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The Question of Authority in Religion.

THE question of Authority in Religion has been ably dealt with by Dr. A. J. Nixon, in a small book entitled: *Priest and Prophet* (Kingsgate Press, 5s. net). I can, perhaps, best do justice to the argument of the book by recording the train of thought to which the reading of it gave rise in my own mind, though, in doing so, I do not saddle Dr. Nixon with responsibility for all the ideas expressed.

We are living in a great age, but a very trying and exacting one. It would not be too much to say that one of the chief characteristics of our time is the repudiation of authority and the rise of private judgment. To-day all humanity's past findings, even the most sacred, are being called in question. All religious conceptions and all ethical systems are being subjected to a sifting, searching scrutiny. There are many who say to us, "We no longer believe as our fathers believed, and our ideas as to what is right and wrong, moral and immoral, are quite different from theirs. The authorities which they acknowledged no longer command our allegiance. We regard ourselves as emancipated from all authority, and we just go our own sweet way. We act as our own experience dictates." In days gone by the pronouncements of the Church on all moral and spiritual issues were regarded as final and authoritative by practically the whole of Christendom, but that is most assuredly not the case to-day. At one time it was possible to settle almost any moral or religious question by quoting a text of Scripture, but that can be done no longer. A year or two ago, I was asked by a group of young people to state the case for God and immortality, but they stipulated that I was not to appeal either to the teaching of the Church or to that of Holy Scripture—they wished me to "give reasons," and not merely to "quote authorities." The number of those who are prepared to take their religion on trust—on authority—is rapidly diminishing. Nowadays all the old authorities are called in question—they are being summoned before the bar of public opinion and asked to justify themselves. This challenging of authority is conspicuous in every department of human affairs.

True as all this is, yet it is equally true that we live in an age when authority is at a premium and private judgment at a

discount. The seeming confusion arises from the fact that we use the word "authority" in different senses. We speak of an expert on any subject as an "authority," and there never was a time when the expert was surer of a hearing than he is now. That fact is very significant. While the present generation rejects dogmatic pronouncements, and demurs whenever anyone—whoever he is—demands that something is to be believed or done, but can give no other reason than his own personal authority; yet it is prepared to bow submissively to authority that is reasonable, that can supply credentials, and can really authenticate itself. There may be perils in this modern attitude, but it is, nevertheless, a movement in the right direction.

Look, for example, at the political realm. There is an almost world-wide reaction against despotic authority in government. The idea of the divine right of kings is as dead as Queen Anne. If any one of the few remaining kings of the world sought to revive it, his kingship would not last a week. In our own day we have seen four more or less hoary despotisms collapse like a house of cards. Even in the ancient kingdom of Abyssinia it has been found necessary to grant a constitution. Yet, at the same time, there is also an almost world-wide recognition of the fact that the authority of a properly constituted government, a government based on the popular will, a government "of the people, by the people, for the people," must at all costs be maintained. Thus the present decisive revolt against despotic authority in government is counterbalanced by an equally decisive recognition of reasonable authority. Despotic authority is rejected. Reasonable authority is admitted.

The authority of the expert is of this reasonable kind. There is nothing despotic in it. It is sometimes alleged that men of science are exercising over us to-day an authority as absolute as that once exercised over Christendom by the Bishop of Rome, and that their pronouncements are accepted as submissively as are papal encyclicals by devout Catholics. As a matter of fact there is nothing in common between the authority of a man of science and that of the Pope. We accept what a man of science says, not just because he says it, but because we believe that he has a right to say it, and can actually prove what he says. When our astronomers, with complete unanimity, assure us that the sun is ninety-three million miles away, we accept the statement as true. We cannot verify it ourselves, but we believe that it can be verified and has been verified again and again. Similarly, we accept the guidance of the expert in literature or music or art or medicine or engineering, because we recognise that he knows more about the subject than we do, and has a right to speak on it as we have not. His authority is of the reasonable kind.

Almost everywhere, despotic authority is uncompromisingly rejected, while reasonable authority is freely admitted.

It is not surprising, then, that in the religious realm we have to face the fact that the day of despotic authority has gone, and the day of reasonable authority has arrived. With this new situation both Catholic and Protestant have to reckon.

