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ARTICLE III.

LESSING'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION.

BY THE REVEREND JAMES LINDSAY, D.D.

LESSING is a figure of quite surpassing interest, if it were only for the fact that in him that great modern outgrowth known as German literature took its rise. He laid the foundations of Germany's intellectual life, freeing its culture from the fetters of theology. But our interest here centers in Lessing as one who may be fairly regarded as, in some sense, the founder of Philosophy of Religion in modern times. No doubt the natural theology of his age still held him in some ways, but he first applied the notion of a progressive historical development to the interpretation of positive religions. The evolutional character of religion, the idea of revelation as a progressive training of the human race, and the conception of Christianity as but marking one great stage in the Divine education of mankind, such was Lessing's discovery. No doubt his originality has been often exaggerated, many of his ideas having been anticipated by—amongst others—Origen, Nicholas of Cusa, and Leibnitz. Spinoza he deeply studied, not, however, attaching himself strictly to his system. But never before Lessing had this great progressive idea of the Divine education of the race been advanced with such strength of thought and charm of style. Much indeed it was to have it in days when men were driven to Deism for lack of any more spiritual theology. The conception of Lessing is, that in God's great schoolbook of Time, each of the historic religions is a lesson set for humanity's learning. This involves the non-finality of any one of them.

Lessing not only held that "what we call education in the individual is revelation in the race," but, after working out his thesis that "education is revelation" and "revelation education," asks whether there is not for this purpose eternity before us ("Ist nicht die ganze Ewigkeit mein?").

Lessing works out his conception with a tendency too intellectual; his thought is too circumscribed, moving within Judaism and Christianity; what he aimed at is still our need, but on more comprehensive range. In his "Nathan the Wise" Lessing really seeks to inveigh against the bigoted adherence to a dominant religion, and against religious creed without correspondent life, going so far even as to identify religion with morality. This too exclusive stress on morality, to the neglect of truly religious world-view, is a defect or one-sidedness found not only in Lessing, but also in Kant and the prevailing thought of the time. But his aim, no doubt, was to insist on right doing for its own sake, as a counteractive to undue theological insistence on the doctrine of reward and punishment. Lessing's acceptance of revelation yet left him in the end—like his age—with only natural religion, for religion would become independent of even the New Testament. The historic religions would really become but forms of the one universal religion of humanity. In all this historic development, the ego or individual factor is, to Lessing, pure mind, and not nature, as might be wrongly supposed.

Religion is to Lessing always a thing anterior to its records, and it is this inner truth of religion which alone gives worth to its records or traditions. To distinguish the form from the spirit, and to discriminate between essential and non-essential—such was Lessing's theological aim. And this is not always easy: he makes Nathan say—

> "To find the first true ring,
> It was as great a puzzle as for us
> To find the one true faith."

The complete sincerity and independence of Lessing kept him from ever accepting truth on mere authority, and without the sanction of his whole nature. It is this strength of his moral nature which saves the clear reflective work of Lessing from coldness. Hence he is never a mere self-satisfied destroyer, but remains a spirit essentially religious and reverent, and keenly alive to the sway of cosmopolitan reason. He carries the Reformational spirit of free inquiry to its legitimate influence on literature, philosophy, and religious criticism.

Not against Christianity itself, of course, but only against prevailing types of Lutheran orthodoxy, were the arrows of Lessing's criticism directed. He had a complete triumph over Goetze and others, and suffered in prestige perhaps more in the house of his friends, when Nicolai, head of the so-called Party of Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), allowed the bright religion of reason to grow into a dull rationalism. Lessing's letters on Goetze and Bibliolatry do not, however, make pleasant reading, the current of controversial feeling is so strongly present in them. Amid the controversial elements occur clear and characteristic insistences like the following: the letter is not the spirit, and the Bible is not religion; there was religion before there was a Bible, and Christianity before evangelists and apostles had written; the whole truth of the Christian religion cannot possibly depend upon these writings; if they were lost, the religion taught by them might still subsist; the scriptural traditions are to be explained from the internal truth of religion. Such were Lessing's insistences, poured forth from a spirit scornful of those defenses of the faith which he felt were enough to betray any cause.

