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THE POSTULATE OF CHRISTIAN EVIDENCES.

BY THE REV. E. ABBEY TINDALL, M.A., Rector of Didsbury.

A LONG era of preparation according to our Christian faith was prefixed to the revelation of Jesus Christ. From the patriarchs to John the Baptist a Semitic race received "at sundry times and in divers manners" the messages which should enable men to perceive the truth which "in the fullness of time" came into the world with the appearance of the Son of God. The need of evidences to a just apprehension of a Divine Saviour was thus providentially recognized, and a preliminary outline sketched to substantiate the fundamental postulate of the doctrine of Christ.

The selection of the Hebrews as the people through whom God would make Himself more fully known to men was remarkable. "Philosophy proper had no existence, and could have none among the Hebrews. A process of thought free from pre-suppositions was unknown to them. God and divine revelation were accepted as fixed points."¹ The Jew was content with interpretative symbols of that which should be believed, and with earthly manifestations of the working of Almighty power; but the Gentile nations, although the conception of God was from the first indigenous in man, were dissatisfied without a richer intellectual acquaintance with the Divine Personality. The Pharisee clamoured for a miraculous racial deliverance and exaltation: the Athenian dedicated an altar "to the unknown God." "The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God." The Apostle came as a Jew to the Gentiles, assuming rather than proving the existence of God.

The quasi-scientific proofs of a Deity, demanded by unbelief, and sometimes attempted by the Apologists of faith, are doomed to failure, for the procedure is inadequate. The favourite methods have been by analogy and logic. As the watch which Paley found on Hampstead Heath was the work of a watchmaker, so the world with its wonderful contrivances and inherent fitnesses must have had an Architect. But since the scope of a man's enterprise is limited by the adaptability of his material—he cannot make bread

¹ Hastings' *Bible Dictionary* iv. 924 f.n.

of stones—the comparison does not lead to a Creator Who is transcendent over matter. Supposing that the law of cause and effect has always operated without intermission, that every effect is the outcome of a preceding cause which in turn was itself the effect of yet another cause, and that the long chain may be extended backwards until in weariness we assume a First Cause of all, it is illogical to hypothecate infinitude of this First Cause, for the sum total of visible effects, incalculably vast as it is, comes short of being infinite. The deduction of Reality from the Idea, first suggested by the acute intellect of Anselm, is too cumbrous [a philosophical process and of too disputable a character to convince an ordinary inquirer.

Interesting as are the speculations of the human mind concerning God, man, and Eternity, they are apt to carry us out of our depth. The counter-schemes to which Christianity is opposed may be classified as Atheism, Pantheism, and Deism, although for the sake of completeness each of them should be sub-divided into several distinct groups, and in fairness the first should be spoken of from its more constructive aspect as Materialism. The audacity of the usual Materialistic assumption that, where our present knowledge (as, *e.g.*, on the origin of life) is uncertain, time and increasing wisdom will justify that hypothesis; the mazes of Pantheism arising mainly from its negative definition of personality that the self is not the non-self, its struggle to harmonise the conception of creation as without beginning with the Absoluteness of God, and its endeavour to find room for progress in a self-governed universe; and the Deistic removal of God to such a distance in the remote past as to render continued existence at the least unnecessary, have induced the inevitable re-action of Agnosticism. This is a counsel of despair. Materialism and Pantheism are unmoral, for the sense of freedom and responsibility is fallacious when every thought and action is pre-determined by external necessity. Deism, with its warmer offspring Theism, is extravagantly optimistic, for its God is not concerned with the trifling affairs of men: sins, weaknesses and failures are of small account: the elaborate machinery of the universe will work all things out well. The removal of sin cannot be accomplished either by denying or by belittling its heinousness, nor does experience attest the Agnostic contention that education is emancipation.

The non-Christian systems spend their force in reasoning from the world to God. The evidence of facts is insufficient to support the weight of their theories. Christianity starts from God and the Creation with the corollary that a revelation of God is possible. The appeal is not to reason but to faith. Its evidence is corroborative, inferential, accumulative, not demonstrative. It does not ignore reason, nor conflict with reason, but in realms beyond the certainties of our knowledge states a case, asks belief, and adduces a class of evidence which would be technically described as circumstantial. Proclaiming the love of God, the sinfulness of man, the atonement by Christ, and a splendid hope of immortality, it utilises historical fact and daily experience as the needful testimony to its truthfulness.

The wisdom of Holy Scripture is shown by the order in which these great topics are introduced. Philosophers commence by developing their conception of the Deity. The inspired writers start from human iniquity defined as disobedience to God. The creation-narratives assert His existence and the possibility of communication between Him and man. Then the whole problem of evil with all its dire consequences is set before us, manifesting the characters of God by His treatment of offenders. From the outset the tendency of sin to harden the heart and induce the utmost indifference is apparent. The callousness of Cain succeeds the alarm of Adam. From the history of Israel we are taught how true this is in the individual, the family, and the nation. Endeavours to overthrow the tyranny, escape the bondage, and evade the results of sin are ineffectual. Its full strength is organized to resist amendment. If deliverance is to come, it must do so from without. Only the blind to moral truth and the inexperienced in social reform can dispute the statement. Human strength is insufficient to crush sin's virility. History repeats itself. Recent events have again demonstrated that legislative enactment, political treaty, police alertness, and military force are unable to wholly subdue the corruptive power of greed and lust.

