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Matthew Arnold's Theology.

"A VOICE from the world of literature."¹ So Matthew Arnold described himself; but with his belief in a free play of mind on all subjects, he could not resist making his voice heard in religious controversy. His relations with Dissenters are still interesting to Free Churchmen, but it is helpful to consider first his general approach to theology.

He makes a curious picture: a devoted son of the Church of England, who could not state that God was more than "the Eternal not ourselves that makes for righteousness";² passionate defender of St. Paul against Paul's mightiest followers; lover of the Mediaeval Church, hater of dogma; radical critic of the Scriptures, merciless attacker of other advanced critics. It is small wonder that he was himself attacked from every side. One cause of this attitude was his upbringing and education. The eldest son of the liberal Dr. Arnold, of Rugby, he went up to Balliol in 1841, when another Broad Churchman, Benjamin Jowett, was tutor there. Both these had a potent influence on him; but he also had John Keble for godfather, and at Oxford he came under the spell of Newman. From the Broad churchmen he learnt to follow truth at all costs; while the Tractarians gave him a love of beauty and a reverence for old forms. To both parties, probably, he owed his profound misunderstanding of Calvinism.

As early as 1852 Arnold's poems reveal an interest in religious controversy. The poem *Progress*, for example, imagines our Lord upon the Mount rebuking His disciples for their too hasty rejection of the old law. This poem expresses Arnold's lifelong attitude to Christianity: destructive criticism of old beliefs will do no good; men must develop everything of value that older ideas have fostered:

"Leave then the Cross as ye have left carved gods,
But guard the fire within!"

These startling lines show him at once radical and conservative. "The fire within" was what the extreme critics were quenching. In 1851 Arnold visited La Grande Chartreuse, the Carthusian

¹ Dr. Stanley's *Lectures on the Jewish Church* (1863), reprinted in *Essays by Matthew Arnold* (Oxford, 1925), p. 444.

² *God and the Bible* (1884 edition), pp. xxvii, 7, 11, 13, 47.

monastery near Grenoble, and in a list of poems to be written during the following year is *The Chartreuse*. This was published in 1855, and it is a reminder of the two differing interpretations of Christianity that influenced his youth. Arnold stands between them, attracted to Catholicism yet unable to identify himself with it:

"For rigorous teachers seized my youth,
And purged its faith, and trimm'd its fire,
Show'd me the high, white star of Truth,
There bade me gaze, and there aspire.
Even now their whispers pierce the gloom:
What dost thou in this living tomb?"

Whether the "rigorous teachers" were the liberal Churchmen or (as some think) the Greek philosophers, their love of truth has had its effect: Arnold feels an alien in the monastery. The monks symbolise a faith which the liberals are killing too violently, and the world has not found a better faith. The reader recalls what Arnold wrote later:

"The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world."³

Examples could be multiplied, for Arnold, in poetry and prose, expressed a wistful sense of loss in the disintegration of the old unquestioning faith, even though he believed that it must go. He wished it to die gently, and to be replaced by poetical insight, not scientific iconoclasm.

Though he was proud to be the son of a clergyman, Arnold's attitude to theology was always that of a layman,⁴ and he never intended his so-called "theological" essays to be technical surveys; they were the efforts of a literary man to criticise one aspect of life. His interest in theology sprang partly from his background, and partly from his conception of criticism as a free play of mind on all subjects. To Arnold, religion was "morality touched by emotion,"⁵ and the Church "a great national society for the promotion of goodness."⁶ Conduct was all; he abhorred

³ *Dover Beach*, in *New Poems* (1867).

⁴ Writing to Frederick Temple (later Archbishop of Canterbury) in 1869, Arnold says, "In the Seventeenth Century I should certainly have taken Orders, and I think, if I were a young man, I should take them."

—E. G. Sandford (ed.), *Memoirs of Frederick Temple* (1906), I. p. 278.

⁵ *Literature and Dogma* (1883 edition), p. 16.

