermons before us, he is still less a Positivist. If God be worshipped at South Place, why is it necessary to explain that one of the titles by which we know God really means nothing

of the sort, but some vague abstraction of Humanity? If the minister and congregation of South Place are really inspired with the sublime belief that they are in the 'foremost files of time;' that they are emancipated from superstitions that hold half the world in night; that they are sure of victorious recognition by the future generations for whom they are heroic pioneers,—how is it such exalted sentiment finds expression in no more hopeful hymnology than such doubtful hymns and anthems as we have quoted, one of them carefully fenced and purged from all suspicion of God, and another dreary enough to have been sung in the awful black-draped cathedral of James Thomson's ghastly dream, where the preacher is an atheist, and the text is *Suicide*? There is a certain brilliance of rhetoric and paradox about the utterances of the South-Place pulpit: but surely, after all, that creed must be cursed with intellectual and spiritual sterility that has such scanty power of inspiration for sentiment and emotion.

It is in this and similar matters that we see what we have ventured to call the intolerance of heterodoxy. The process of heterodoxy is essentially *narrowing*. It pretends to extreme 'breadth;' in reality it is extreme narrowness. The fascination that heterodoxy has for the unwary is that it offers magnificent promises of emancipation from vulgar prejudices; it assumes that orthodoxy must needs imply a fettered intellect; that to live in the light of the faith of Christendom is really to live in spiritual darkness; that, indeed, orthodoxy must needs mean intellectual imbecility, or intellectual prostitution: while heterodoxy is the proud stronghold of gigantic minds who have achieved a great deliverance and entered on a glorious liberty. All this is absurd assumption, but it serves its purpose. This is one-half of the programme, and it effectually appeals to human vanity and pride. The other half describes heterodoxy as the higher spirituality; as the purer and loftier worship, freed from vain and polluting traditions. And it is this portion of the programme that seduces some higher natures— young men of more than common earnestness of thought, through their very earnestness; devout natures, through their very devoutness; though never even in these rare cases without some side-appeal to the intellectual pride that loves to have its own way, even though it must emigrate to a desert in order to secure it. But where is the breadth and charity of view that heterodoxy promises? It passes from its criticism of the Bible to its degradation. In its effort to avoid the habits of worship sanctioned and sanctified by centuries of devotion, it closes a Book which even Free-thinkers have valued as a source of priceless instruction, or it varies the words of the 'Fourth Gospel' with the 'Experiences of George Coombe.' In its fear lest it should approach too nearly to the dangerous phraseology of orthodox hymnology, it hastens to explain away its hymns, and to assure us that though the Scripture term for God is used, yet nothing of the kind is meant. Is this breadth or is it narrowness? Does it not appear as if the spirit of denial, once admitted into the temple, closes window after window

to the light, until but one outlook is left—the narrow aperture of solitary dogmatism? Stripped of the false romance that usually attaches itself to intellectual adventure, what fascination is there in such a position of isolated denial? And whether is the more tolerable, the bondage of this individual dogmatism which walks in fear of itself, or the wholesome restraints which are no more than the landmarks of guidance which experience has set up?

This process of contraction and distortion in the intellectual outlook is strikingly illustrated in some portions of the fifteen discourses that contain the views of Mr. Conway and Mr. Ellis. Mr. Conway in his fifth discourse dwells very strikingly upon what he terms the ‘morality of the intellect.’ He says that there may be and is such a thing as intellectual immorality: ‘To believe a proposition aside from its truth, to believe it merely because of some advantage, becomes intellectual prostitution. The purity of the mind is bargained away.’ In this we heartily agree, and we do not for a moment suppose that Mr. Conway and his followers have fallen into the sin he so forcefully repudiates. But it seems to us that the code of intellectual morality includes many things not covered by the definition of Mr. Conway. It includes *fairness of thought*, and soberness and perfect integrity of judgment. It commands that the balances be held evenly, that judgment shall be in strict accordance with facts, and that the verdict should be received and recorded, even though it be adverse to the claim of the most favourite theory. And it seems to us, upon full and honest examination, that the ‘higher culture’ of the advanced school has only resulted in the flagrant violation of each of these laws; that its awards are partial, its views one-sided, and its judgments of others chiefly distinguished by wilful distortion and misapprehension. And this is all the more remarkable because it is the work of trained thinkers, of scholars and gentlemen, from whom we should at least expect that the intellect would be free from warp, whatever the deranging bias of the creed.

But as mere matter of human experience, it must be noted that the creed a man holds is really the lever of his actions, and a greater thinker than Mr. Conway—Goethe—has remarked that ‘everything depends on what principle a man embraces; for both his theory and practice will be found in accordance therewith.’ Probably the critics of South Place would vehemently dispute this axiom, for the uselessness of creeds is a favourite subject for derision, and Mr. Conway has announced that Theology—which is the scientific statement of creed—‘is the great enemy of Religion.’ But so many things are disputed, and so wilfully, with so great a lack of intellectual conscientiousness, that this passes for a very small matter. Thus the most striking discourse of Mr. Ellis—*The Dyer’s Hand*—contains a contemptuous attack on Paley’s argument of design, on this ground,—that to design is not to invent; that the maker of a watch invents nothing; he discovers natural laws and properties, and in making his chronometer he is, simply a designer.

