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## ART. VI.—THE POSITION OF DIVINITY AMONG THE EXACT SCIENCES.

THE trying fire of the world's judgment may not have set Descartes as a philosopher in all points to be followed. But there are two points in his metaphysical system in which he was ahead of his age, and still may convey to us a conspicuous illumination in the handling of problems of thought. The one point is, that in endeavouring to solve them we should reduce every question to its simplest elements and get clear of what seems laboured in system and burdensome in mere bulk and complication. The human brain very often darkens and covers more than it discloses, when it pleases itself in building up cloud castles, and even huge towers of Babel. It is in this sense that the proverb runs true: "A big book, a big evil." A complete system is more than is really given to us on any subject in this world. It is the characteristic instinct of an Englishman, partly because of his history, partly because of the atmosphere of English life, to look with suspicion upon thought which professes to grasp, and completely co-ordinate, everything in the universe. We readily imagine that ascertained fact must be bent about to fit into such a process.

The second point, in which Descartes gives us at any rate a helpful impulse, is in the importance that he gives to clear and distinct perceptions. We may, indeed, demur to the generalization that whatever presents itself to the human understanding in a clear and distinct perception is therefore a necessary truth. We may, indeed, hold that many things are false, though they may be capable of being clearly and distinctly visible to the understanding, though, owing to the idola or delusive shadows, and images which beset our mental vision, the exceptions may possibly be more apparent than real. For for clearness and distinctness it is necessary to banish these idola, which is a difficult undertaking. But this, I think, we should be freely disposed to grant: that what is seen clearly—*i.e.*, is present and open, to use Descartes' language, to the mental vision—and what is distinct—*i.e.*, what is not confused with anything else—is the more *likely* to be true. There is, at any rate, so far a presumption in its favour, if only so far. Depth and truth of thought are not to be measured by the amount of fog which envelops them. Now science, when we use the word of a result and not a process, is the register of hitherto observed facts and their hitherto observed connection. Exact science it is when we are able to say, and in so far as we are able to say, that it has emerged by the labour of many or the genius

of few into certain clearly observed and generally recognised principles, which seem fixed and settled, and not likely to change. The dogmata of exact science are the presentations of the results of a clear observation of facts, and a general agreement in them of all unbiassed observers. In Lenormant's "History of the Ancient East," for instance, the history of India is left out, though Lenormant thought at first to write it, and had every inducement to do so, because the facts appeared to him to be not as yet clearly ascertained, and because there is at present, consequently, no such general agreement in those who have examined them as leads to confidence. The scientific history of India, that is, is not yet sufficiently certain as to its facts to admit of its being dogmatically taught in the schools.

It may seem that this grouping of all sciences under one process, and the use of the word "exact" as a term of degree and not of kind, needs at least to be substantiated. But it is just the point contended that, reduced to its simplest elements, all science is simply a clear, distinct observation and vision of facts, and that its exactness is witnessed by the concord and agreement produced upon the judgments of the majority at least of unbiassed and competent observers, and in the long-run. It is only under these two conditions, more or less observed, that any science becomes a fit subject for dogmatic teaching in the schools. It is true that both of these conditions are susceptible, like the heavenly bodies, to perturbations from without. A keen-sighted catalogue is given by Lord Bacon of the idola, which, like mists and vapours of the mind, obscure the distinct, clear vision of things as they are. The late Professor Seeley has remarked that "fashion is little less ephemeral in opinion than in dress." There have been martyrs of science as well as of theology. Yet I submit that divinity has its claim to rank among the exact sciences, simply because there is nothing peculiar to itself in its processes. The terms "revelation," "the teaching, witnessing office of the Church[1] throughout the world," "dogma," are not terms in their essential meaning peculiar to divinity.

[1] Let the writer be understood. In making this statement it is the least possible intended to imagine the Church, the Divine society, "the Body of Christ"—not the Truth, but "the pillar and ground of the Truth"—to be a kind of Glorified British Association, or even Melancthon's "Cœtus Scholasticus." By no means. I speak only of the consent of the Church in this connection as analogous to the consent of scientific men in all well-ascertained scientific truth as a logical ground of evidence. As Dean Hook says in a preface to a sermon, "Take heed how ye hear"; "to leave out all reference to authority is dealing with the most worthy of sciences in a way that is not tolerated in the most ordinary of all."