The inspiration of the Old Testament is manifest in its mode of recording events. Externally sacred and profane history are not dissimilar. But the religious writer perceives an inner significance which is overlooked in more secular annals. Difficulties and troubles are the common lot of men. Frequently they can be traced to moral depravity, though at times the connection appears to be loose.

Behind these trials the operation of a hand of mercy is scarcely veiled. That a flood should follow the basest indulgence of carnal iniquity, or that fire from Heaven should consume the cities of bestiality in the vicinity of the Red Sea, is evidence of a righteous judgment inflicted by a personal Governor. The ruin of Pharaoh and his hosts, the fall of the walls of Jericho, or the scattering of the Assyrian forces, are just retributions of criminal ambition. Alike in unexpected calamities and in those which ordinary foresight might have predicted the finger of God is visible. His holiness is displayed in the catastrophe, His grace in the miraculous accompaniments which need no repetition after they have effectually drawn attention to His presence, and His mercy in the consequential impetus which through the deliverance of the elect is given to the forces that work for righteousness. These attributes of His character are not extolled in other creeds, but in the special preparation of the world for Christ they are placed in the foreground.

The preacher enforces this doctrine from a wealth of Scriptural detail; the Christian apologist will avoid the prejudices of his antagonists against the Bible by turning to other sources of information. The Jewish race approached extermination in A.D. 70. A weak and impoverished remnant was scattered over the face of the earth, but in defiance of all the laws of sociology has refused to be absorbed into the peoples amongst whom it mingled, has maintained a strange aloofness in spite of gross persecution and slander, and after the lapse of eighteen centuries and a half is to-day making a bold and promising claim for restoration. A well-deserved punishment for the rejection of the prophets and the blood-guiltiness of the Crucifixion has been accompanied by a providential mercy, miraculous in its nature, and immediately fraught with benediction to all men by the abolition of the claims of the ceremonial law. The appalling iniquity of the Decian and Diocletian persecutions brought a tottering Empire to the verge of ruin in the civil wars which followed. The heroism and fortitude of the martyrs produced results which were marked by the half-hearted conversion of Constantine, the rise of Christianity upon the ashes of Paganism, and the salvation of society by the Church. The casual student and the cynical historian narrate the incidents with inadequate explanation. The suggestion that the world is governed by a God of Justice and Mercy exactly meets the whole sequence of events.

The Mohammedan peril of the Middle Ages alarmed Europe especially after the Conquest of Constantinople in 1453, was held in check after the defeat of Solyman outside Vienna in 1529, but never abated until the dawn of Christian missions for the conversion of the infidel. The condition of the Church had provoked disaster : the revival of learning and the Reformation showed the working of love beneath the penalty ; activity for God rolled back the evil.

The extermination of heresy by scaffold and stake gave the Roman Church a notable victory. " Jam nemo reclamat, nullus obstitit " exclaimed the orator of the Lateran Council in 1514. " Jam omnes unum Deum, unam fidem, unum baptisma corde juste credunt, et ore salubriter confitentur." Within three and a half years the proud Church was reeling under the blows of a hitherto obscure monk, the whole ecclesiastical edifice recoiled with a wound from which it cannot recover, justification by faith only was preached everywhere, new life began to fill the world.

The moral degradation and the impure atheism of the eighteenth century plunged France into a Reign of Terror, excited the blasphemies of Notre Dame, and stirred the nations to prolonged and severe warfare. Nor did the horrors cease until the Evangelical Revival had well begun its work of purification. The arrogance of apostate Germany challenged the world to another clash of arms. In the spring of 1918 this power gave no signs of snapping. The day after the English Parliament decided to attend with the King a service of supplication at St. Margaret's, Westminster—the Americans under the leadership of President Wilson being also reliant upon prayer—the tide began to turn. After August 4, the actual day of intercession, the ebb became increasingly rapid. On the first day of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, in the plains of Megiddo, a welcome victory sent a feeling of consternation throughout the long line held by our opponents. Bulgarians, Turks, and Austrians capitulated, and the Germans sought an armistice. The mighty were dethroned, the punishment which had befallen all peoples for their guilt was relaxed, a fresh hope has been given to mankind.

The nature of our argument renders it incapable of production in its entirety. All that can be expected is that a few pigeon-holes may be clearly labelled into which epitomes of evidence can from time to time be placed as by research in history and biography an

ampler testimony is forthcoming. By sheer quantity this will become convincing.