⁶ *Last Essays on Church and Religion*.

doctrinal rigidity; and of all theological systems, the one he could least bear was Calvinism. In *St. Paul and Protestantism*, published in 1870, he gives his fullest treatment of this subject. He believes that Calvinism has wrecked Paul's teaching, which he surprisingly thinks is very like his own. Arnold was sure that religion should only state what can be verified by the "scientific sense," the faculty that weighs statements by experience. He imagines "the men of science" saying to the theologians, "we too, would gladly say *God*, if only, the moment one says *God*, you would not pester one with your pretensions of knowing all about him."⁷ Theology deals with what, according to Arnold, cannot be tested. The furthest point to which he can go in defining God is the "stream of tendency by which all things strive to fulfil the law of their being."⁸ With his own definition Arnold contrasted "license of affirmation about God and his proceedings, in which the religious world indulge."⁹ Calvinism, especially, talked about God "as if he were a man in the next street."¹⁰ Calvinists quote St. Paul; it is true that Paul often talks like a Calvinist, but, says Arnold ingenuously, the scientific sense rejects Paul also, when he "falls into" Calvinism.¹¹ Religion may speak poetically and figuratively, but if it is crystallised into formal theology it must stand the test of scientific verification. Arnold gives an outline of Calvin's doctrine, freely using the Westminster Confession of 1647. He is not scholarly here, quoting two very crude statements, one about an "agreement" between "God and the Mediator, Jesus Christ," and one about a "contract passed in the Council of Trinity"; he gives no reference, and neither statement occurs in the Westminster Confession.¹² Nevertheless, Arnold extracts the core of Calvin's theology, that "there is very little of what man thinks and does, very much of what God thinks and does."¹³ The glory of the Calvinist is to Arnold a fault, for asserting what God thinks and does is vain speculation. Calvinism is, indeed, "both theologically more coherent, and also shows a deeper sense of reality than Arminianism,"¹⁴ but neither system commends itself to him.

A theologian would doubtless find much error in Arnold's criticism of Calvinism, and a layman can see his unfair treatment

⁷ *St. Paul and Protestantism*, second edition, pp. 11-12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12 cf. *Literature and Dogma*, p. 31.

⁹ *St. Paul and Protestantism*, p. 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹¹ cf. his delightful remark (*St. Paul*, p. 99.) "This is Calvinism, and St. Paul undoubtedly falls into it."

¹² Dr. A. Dakin wrote to me concerning the first quotation: "[It] hardly sounds like Calvin; it strikes me as a very crude statement."

¹³ *St. Paul*, p. 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

of the Westminster Confession. Between Arnold the agnostic humanist, and the Calvinist with his great conception of the Sovereignty of God, there is an impassable gulf. Writing in 1870, Arnold saw Calvin in the dress of the narrower kind of Protestant Dissenter. According to Dr. J. S. Whale, "Calvin's great principle, 'Scriptura duce et magistra,' could degenerate into a narrow biblicism in the hands of later Calvinism,"¹⁵ and Arnold saw that a deterioration had set in as early as the mid-Seventeenth Century.¹⁶ What he failed to see was that Victorian Puritanism, represented by the Nonconformist Churches, had degenerated into something that the earlier reformers would hardly have recognised.

With these "advanced" views, Arnold might be expected to support such theologians as Bishop Colenso¹⁷ and the authors of *Essays and Reviews*,¹⁸ but he rejected and ridiculed them violently. At first he showed some sympathy with the Essayists; he wrote to his mother in 1861: "Certainly the wine of the Essays is rather new and fermenting for the old bottles of Anglicanism. Still . . . perhaps it is in this way that religion in England is destined to renew itself." Fundamental sympathy was mingled with caution, and writing to his mother two years later, he mentions "Colenso and Co.'s jejune and technical manner of dealing with Biblical controversy." He has been reading Spinoza, whose method he contrasts favourably with theirs: "Spinoza broaches his [heresy] in that edifying and pious spirit by which alone the treatment of such matters can be made fruitful, while Colenso and the English Essayists, with their narrowness and want of power, . . . do not." So Arnold finds narrowness, though a different narrowness, even in Broad Churchmen. Yet he knows that not only the new wine, but also the old bottles, the Anglican formularies, are at fault: "If a clergyman does not feel [his restriction] now, he ought to feel it. The best of them (Jowett for example) obviously do feel it." He add the famous remark about the Church of England's seeing Christianity through the spectacles of "a number of second, or third-rate men" of Queen Elizabeth's day—evidence that he could criticise his own Church severely.

Arnold's first public attack on the methods of "Colenso and

¹⁵ *Christian Doctrine*, p. 16.

¹⁶ *St. Paul*, p. 18.

¹⁷ J. W. Colenso, Bishop of Natal, whose book on the Pentateuch, the first part of which was published in 1862, caused much consternation among conservative scholars.

