
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Subjective Element in Religious Belief.

ONE of the most important effects of the Reformation of the sixteenth century has been described as "the transfer of religion from the objective to the subjective order of things,"[1] and the description, taken broadly, summarizes the causes which led to the assertion of the right of private judgment in relation to the truths of religion. It seems hardly necessary to say that, in the last resort, the experience of the individual consciousness must, whether its actual deductions be right or wrong, fix the limit of personal responsibility in regard to the assimilation of revealed truth, provided always that such deductions are made in good faith. Individuals may be congratulated, or not, on their selection of the theological systems to which they are prepared to yield their allegiance, just in proportion as these systems supply their personal needs and satisfy their aspirations and ideals, or fail to do so; but the fact remains that adhesion to any system, even though its ecclesiastical machinery be developed to the point of logical perfection, can never become a substitute for the personal realization of the claims which separate truths exercise upon the mind. There may be a certain degree, even a high degree, of virtue in a *fides implicita*—a faith and obedience which is able to accept the details of a system, practically without examination, as consistent parts of it, or as the logical consequences which follow from certain given premisses, on the somewhat rough and ready principle that the parts are included in the whole; but since there is an intellectual side to faith—that is, to faith taken in its highest signification—the ultimate criterion of truth must, for individuals, always be found in the mind interpreting itself in the light of such knowledge as it can acquire from whatever source it may, and it is this, one ventures to say,

[1] The Hibbert Lectures, 1883, by Charles Beard, on "The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century in its relation to Modern Thought and Knowledge," pp. 1-112 *et seq.*

obvious fact which distinguishes a spiritual religion from one which is purely authoritative.

And yet we cannot think of man's limitations without being forced to acknowledge that the acquisition of truths, the spiritual validity of which is dependent on their historical-objective value, is humanly possible only by the recognition of some source of knowledge exterior to the mind itself which is capable of supplying at first hand, as it were, data and evidential matter on which the mind may work, and from which it may draw its deductions; so that, consciously or unconsciously, men are driven in their quest of truth to fall back on the testimony derivable from beliefs and habits of thought which are the result of human experience, and which have grown up with the race until they have become crystallized, if not in the form of creeds, at least in the statement of principles. It is ever true, from the necessities of the case, that experience must be the supreme and ultimate test of truth; that is to say, what we regard as religious truths are, for their binding and compelling power, dependent on personal intuition. But for all that there may be facts of faith which are objectively true, though subjectively unrealized; and it is this lack of intuitiveness which no doubt accounts for that failing all too common among the adherents of every religious system—namely, the falling asunder of theology and religion, of thought and life. For this reason Divine revelation is not to be thought of merely as "the communication to the intellect of a series of thoughts and tenets," but rather as "consisting of facts in which God shows Himself active, and in which man wins practical experience of His gracious will. Where historical facts are so understood as to carry religious conviction there is revelation."[1] That there are doctrines which are "true for faith" may not be doubted; but surely these same doctrines are true in spite of "unfaith"! Therefore, to say with some Modernists that a doctrine may be "true for faith" is to utter what is at best a half-truth, and to

[1] So, in substance, Professor Wendt, of Jena, in a lecture which the present writer had the privilege of hearing him deliver in Oxford, May, 1904.

leave out of consideration the fact that revelation in its fullest aspect must be conceived as made up of truths, not all of which may, indeed, be intellectually apprehended, but all of which are capable of spiritual apprehension. And this is equivalent to saying that scientific theology represents the *objective*, personal religion the *subjective*, order of things; so that faith in its highest meaning consists in a condition of mind in which these two principles are rightly balanced. When religion suffers, it is generally owing to the over-emphasis of one or other of these two aspects of revelation. On the one hand there is the tendency to exalt the habit of submission to approved definitions at the expense of personal feeling, by which orthodoxy tends to become a philosophy rather than a religion, and, in its extreme form, a substitute for personal righteousness; on the other hand the principle of private judgment, exalted into a kind of theory of private inspiration, tends to become a mere excuse for emotionalism and sentimentality, and, in its extreme form, for lawlessness and the repudiation of all authority. May it not, therefore, be true to say that, while the truth in these two principles makes them mutually supplementary, pushed to extremes, they become mutually destructive?