Divinity is an experimental science as much as any other, and has the same credentials, because it is dependent upon exactly the same processes. Science of all kinds has also its epochs of revelation and vision, when something new was born in the human understanding, has its witnessing and teaching and necessarily selected Church all over the world, to guard and increase the treasure thus laid open—fares forth into the world with dogmas which meet with the same kind of reception, by honour and dishonour, by good report and bad report, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and the left. And neither the church of divinity nor the church of science is infallible. Both are susceptible of the same relapses, the same epochs and periods of decadence, if not of retrogression from their true principles, the same fallings away from clearness and distinctness of vision. The difference between human sciences and the Divine science is not in the process, but in the importance and relative nearness of their respective fields of observation.

What follows, then, from this, as I hold it to be, essentially true affirmation of the chief place that divinity claims for itself as a science amongst the sciences, which make up the total of our Christian civilization? Much follows, and, as it seems, much of interest.

In any science whatever which ranks as an accepted branch of human knowledge there is always a body of ascertained truth which the bulk of educated men receive without question. To investigate afresh in new light and with increased apparatus this ascertained truth is part of the necessary education of properly scientific men. And each several new investigation, if it arrives at the same conclusions, adds to the cumulative assurance which we may ordinarily and rightly place in this body of undoubted doctrine. This undoubted doctrine is susceptible of dogmatic teaching in the schools. To take the science of astronomy as an instance. The world is round and moves. It circles round the sun at a known distance in an elliptical orbit. It has its perigee and its apogee. Light is an incredibly swift and an incredibly quick vibration of a universal ether, which we are obliged to postulate, but at present incompetent to understand. The heavenly bodies give up in their spectrum analyses the secret of the materials of which they are made. They can be weighed, often, and in many cases their distances can be precisely given; while often their perturbations reveal the sway of what we call universal gravitation. And all this, and more, inconceivable wonder, by faith is rightly accepted by the educated layman, although in many cases actual verification by strictly scientific process may be alike by bent and

calling beyond, if not his capacity, yet his existing attainments. Yet we have no hesitation, therefore, in teaching this great and splendid faith dogmatically in the schools. It forms part of the curriculum of ordinary education. But outside this body of ascertained doctrine, which forms the staple of any proper science, there lie a number of speculative questions not yet strictly scientific—questions as yet only on the road to solution, questions of debate in the scientific hierarchy, a region properly given up at present to the inquiry of the specialist. At the same time, it is proper to remark that these questions, unless they admit of the statement of their reasons for and against in a way that admits the ordinary layman to a clear, distinct appreciation of their bearing, are no questions at all. There is no scientific priestcraft allowable; no mere appeal to authority without reason. In all sciences we should be watchful to prevent the invasion of unreason.

Now, with Divinity, I submit, it fares the same. There is, and always has been from the beginning, a body of ascertained truth which has received a general assent from the Church of Divinity—*i.e.*, the Christian Church—and incidentally and all the more strikingly outside it, which for volume, depth of assurance, extent, and power, is and has been, I venture to believe, quite unique, and, moreover, essentially wonderful when we have regard to the oppositions which from the first have continuously assailed it, and forced in every age its fresh investigation.

This body of ascertained doctrines we call the Christian faith. The world-wide acceptance which this body of truths, thoroughly investigated afresh in every age, and acknowledged in the result, to use the words of Vincentius in a sense which is certain and generally true, from the first, everywhere, and by all to a surprising degree—this world-wide acceptance it is which rightly creates the confidence that it is susceptible of being taught dogmatically in the schools. And outside this Christian faith, strictly so-called, there is and always has been an outlying region of questions of debate, though of undoubted interest and some of first importance. Some of these questions have more or less narrowly approached a universal consent. They have almost passed out of the category of pious opinions. Others of these questions are still only, some more and some less, in the realm of a just and proper speculation. And it is equally important to remark about them that if they are not open to be stated clearly and distinctly with reasons for and against, they are not questions at all. Divinity no more than any other experimental science has a right to unreason.