With rare and noble courage Lessing published the Fragments of Reimarus, in scorn of consequence. In them what may be called the esoteric doctrines of that prodigy of learning, Reimarus, were set forth, in vindication of the sacredness of reason, and the supremacy of conscience, as against the pretensions of the orthodoxy of the time. As for Lessing himself, he was more critic than systematic philosopher and theologian, devising more than doing, and discovering weak positions more than defending strong ones. That is to say, he suggests and inspires more than he directly or systematically teaches. His work is unified by the idea of progressive humanity, by his keen interest in truth, and by his unfailing spiritual aim. The germinant and positive elements of his teaching have made his influence on subsequent thought great, as witness Hegel, Goethe, Heine, and many others. Hardly any of his passages has aroused more interest than that which, occurring in one of his controversial writings in 1778, contains the declaration that, if God offered him truth in the one hand, and in the other nothing but the ever-active impulse for truth, Lessing would choose to wander in error in order to win truth, rather than possess and enjoy it. However much it may have been praised, or however much it may attract and fascinate one, it is impossible to give it approval in any unqualified way.

For, what is truth that the honest seeker after it should be so much afraid of its possession? Why not be more careful to maintain the honesty and sincerity implied in our professed search for its acquirement? What but the possession of the truth gives to life its peerless value, objective truth being there to be sought? Life is surely possession as well as progression: it can be no mere seeking and becoming, with never a finding and being something positive and definite: it is a progress *in*, and not merely *towards*, the truth. Life is attainment as well as ad-

vancement, and the advancement lies through attainment. Besides, we need not fear that the truth will be so easily possessed, that our possession of it will be so easily completed. Our possession of it is never complete and once for all. Lessing needlessly exaggerates a great truth, namely, that the truth does not exist for us till we learn to love and believe it. It should be noted that Malebranche and Richter both uttered similar sentiments to Lessing, so impressed, apparently, were they with the fact that true being is dynamic rather than static.

Lessing had no love for such orthodox conceptions of Deity as that of an extra-mundane, personal Cause of the world, and confessed he knew only ἓν καὶ πᾶν, not thereby, however, committing himself to thoroughgoing Spinozism. Lessing held to the complete rationality of Revelation, which goes not beyond reason as such. He held that the very nature of a Revelation calls for a certain submission of reason, but reason therein only expresses a just conviction of its own limitations. Reason is to Lessing a thing of becoming, and the form of Revelation is necessary to it as the integument of the truths of reason. The fact that it contains truth transcending our reason is to Lessing an argument in its favor—not an objection. "What would it be if it revealed nothing?" Gradual and progressive must revelation be, assuming some external and authoritative form, but not to be identified with any of its positive forms. Eternal truths, independent of historical evidence, form the sum of religion to Lessing. It will be seen how little Lessing attempts account of the manner, and even possibility, of Revelation. Even the Christian religion was for him destined to pass like the Jewish, and indeed Lessing sits lightly to all positive religions.

It seems a somewhat absurdly large claim Lessing makes for human development, when, introductory to his "Education

of the Human Race," he asks: "Why will we not rather see in all the positive religions nothing but the order of march in which the human understanding in every place could solely and alone develop itself, and is still to develop itself further, than either smile or be angry at any one of them?" For he tends to find in the nature and development of man the foundation of the positive religions. His also is the idea that revelation makes known, much earlier, truths that would later be discovered by developed reason, but this idea is not new, being, in fact, derived from the Fathers and Schoolmen; only, it is given stronger or more pronounced form by Lessing. One must hold it for a somewhat absurd and mistaken idea, for truths discoverable by man's own thinking could clearly be no substitute for the historical action of God. Such a mode of thinking was made possible by the tendency to put truth or doctrine as thought by men in the place of God's historic self-revealings. Such a foreshortening of human development might be no advantage, but very much the reverse; and, in any case, truths which man could himself have ultimately found without going beyond the terms of nature, have no real claim to be called Revelation. We must account it as of the essence of Revelation that it deals with the secret things—not discoverable by man—that belong to God, and relate to him.