If, then, the essential element of religion is to enable men "to get into right relations with God," it is obvious that no system or school of theology can ever be a real and living power and influence if it fails to make its appeal to the whole man, will, intelligence, and heart, or if it attempts to impose decrees and definitions which do not fit in with the manifold phases of human experience in every age. We value systems, whether Catholic or Protestant, in so far as they express for us the strivings of men's minds and hearts to arrive at satisfactory views of their relation to things unseen, and are conducive to a right understanding of the forces which have been at work in the moral and intellectual spheres; but when we come to consider the question, How far is the individual conscience responsible in regard to the knowledge of truths the objective reality of which forms the basis of Christian faith? the answer

seems to lie with the history of theology, in determining how far in the past it has been able to express its fundamental ideas in the terms of contemporary thought; and in asking how far in the future it will be able to bring about a return to primitive simplicity both of faith and practice, and to rid itself of that element of high metaphysics which is the result too often of mere human speculation, or of an excessive love of definition. "In ipsa Catholica Ecclesia magnopere curandum est, ut id teneamus, quod *ubique*, quod *semper*, quod *ab omnibus* creditum est: hoc est etenim vere proprieque catholicum." How simple and elemental would be the theological formulæ which would bind together all men of faith could this maxim of Vincent only be reduced to actual practice! Is such a position impossible? or are we still to look to a tradition which has not unfrequently come to us indirectly and through various media—sometimes distorted owing to circumstances of time and place—as that which alone expresses for us the true aspect of Christian faith?

And here may be noted a further aspect of the question, and one not to be lost sight of—namely, that religion has a subjective side for races as well as for individuals, and that, consequently, Divine revelation must always be conceived with certain drawbacks, which are due to the peculiarities of the channels through which it comes to us. For this reason it would seem as though the *forms* under which Christianity finds expression among Greek, Latin, and northern nations, are often as ineradicable as race itself, and are as little capable of fusion as are the nations whose characteristics they so frequently represent; so that, so long as God's revelation is viewed—as viewed it must be—under conditions which are peculiar to races and peoples, it will often be as difficult for a Teuton to embrace wholeheartedly the peculiar features of Greek and Latin forms of religious thought as it formerly was for the Greek to enter into the spirit of the Jew. It is well to keep this fact in view, as it may help us to realize that the precise forms under which Christian doctrine is expressed for us are not *necessarily* to be regarded as final; for although Christianity itself, as the direct

and personal revelation of God, is, and must be, objectively complete, *subjectively* its modes of expression are capable of re-interpretation, expansion, and development, so that in process of time it is possible for them to assume forms which would have seemed out of harmony with the conceptions of earlier ages.[1]

The influence of such tendencies is, naturally, most apparent when we consider their bearing on questions relating to credal statements and the doctrine of Sacraments. For centuries past orthodox Christianity has thought in the terms of Greek metaphysics, but although the phraseology which it has employed to express its religious ideas may have been true for past generations, and may be, to a large extent, true for us to-day, yet, as "God no more revealed metaphysics than He did chemistry, Christian revelation, being primarily a setting forth of facts, does not in itself afford a guarantee of the certainty of the speculations which are built upon these facts. Such speculations are *dogmas* in the original sense of the word—*i.e.*, simply personal convictions. To the statement of one man's convictions other men may assent, but they can never be quite sure that they understand its terms in the precise sense in which the original framer of the statement understood them."[2] If this very obvious fact can have any lesson for men in the field of theological controversy to-day, it should be to teach them the necessity of toleration, and the futility of pronouncing condemnation upon the manner in which schools of thought from which they may differ think it best to express the religious conceptions for which they stand; for, imperfect as the formulæ employed must always be *in fact*, their imperfection lies in this, that they are, after all, but relatively and subjectively inadequate. We have, indeed, only to remember the hesitation which St.

[1] Examples are not wanting which show that such a restatement, even of fundamental truths, has actually taken place, and may be found—*e.g.*, in the primitive developments and subsequent modifications of such doctrines as the Atonement, the Inspiration of Scripture, etc.

[2] The matter is fully discussed in the Hibbert Lectures for 1888, by Dr. Edwin Hatch, on "The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church"; see especially Lecture V., "Christianity and Greek Philosophy."

Augustine expresses in regard to the term "person" as applied to the doctrine of the Trinity to realize how "human language labours altogether under great poverty of speech" in its efforts to express the eternal verities;[1] and how the true apprehension of Christian truth lies less with the head than with the heart, and is to be attained more by a realization of the power which flows from the *facts* revealed than by the inheritance of words and phrases by which to express them.

"Great truths are dearly bought. The common truth,
Such as men give and take from day to day,
Comes in the common walk of easy life,
Blown by the careless wind across our way.

"Great truths are greatly won. Not found by chance,
Nor wafted on the breath of summer dream;
But grasped in the great struggle of the soul,
Hard buffeting with adverse wind and stream.

"Wrung from the troubled spirit, in hard hours
Of weakness, solitude, perchance of pain,
Truth springs, like harvest from the well-ploughed field,
And the soul feels it has not wept in vain."[2]

ALEXANDER HENDERSON.
Priest-in-charge of Prestonpans.

---

[1] "Cum quaeritur quid tres, magna prorsus inopia humanum laborat eloquium. Dictum est tamen tres personæ non ut illud diceretur, sed ne taceretur" (Aug. De Trinitate, V. ix., *cf.* VII. vi.).

[2] Dr. Horatius Bonar, in "Hymns of Faith and Hope."