¹⁸ This volume of seven essays by liberal Churchmen was published in 1860, and caused such consternation among the orthodox that the authors became known as "The Seven against Christ." The only one of importance now is Mark Pattison's "Religious Thought in England from 1688 to 1750."

Co." appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine*.¹⁹ Arnold turns to Spinoza for a contrast to Colenso, and he defends the right of literary criticism to judge works like theirs. The Bishop's book has been criticised from the theological point of view, and Arnold intends to judge it as literature; literary criticism tries books for their general influence on culture, after their technical criticism by experts. This literary criticism demands that a book edify the uninstructed, or inform the instructed; but Colenso's book does neither, and is therefore not only useless, but harmful. In fact, Colenso has made himself "the laughing stock of the civilised world." Arnold holds up Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, then recently translated into English, as an example of a theological treatise which literary criticism approves. Spinoza aims at informing the "instructed few," and he succeeds; moreover, he concentrates on what is positive and helpful in the Old Testament, not on its inaccuracies. So Arnold reveals his own blend of conservatism and liberalism; Christian orthodoxy he does not require, only great tenderness towards orthodoxy in the slaying of it.

A month later, *Macmillan's* again gave Arnold an opening, this time in a review of Arthur (later Dean) Stanley's *Lectures on the Jewish Church*. Spinoza had informed the instructed; Stanley, addressing a general audience, edifies the uninstructed—he devotes himself to the moral lessons of the Old Testament, making truth of science harmonise with truth of religion. This is where Colenso and his like had failed for "applied as the laws of nature are applied in the *Essays and Reviews*, applied as arithmetical calculations are applied in the Bishop of Natal's work, truths of science, even supposing them to be such, lose their truth."²⁰ Arnold placed himself in a delicate position by these two essays; it is not surprising that he was misunderstood. He seemed to say, "Keep Biblical criticism for the intellectuals, and feed the masses on the old myths."²¹ In reply, he maintained that by the "instructed" he meant not all the educated, but rather the minority who are fitted for the handling of theological details. He never intended to advocate "economy of truth"; he merely meant that for purposes of edification a constructive rather than a destructive attitude should be adopted.

How far were Arnold's own "theological" books an attempt to practise what he preached? *St. Paul and Protestantism*

¹⁹ "The Bishop and the Philosopher," *Macmillan's*, Jan. 1865, pp. 241-256.

²⁰ *Essays by Matthew Arnold*, p. 436.

²¹ Frederick Denison Maurice, in an article "Spinoza and Professor Arnold" (*Spectator*, Jan. 3rd, 1863) concluded that Arnold thought the intellectuals did not need religion.

certainly passes the test of edifying, however much its conclusions may startle; and ten years after his criticism of Colenso, in the preface to *Literature and Dogma*, he still pleads for caution. He fears the "inevitable revolution . . . which has already spread, perhaps, farther than most of us think," and which "is befalling the religion in which we have been brought up." Therefore "there is incumbent upon everyone the utmost considerateness and caution." He who thinks his truth must be proclaimed, when where, and to whom he will, is "a man whose truth is half blunder, and wholly useless." Arnold's startling aim is "to recast religion"—but in such a way that it remains religion.

It is Arnold's method that is so different from that of other liberals. He takes pains to be constructive—perhaps he learnt from their mistakes: "To understand that the language of the Bible is fluid, passing, and literary, not rigid, fixed and scientific, is the first step towards a right understanding of the Bible."²² There we have the key: he approached the Bible as a man of letters, not as a scientist. Verbal inspiration meant no more to him than it did to Benjamin Jowett, but he tries to fill the gap left by the destruction of old beliefs. Jowett simply says that the New Testament is liable to error; Arnold says that it "exists to reveal Jesus Christ, not to establish the immunity of its writers from error."²³ The publication during the Seventies of *St. Paul and Protestantism*, *Literature and Dogma*, and *God and the Bible*, drew not a fraction of the censure heaped upon *Essays and Reviews*; this fact may be partly due to Arnold's being a layman, but it may also be due to his method. While the others criticise and depart, he stays to make the greatness of Jesus the centre; his readers are made to see Him, a mighty Figure triumphing over faulty records. Judged as literature, *Essays and Reviews* and the rest are dead, while Arnold's works are alive, even though they, too, reflect the dilemma of a period when science seemed to be the enemy of religion in a way that it is not today. It is against this background that the modern Free Church scholar will study Matthew Arnold's attitude to the Nonconformists of Victorian times.

JEAN A. SMALLBONE.

²² *Literature and Dogma*, p. xx.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.