The Catholic finds his despotic authority in the Pope. The Vatican Council of 1870 decreed that when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals, he delivers an infallible judgment to which all the faithful must submit, without question. No valid reason is given. We are simply told that he is authoritative because he is authoritative—which is not very illuminating, but sounds rather like the argumentation of a child who tells us that a thing is so because it is so. Thus the Pope claims an authority which the Apostle Paul would never have dreamt of claiming. For such a claim there is no religious or scriptural or historical or philosophical basis—it is pure dogma. It is obvious that no mere man can ever be a perfect organ of the Spirit of God. The best of men, even in their moments of highest inspiration, are liable to err. In all human utterances, however exalted and sublime, there is the dross of man's error as well as the pure gold of eternal truth. That any man, whoever he be, should presume to dictate to his Christian brethren on all matters of faith and morals is an altogether intolerable thing. It is contrary to the genius of Christianity to suppose that any one has been granted a monopoly of the Spirit of God, which is like the wind that bloweth where it listeth, and which is the birthright of all who have been born again in Christ unto God. We must never forget our debt to men like John Hus and others who preferred to go to the stake rather than submit to dictatorial, tyrannical, ecclesiastical authority, and who thus sacrificed their lives for the sake of witnessing to the fact of the individual's right of direct access to God. ALL AUTHORITY THAT DESTROYS THE SPIRITUAL FREEDOM OF THE INDIVIDUAL IS THE NEGATION OF THE GOSPEL. The only authority which the Church can rightly wield is an authority that is akin, not to that of the despot, but to that of the expert—the authority of the great masters of the spiritual life, who are able to initiate others into its secrets, because they know those secrets themselves.

But Protestants, too, have their infallible authority, for some of them appeal to the Bible in exactly the same way as the Catholic appeals to the Pope. They tell us that our business is not to reason or to examine or to enquire, but simply and solely to submit to the LETTER of Holy Scripture as the absolutely infallible and inerrant authority in matters of faith and morals. Such is the position of the Fundamentalists. It is a sufficient

answer to point out that the biblical writers never made—or dreamt of making—any such claim for themselves. They were human, and therefore fallible, like the rest of us. There is consequently a human, as well as a divine, element in Scripture. I yield to nobody in my love of the Bible, or in my appreciation of its intrinsic spiritual worth, but no careful and honest student of Scripture can for one moment assert that it is infallible and inerrant. The only valid proof of the inspiration of the Bible is its power to inspire—and it easily survives that test. The inspiration, however, is to be sought, not in the letter, but in the spiritual experience that lies behind the record. The rays of a prehistoric sun sleep in coal, so that there is potential warmth in a piece of coal, but the warmth is actually felt only when those rays are released by burning the coal. So a truly divine ardour sleeps in the letter of Holy Scripture, but its power is felt only when the letter is truly interpreted, and its spiritual meaning is realised in living experience. To get at the spiritual meaning of Holy Scripture, we have to find our way through the letter to the life and spirit which gave it birth. As has been truly said, the Bible is a means of grace, but it is not grace itself.[1] The authority of the Bible is akin, not to that of the despot, but to that of the expert. It is a record of the deepest religious experience of mankind. It tells us how to sound the depths of spiritual experience, and how to scale the heights of moral and spiritual elevation. Its authority lies solely in the intrinsic worth of its message, and in its power to guide and inspire all who will take trouble to understand it.

To seek an absolute, infallible authority in religion outside the soul is to seek the living amongst the dead. It cannot be found in an institution like the Church or the Papacy, or in a book like the Old Testament or the New.