It is in this region more particularly of not yet quite, but more or less, settled questioning, that the danger of hard words and acrimonious ways of thinking comes in. And it is our wisdom, as it is our Christian safety, in this region to learn to bear and forbear. "Alas for the rarity of Christian charity!"

With proved error we can have no parley. With what has been proved over and over again in history to be false and injurious in influence, and to be like a worm at the root of Christian progress, we can have no more dalliance than we can have in any other science with doctrines which undermine its sanity and shake the reasonable allegiance which that science has been found rightly to claim from an educated man. But in the region of the penumbra, in the region of a partial discovery, in the region where men have reasonably differed, and still reasonably differ, or even, as we may truly think, have *unreasonably* differed, we have, indeed, a constitutional right to hold strongly to opinions which we judge we have tested, and the more so if they have obtained in the settled judgments of a vast number of keen and unbiassed minds; but we have a still greater right to exercise a Christian charity. We may be in part mistaken. When the whole truth in all its colossal and adorable proportions dawns upon us and we know as we are known, we may see things in a greater synthesis, which shall restore all things, and with them many a sadly-broken unity. "If the vision tarry, let us wait for it."

There is just one point further which I should like to touch upon. I have called divinity an experimental science. I should like to prove this proposition. And, to attempt to do so, let me take the scientific doctrine or dogma—than which I know no other equal in interest to a thoughtful person—the Divinity of Christ. That He was a man in all points as we are, yet without sin, needs no proof. That He was without sin even is conspicuous enough and very generally perceived by the best calibre of mind. These things lie on the surface. But the doctrine of the person of Christ from the first, everywhere, and by all, has been seen to involve a greater mystery than even pure and perfect humanity is. Now the doctrine of the person of Christ is contained in a body of writings which we call the New Testament. The first part of these conveys to us with much freshness and vigour the converging observation of a very considerable number of eye-witnesses, shrewd, honest, large-minded, and capable. The second part bears witness to the universal assent of all those, who were sufficiently deeply interested to weigh the evidence, to the disclosure of the person of Christ which the first part delivers to us,

and this assent—harmonious and one—covers an area roughly coterminous with the known civilized world, and embraces a unique gathering together of all nationalities, tastes, and callings, one only in this. The latest, as the earliest, criticism, without going into details, has alleged so many cogent and abiding marks of contemporary honesty and ability and, to go further, Divine inspiration, that the man who lives in the open need have no hesitation in accepting this evidence, first, as to the results of the observation of the person of Christ upon those best qualified to judge it, and, secondly, as to the general consent with which those results were received.

What, then, did men, as they witnessed and gazed upon Jesus Christ, increasingly observe in the course of His sacred life-development? The first thing was that He taught with an innate authority, and, though lowly and submitting to undeserved suffering, He advanced imperious claims; that He was, though one of us in everything, yet entirely different from us in all. The next thing was that He plainly showed Himself having a mastery of nature, and powerful where we are weak in the presence of sin and disease and suffering and death; and that He overcame death, both for others and, in a far vaster sense, in Himself.

They observed, that is, an extreme power in word and in deed, not arbitrarily used, but used in the service of an unselfish tenderness and absolute self-devotion which made all things new. It is not for me here to critically elaborate in this place the idea proposed; I only wish to point out that all this indicates a clear, distinct perception on the part of a large number of the best souls and most penetrating, because guileless, intellects the world has ever seen. It is strictly scientific and experimental, if we reduce it to its simplest elements.

Further, in the written record there is a means at hand to verify the scientific impression clearly and distinctly, and once for all, made. And the general assent of the early Church all over the world to this clear, distinct perception is such that no kind of adverse criticism has ever been able to banish the marks of it from the rest of the New Testament. There is a complete general accord, which is also faithfully reflected in the remains of the Subapostolic Church and the Primitive Church which have come down to us. This clear, distinct perception of the proper Divinity of Jesus Christ, the only Begotten, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, is historically a conception of tremendous vitality. In all ages, under all skies, under every conceivable condition, under every form of mental capacity and mental environment, it has been and is being verified afresh. Effaced, it recurs; dying, it

lives; corrupted, it reasserts itself; the ancient thoughts of it, though they have never been surpassed in philosophic clearness, are perpetually perfecting themselves in gathering light. Men are everywhere and at all times seeing afresh the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. If we really grasp the mass of intelligent verification, which this greatest fact of history has received and is receiving, it will appear like a rock in the midst of storms.[1]