'So then (says Mr. Ellis) all that man does with his materials is to put them together. And we say that grand abstraction, "Nature," does the rest. Now if we apply this to God, we see that some other god must have made the materials, and their laws, and the laws of their connection, and that He merely puts them together. What a degrading conception! The great God, the expression of utter boundlessness, a piecer of other gods' goods! Shame on man that he ever inculcated such a doctrine. Shame on those natural theologians who would found our very reason for believing in the existence of a God on such transparent fallacies, which can be knocked down like nine-pins by the first bowl of a cunning atheist!'

But we ask, who ever did inculcate such 'a degrading conception'? Who but Mr. Ellis ever conceived it? Does Mr. Ellis suppose that Paley represents God as only 'the *piecer* of other gods' goods'; or does he really imagine that this conception of the argument of design, upon which he wastes so much indignation, is one of the stupid follies of orthodox belief? It needs no very '*cunning* atheist' to bowl down such a conception; but any candid atheist of average ability will see at a glance that the nine-pins he knocks down so easily are set up by Mr. Ellis himself, and not by Dr. Paley. We are well aware that *one* of the meanings of the Latin word *designo*, and *one* of the meanings of the English word *design*, is: 'to mark out, to trace out;'; but who does not also know that the Latin word also means 'to contrive'; and that language is largely determined by usage, and very frequently departs more or less in that process from what was originally its most prominent meaning? The average mind understands with perfect clearness what Paley means by the term 'design,' and the dictionary is clear enough. The argument to which Mr. Ellis applies the term 'preposterous nonsense,' is certainly not Paley's, but Mr. Ellis's own quibbling caricature of Paley's; and Mr. Ellis's whole position is occupied by taking an unworthy advantage of the fact that one word has often more than one meaning, and by arbitrarily fastening on that word a meaning far different from that which the great reasoner obviously attached to it, in accordance with common usage. Mr. Ellis is welcome to his conception; but it is disingenuous to assume that 'orthodox Christendom' can in any such manner misinterpret the language of a standard English writer who is also a consummate reasoner.

The very same strategy is employed by Mr. Conway in his last discourse on *The Ascension of the Criminal*, in which Methodism is introduced, in the garments of her hymnology, as a witness to the immoralities of orthodoxy. It is a strategy which requires no genius for either its conception or its execution; it creates a false assumption, accredits it to orthodoxy, and then exposes orthodoxy to ridicule for what orthodoxy never said or thought. If it can be made clear that orthodoxy does not hold what her critics so confidently assume and assert that she does, the whole attack, delivered with so much vehemence and passion, is merely a sham-fight contrived for the entertainment of the South-Place congregation.

It is sufficient to quote from this single discourse to prove that the above statement is fully borne out by the facts of the case. Thus Mr. Conway

starts with the proposition that 'religion and morality use totally different weights and measures. The vilest scoundrel to one may be a saint to the other.' The religious instruction provided for the masses teaches them, says he, 'that the supreme rewards of existence are attainable *without reference to life and character*. The voice most authentic to the masses says to them,—In the name of God we declare to you that your thefts, murders, adulteries, cruelties, and general baseness, may be to man of vast importance; but to God the one question is, Do you believe in His Son or not?' Christianity finds its strongest motives of appeal in a judgment day and an eternal hell. 'Now these,' says Mr. Conway, 'would be very strong if they *were penalties* for immorality; but Christianity' (*sic*, not *orthodoxy* merely) 'repudiates the idea. Hell, it declares, is for those that forget God, or do not believe in His Son. Consequently the criminal may snap his fingers at the day of judgment. . . . Those sects that deal with the masses are pervaded with a contempt for good works. The Wesleysans sing:

"Let the world their virtue boast,  
Their works of righteousness;  
I, a wretch undone and lost,  
Am freely saved by grace;  
Other title I disclaim;  
This, only this, is all my plea,  
I the chief of sinners am,  
But Jesus died for me."

The charge culminates thus, that Christianity positively discourages 'the formation of self-reliant and moral character'; in the 'plan of salvation no provision is made for morality. Not one item in it refers to morality. Morality is not made a condition, nor immorality a disqualification for its full enjoyment'; so that Christianity is a criminal system—'it assures the criminal, converted after he can sin no more, that heaven has the same place and rewards for the life of crime and the life of virtue.' Indeed, the success of orthodox Christianity is represented as chiefly due to the fact that it appeals powerfully to the criminal instincts of mankind, that is to say, to the instincts of the criminal mind, whose creed is to secure all the advantages of virtue with the weapons of vice.