The attitude of our Lord on this question of authority is illuminating. He never sought to exercise a despotic authority, and yet He made His authority felt in men's hearts and minds. He never prefaced any word of His with the blunt assertion that He was the Son of God, the long-looked-for Messiah, and that, therefore, anything He said must be accepted by His hearers just because it was He who said it. Making no claims whatsoever for His Person, He won the spontaneous recognition of His authority as a moral and spiritual guide, as one thoroughly at home with God and with the things of the Spirit, by the sheer intrinsic worth of His spiritual message and the sublime witness of His character. There never was a less dogmatic, or a more reasonable and persuasive teacher than Jesus Christ. He never demanded of men that they accept a statement of His simply because He made

[1]H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit.*

it. He never asked men to shut their eyes and open their mouths while He thrust truth down their throats. He never sought to blindfold His audience or to coerce belief. He always endeavoured to make men feel the utter reasonableness, the obvious truth, of His message. His attitude was ever one of appeal. He urged men to examine His message with both their eyes and with all their understanding, to sift it, to search it, to scrutinize it, to test it, to apply it, and then to judge for themselves whether or not it was true. All the way through His teaching, He revealed His awareness that moral and religious truth can actually reach men only as they inwardly perceive that it is true. In this department, men can be led, but not driven; they must be convinced, they cannot be coerced. The gospels testify that again and again people were amazed when they heard Christ speak. He needed no external authorities to authenticate His words—they carried their own authentication. There was in them an inherent, self-evidencing, convicting, and convincing power. They conveyed their own authoritative message to the hearts and minds of the hearers. As people listened to Him, they felt, instinctively and spontaneously, that they had heard living truth which gripped the mind, moved the heart, and roused the will. They realised that the teaching of Jesus came quick and powerful, not out of a book, but straight out of a full heart that vibrated to the Spirit of God. Thus they became conscious of the majesty of the Teacher and of the force of His words.[2] They knew that they were in touch with an expert who could reveal to them the deep things of God because He was familiar with them Himself.

Our Lord was aware that the only authority that a man can really acknowledge is an authority which he finds in his own soul. And what is that? It is simply the voice of God in the soul—the moral will of God immanent in man, but yet transcendent in that it comes to him, is something given in experience. It was to that that Christ made his appeal. When, for example, I am told that I ought to be true and not false, pure and not licentious, generous and not selfish, brave and not a coward, I ask for no proof and I demand no authority—the statement proves itself in my soul, it authenticates itself in my soul. It is characteristic of all moral truth that it proves itself and demands acceptance. We all know that we ought to do what is right (even though our ideas of what is right may need correction). That "ought" is the biggest thing in man. It is in that "ought" that the Spirit of God and the spirit of man most certainly meet. To that "ought" a man knows he should submit, and that in submission to it he will find his fullest freedom. In some strange way, we are conscious in our

[2] Bengel on Matthew vii. 29.

inner life of a Spiritual Power, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness, and that demands righteousness of us. We are conscious of Another Will, acting upon us, impressing itself upon us. In the secret depths of our inner life we meet a visitor from a higher world. We hear the Divine Voice within the soul. We are conscious of the witness of the Spirit of God to our spirits. In this experience we touch absolute reality. It is here, and not in any institution (however august), and not in any book (however sacred), that the real authority for the moral and religious life is found. The vital nerve of Christianity is the inner witness of the Spirit of God to the spirit of man. When once a man has had a real experience of the Spirit of God in action in his inner life, he is independent of all ecclesiastical and statutory authority—his religion is rooted and grounded in his own soul, in his own direct and immediate experience of the living God. In the last resort, that is the only kind of religion that is worth having.

It is the supreme merit of Dr. Nixon's book that he has made clear to us the essentially prophetic character of Christianity. With a wealth of historical illustration, he has shown that all through the Christian ages there has never been a time when the Church was entirely without its "prophets"—men who stood for the inner witness of the Spirit against a mere priestly, institutional Christianity. He contends that the Free Churches are peculiarly fitted to bear prophetic witness. That is true, though it must not be supposed that the Free Churches have any monopoly in this realm. There is, after all, an essentially prophetic element in Catholic piety at its best, for a man's religion is often vastly superior both to his theology and to his ecclesiology. The really vital factor in the religious life of the truly devout Catholic is not his acceptance of papal infallibility, or his submission to priestly authority in ecclesiastical affairs, but his own personal experience of the Living Christ. Further, it must not be forgotten that however superior prophetic religion may be to priestly religion, yet the world needs true priests as well as true prophets. For just as the true prophet is one through whom God approaches men, so the true priest is one through whom men are assisted in their approach to God. We Free Churchmen may have been fairly strong on the prophetic side, but, alas! our true priestly functions are often but meanly fulfilled.

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