But to Lessing, Revelation had no such intrinsic value, and carried with it no such absolute necessity: it could be dropped whenever it had served its educative purpose. In his view that positive religion was best which had in it the least number of additions to natural religion, Lessing, like Kant, being infected too much with the abstract dualism of "positive" and "natural" so characteristic of the philosophy of the Enlightenment. History was to him but the record of "Enlightenment." But the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) was marked by an inca-

pacity for understanding the real significance of history, and in the way he used the opposition between eternal truths of reason and accidental truths of history, Lessing himself cannot be said to have transcended this incapacity. Only later was this opposition to receive clearer marking off and treatment.

The theory of the education of the race, as put forward by Lessing, has, no doubt, been thrown into the shade by the theory of evolution, with which, however, it may be said to be in substantial agreement. Lessing's theory had the virtue to be historical, while the evolution theory has not always the merit of making a satisfactory thing of the facts connected with degeneracy. Lessing's conception of education—with its fatherly character of God, its great educational purposes for the race, and its eternity to work in—was indeed a great one, teaching how that which is in part is being continually done away, that that which is perfect may come. It certainly gave a new clew to the understanding alike of Revelation and Inspiration, and the strongly-marked ethical character of the whole process—in each of its three great stages or periods—deserves especial notice.

Lessing laid enormous stress on Individuality, and makes it a kind of moral basis for man's life that every one should act in the direction of his individual perfection. But, while standing thus, in intuitive fashion, for transcendent Individualism, Lessing, no more than Herder, succeeded in giving it a speculative grounding. But the endless life for this perfection was the strange one of transmigration, for the Platonic teachings about transmigrations of the soul seem to have been quite accepted by Lessing. The position of Lessing as to man's personality was expressly this, "If I am, God is also; He may be separated from me, but not I from Him." Probably Lessing did not feel how true is the converse also, that if God is not—lacks

personality—I am not, and cannot pretend to personality. The immortality of the soul—like the unity of God—was a truth, in Lessing's view, capable of demonstration. But as to immortality, he thinks we can dispense with the New Testament, just as, in the doctrine of the unity of God, he thinks we can dispense with the Old.

Lessing held with a strange tenacity to Determinism, loving necessity, it is often said, almost as dearly as did Spinoza. And he volunteered what must seem to us the rather astonishing opinion that "determinism has nothing to fear from the side of morals." But perhaps it were wiser not to take his isolated sayings too seriously. A kind of ideal Monism is what we find in Lessing, in whom thought is more spiritualized than in Spinoza, chiefly through the individualistic teaching of Leibnitz. If Lessing's earlier leanings were towards Deism, it seems as though his later experiences tended to Pantheism. Pantheist, however he is not, albeit Spinoza so deeply influences him, for that influence is more on the historico-critical side, than on the philosophical. His Deity was not without supernatural cast, although set also in natural relations; and the free and conscious Spirit, who to him represented Eternal Providence, was able to determine his own ends. Lessing even deals, in speculative fashion, with the doctrine of the Trinity, after the examples of Augustine, Aquinas, and Melanchthon, offering what to him appears a philosophical equivalent. Lessing understands the Trinity in the sense of immanent distinctions. His own perfections are conceived by Deity in twofold fashion: both as single, and as united in himself as their sum. God's thinking means creation, his ideas are actualities, and his creation flows from his conceiving his perfections singly. When he conceives them as united, then creates he the Son of God,

his own eternal image; and then becomes the Holy Spirit, the bond between Father and Son.