Because of the continuous verification in the hearts and minds of the undeniably best of our race of the effect which our Master Jesus Christ produced upon the best and the deepest thinkers of His day, we may accept this doctrine as the corner-stone of the scientifically ascertained body of accepted truth which we call the Christian faith. Because the properly scientific consent to it has been so wonderfully wide and keen and fruitful, it is susceptible of being taught dogmatically in the schools. It is that chiefest element of Christian knowledge which has the certain promise and potency of that rejuvenated world which Goethe hoped for and says he foresaw. And, analyzed, it derives its truest strength from the fact that its process is not peculiar to Divinity, but is the process of every science that we know. Its steps are: First, a clear, distinct perception, a revelation of something new in the mind; secondly, a select, verifying, witnessing Church; thirdly, teaching or dogma. These are the first steps of experimental science; and when a science begins to be taught dogmatically it is evidence in itself that it has passed the stages of hesitation and inquiry and become part of human knowledge.

Such is the transcendent idea which needs only the touch of inspiration to awake. The well-known French scientist and writer, Camille Flammarion, in a flight of the greater fancy, has pictured the science of astronomy as the muse Urania. He contemplates it as a statue, and then sees it live and speak. He sees an enchanting face illuminated with a mysterious smile, with looks almost of endearment, in which a fine serenity changes suddenly into an expression of joy, agreeableness, and felicity, which it is a pleasure to behold. "Muse ou déesse," he says, "elle était belle, elle était charmante, elle était admirable." Flammarion's meaning is to rescue the teaching of the heavens from the region of mere logarithms and arid formulæ, and to place it in that region of kindling emotions and enlarging understanding which is more than its due. If we were to attempt to do the same service for Divinity, of which it stands in need, I should prefer to

[1] Matthew xvi. 18.

idealize a historical situation and a man. I would set before myself Stephen, full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, full of grace and power, with a mind stirred with Hebrew sympathies and enlightened with Alexandrian culture—a mind whose vision was at once, that is, ancient and modern, and a mind whose force infixed a lifelong impress upon one who was consenting to his death. I would have myself mark his gaze directed heavenwards and downwards too—an angel face looking fearless upon the very fact of death.

It is this vivid, personal vision of the God-man for us exalted, and certainly returning—always believed, though the heavens were not always open—it is this knowledge *in Him* of a conquest won for us over death, that made the life of the first Church so purely attractive and admirable.

The first Church was not spotless, not free from a tendency to divisions, but it is still for this cause the fountain-head and pattern of any true life "in Christ."

These were the times when the Divine idea was fused with a gracious and heaven-born life. The angelic face of Stephen must have been a type of many faces. And the sanity of the Divine idea itself is guaranteed by the fact that though it was perceived to be infinite and universal in its range, yet it was seen to be essentially enigmatical in its universal reference. The light that had fallen was the light of the rising sun, but it had not yet illuminated all things. It was a light to walk in for practical everyday uses. They knew only in part. The book of God's secret was unsealed by the Lamb as it had been slain, but not open. The faith of the primitive Church was a complete confidence in a person. Much has been written to account for the victorious progress of the Christian faith in the first age.[1] It would seem that the continuance of signs and wonders had a strictly secondary place in this progress. These forced attention; these showed that the healing power of the risen Christ was still present with His Church. But when the idea of the Lord's continuous activity was established the signs were withdrawn. There is an economy of the miraculous in the New Covenant analogous to that which the Old Covenant exhibits. It was the upward and expectant gaze, the *Sursum corda,* the confidence in a victory won, that gave the Church of the first age her power and joy.

And if the Church of to-day, in anti-Christian times, is to "go forth conquering, and in order that she may conquer," it must be by persistently and patiently reverting to the experimentally scientific spirit of her origin.

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[1] Notably by Gibbon and Lecky.