We have purposely avoided the more offensive sentiments in this remarkable discourse, simply selecting the brief sentences that indicate the course of thought pursued in it. We can only ask, with something like amazement, Can Mr. Conway bring himself to sincerely believe that this loathsome monstrosity which he paraded before the congregations assembling at South Place, and the Athenæum, Camden-Road, on the 2nd of March, 1879, as orthodox Christianity, is the actual Christianity preached in so many hundreds of pulpits on every side of him, and sung by so many thousands of worshippers, from Sabbath to Sabbath? From what pulpit has he ever heard it announced that 'the supreme rewards of existence are attainable without reference to life and character'? Where has he heard it proclaimed that 'the adulteries, cruelties and general baseness'

of mankind are of no importance to God, or that the dreadful penalties of future judgment pass over the immoralities of men, and fall only upon those who have departed from the faith of orthodoxy, and have denied the Divine Sonship of the Saviour? If a life of baseness and immorality be not 'forgetting God,' what is? How is it that a man who is capable of writing able and sympathetic criticism upon secular subjects, can allow himself to be so unfair as to take a single hymn, which is the lyrical expression of personal conviction, expressly *designed* and designated 'For mourners convinced of sin,' as a complete summary of orthodox belief, and to infer from the omission of any mention of the deeds of a holy life in a solitary verse of Wesleyan hymnology, that the Wesleyans have a 'contempt for good works.'

A similar process of criticism, confined to garbled utterances and founded on omission, might be made to prove the grossest calumnies against the greatest authors. And how can any man who has read the Gospels and Epistles, and who knows that it is from the Divine ethics of Christianity that a thousand pulpits are drawing their inspiration and instruction from Sabbath to Sabbath, dare to stand up and affirm that Christianity is a criminal system, and makes no provision for morality! If orthodox Christianity is a criminal system, how is it that it has proved the most powerful deterrent from vice? And if Mr. Conway's scheme of religion is so much loftier, why is it that it exhibits itself mainly in false paradox and the intellectual fireworks of an explosive and yet random criticism, instead of weaving its mightier spell for the exorcising of the foul spirits that defile and deform society, and which, according to his view of the case, Christianity encourages, but cannot cast out? We can only suppose, in charity, that Mr. Conway knows next to nothing of the Christianity which he so wantonly caricatures. And what can be a preacher's notion of the *Ethics of Quotation* who, having given one verse of a hymn, is careful to keep back another verse which would at once refute his calumny:

' Jesus, Thou for me hast died,  
And *Thou in me* shalt live,  
I shall feel Thy death applied,  
*I shall Thy life receive.*'

And what a reckless and audacious contempt for recent history, as well as for conspicuous and admitted contemporary facts, is betrayed by an able public teacher—fair-speaking on all other subjects but Christianity—who can, within a few yards of Moorfields and City Road Chapel, coolly tell his disciples that the Wesleyans have 'a contempt for good works.' Who does not know that by the self-same tactics John Wesley and the Wesleyans have been denounced as 'merit-mongers' and 'Pelagians,' and Papistical criers up of the desert and absolute necessity of 'good works,' and the attempt to sustain the charge has been made precisely on the same principle, or with the same disregard of principle, as is exhibited by Mr. Conway. Only

the slightest observation is sufficient to bid back again the spectral deformity which he has conjured up and misnamed *orthodox Christianity*.

The self-styled 'rational religion' has a strange method of cultivating and inculcating intellectual morality, when it can deliberately set forth from both pulpit and press Charles Peace as a representative Christian saint, and can make his last utterances the typical confession of orthodox piety, in order to construct a sermon, under the title of *The Ascension of the Criminal*. Nor does it shape well with the laws of intellectual morality that it should be conveniently forgotten in such an attack upon Christianity and Christians, that orthodox Christianity teaches that 'faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone' (James ii. 17). And surely Mr. Conway's revolt is not so much from revelation as from common sense, when he can venture to quote an obscure Indian myth concerning all animals being once imprisoned in a monster, and owing their deliverance to co-operation—with the solemn announcement that this 'is a much more moral and scientific genesis of man than that in the Bible.'

Such, then, is the tolerance of heresy. The spirit of denial proves himself to be no holy iconoclast, who moves onward through the wreck of crumbling traditions to a larger inheritance of truth. It is simply a mocking, railing spirit, unable or unheedful to discriminate between good and evil. We are so often taunted with the bigotry of orthodoxy, the galling fetters it imposes on the intellect, the fierce anathemas it thunders forth to all who cast away its shibboleth, that it is time to look our accusers in the face. It seems to us that the palm of intolerance belongs to heterodoxy, and its bigotry is all its own. It professes to reject the tyranny of any standard of faith; but it sets up its own crude standards of faith nevertheless, in the arrogant egotism of its high priests. It weaves its boasted ethics from negations; it affirms only to accuse. Of its charity and tolerance let Mr. Conway's own discourses bear witness. We are told that our generation is stricken with the pestilence of doubt, though there is good reason to believe that large exaggerations are mixed with its statistics. The infected area is probably much smaller than some think. However this may be, contemporary literature swarms with smart doubters, with whom the lack of faith is no longer considered a calamity, but a badge of intellectual distinction. They invite the novice to the larger air of liberal ideas, but the novice soon finds that 'free thought' has its Inquisition, and that denial has its dogmas. He flees from orthodoxy because his new instructors have branded it as narrow and intolerant, to find, when the awakening comes, and natural revulsion follows fascination, that he has fallen at the feet of an arrogant heterodoxy, immeasurably narrower and more intolerant.

D. J. W.

---