On what are known as Mediational aspects of truth, Lessing has little to say, his views being predominantly ethical. Indeed, he is rather meagre in what he has to say of the Person of Christ in his whole historic relations, although he does deal with the Satisfaction of Christ and Original Sin. On the Resurrection of our Lord, Lessing has something to say. One of the Fragments of Reimarus published by him attacks the resurrection history, and Lessing agrees so far that the Gospel accounts cannot be rid of contradictions. But he does not on that account treat the resurrection as unhistorical. "Who," he asks, "has ever ventured to draw the same inference in profane history? If Livy, Polybius, Dionysius, and Tacitus, relate the very same event, it may be the very same battle, the very same siege, each one differing so much in the details that those of the one completely give the lie to those of the other, has any one for that reason ever denied the event itself in which they agree?" Admitting thus the fact, Lessing does not yet seem to have seen its bearing upon religious experience or theological truth. The circumstance is, no doubt, interesting also as showing that Lessing did not always accept the conclusions of Reimarus, the publication of whose Fragments he yet thought would serve the interests of investigation and inquiry into truth. If less subtle, Lessing was certainly more candid than Baur in this matter. It was a pity that Lessing had not more to say on these historic relations of Christ, for then he might have had opportunity to cast light over the "foul broad ditch," as he was pleased to term it, of the distinction between accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason. He might even have seen in Christ's life, not an accident of history, but a deliberately purposed embodiment of truth for all

time—might, in fact, have seen history become religion in him. Lessing—as many, with less excuse, have done after him—shows a strange lack of perception in respect of the stability and enrichment that accrue to the idea from the historic fact. On the other hand, it is an equal error when they who cling to historic fact are so wedded to it as to lose sense of the truth that it is never more than mere symbol, representative of the process or idea.

Eternal recompenses, promised in the New Testament as rewards of virtue, are to Lessing only means of education, destined to gradual disuse; virtue will at last—in the stage of purity of heart—be loved for its own sake, and practiced for no mere heavenly rewards. That is the time to which Lessing looks forward, when, in the invisible march of Eternal Providence, the "Christianity of reason" shall have come, and men will do the good because it is the good. How much that was both needful and wholesome in these insistences needs no pointing out, whether one agrees with Lessing in the entirety of his teachings or not. The insight and pregnancy of the expression which Lessing has, in such ways of looking out upon the future, given to his religious conviction, have been very expressly noted by Zeller.[1]

The analytic clearness of Lessing's writings has been already noticed, but this is not to say that his work was always marked by self-consistency. It was much that his deep soul and clear, comprehensive intellect shunned the dry and arid Deism of his time, but more that he should have put forward such positive truths as he did, like so many germinal seeds of thought. Highly characteristic of the German spirit is his work, with its preëminent clearness and candor. Dogmatism of belief is what he opposes, the religion of the letter as against that of the

[1] E. Zeller, Vorträge und Abhandlungen (1877), vol. ii.

spirit. The votary of Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), his enlightenment yet leads him to Christianity as the religion of humanity at its highest, Christian truths being for him truths for reason. Lessing was a powerful precursor of Hegel, alike in his developmental treatment of the positive religions, and in his speculative treatment of dogmas like the Trinity. He gave the basal thought of Hegel's philosophy of religion in his theory of the education of the race, while the foundation for Kant's doctrine of ethics was laid in Lessing's insistences on the gospel of pure morality. If Lessing be held as estranged from positive Christianity, the degree of his alienation is matter on which there is still no complete agreement. What is beyond dispute is Lessing's significance for the Philosophy of Religion as a great seminal thinker. Prophet and harbinger he was of a more truly enlightened time than his own, and if the world has not even yet got beyond the faith of authority, that is no reason why we cannot heartily appreciate what the universal thoughts of Lessing did for the immediate and most important future.