The methods of Divine revelation are numerous. By dreams to Jacob and Joseph, by signs to Moses and Ahaz, by a prophet to David and John, by a seeming human appearance to Abraham and Joshua, by the Angel of the Lord to others, and by the theophanies of Isaiah and Ezekiel, truth was communicated. The purpose was either to convince of sin, to deepen remorse, to assure of pardon, or to enlist for service. When the soul is ripe for such movements, man most vividly realizes that he is built in the image of God. There is then a correspondence between the creature and the Creator, a closeness of contact, an understanding which at other times is lost or overlooked. That God hates sin, freely forgives the penitent, and uses in His work the consecrated servant is clearly perceived. Guilt and remorse are impossible to God, but the sin of man gives to Him the deep sorrow of an outraged affection. Repentance in man and pardon in God are linked inseparably together. The result is a desire for fuller co-operation in the redemption of humanity. The miraculous accompaniments occasionally recorded in the Scriptures are worthy of so great a revelation, and the evidential value of the biographies of a countless number of earnest Christians equally attests the truth. It would be idle to attempt a list of all whose experiences confirm the fact, invidious to make a selection, and needless to do either when one of the greatest living psychologists¹ tells us that "crises in the development of personality are the rule rather than the exception," and adds that this "is familiarly known in religious experience as conversion or 'second birth.'" Regeneration is parallel to generation in the use of natural agency. But the naturalistic explanations which are proffered are unsatisfactory. By some writers conversion is regarded as incidental to adolescence, the smaller outlook of the child yielding to the wider prospect of maturity. But eminent instances are by no means confined to that period of life, nor does instability in the new life cast doubt upon a divine origin any more than the sin of Adam disputes the initial creation by God. How else can these experiences be accounted for? Is it "unconscious cerebration"? Then some power not our own must move the unconscious thought. Is it "automatism"? The term implies the liberation of some freshly

¹ Prof. James Ward.

active force when a former has run a prescribed measure of its course, but does not define its character. Is it "subconsciousness" or the "subliminal self"? The idea is to many thinkers a psychological mare's nest, throwing beyond our ken the sphere we desire to examine. In any case it agrees with the theological notion that when the influences of the world are less potent God Himself is nearer to us, but it leaves unstated what is the power that operates in this field of mentality. Thus we return to the contention that the Christian hypothesis alone explains the phenomena, and is confirmed by their perpetual occurrence.

"The law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ." "To Him give all the prophets witness." The Messianic hope of lawgiver and prophets is one of the most arresting features in the evolution of human thought. All shades of opinion have found advocates from the buoyant but baseless optimism of the Deists to the acute pessimism of Schopenhauer and von Hartmann. The peculiarity of the Hebrew prophets is the combination of the two extremes. In a holy zeal for righteousness they dealt unsparingly with Israel's sin and pictured in lurid colours the dreadful disasters and desolations which were sure to come. Then turning to God they spoke of a golden age to follow in a new heaven and a new earth wherein righteousness would dwell. Wearied with the rebellions in the wilderness Moses warned the people of the awful sufferings which such conduct must precipitate, and also foresaw the coming of a prophet whom they would hear. John the Baptist preached of the winnowing fan, the axe, the fire, and also proclaimed "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world." A hardened nation forgot the beautiful symbolism of their sacrifices, became self-satisfied, and maltreated the men of God. They trusted in Egypt, not in Jehovah. But a devout remnant looked for the promised consolations and redemption. The darker side of the prophecies has been abundantly fulfilled. The brighter finds encouragement in Christ. Whence came these opposite and conflicting tendencies? They are not mere vacillations due to the transient moods of the speakers. Nought but the power and the truth of God could reconcile them in the actual experience of men.

The great saints of Christendom have shown the same leanings. They, too, have wearied of life, have prayed for death and thought the final judgment to be immediately impending. Yet at the same

moment they have uplifted the Christ of the Cross as mighty to save. Such men are in contact with hard facts. They cannot disregard the things which contradict the peculiar theories of their own minds. They are puzzled, yet quite certain : fearful, yet not afraid : weak in the presence of others, yet strong in their message. The antinomies of spiritual life are obvious. They describe the conflict between God and sin. And the victory rests with God.

In an age of scientific inquiry when men seek the certitude of direct evidence as the basis of all knowledge, the Old Testament has been subjected to the most searching critical analysis. The investigation of the literary sources is legitimate, and will afford beneficial results. But when on *à priori* grounds its history is turned into legend, the miracles are expunged, the predictions nullified, and the supernatural excluded, the question must still be asked how a doctrine—which so closely fits the condition of human life, lays bare the moral struggles and issues of men, and refers to God as the living Power which again and again uplifts when all is ready to perish—arose, if it has not come from the Most High. It did not come by scientific investigation, nor by philosophical meditation, for the method of the Scriptures is neither scientific nor philosophical. It is not an instinct, for the natural heart invariably resists it. Whence comes it but from God ? “ That which is born of the flesh is flesh ; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

That God *is*, and can be known ; that God is very just and most merciful ; that God desires to win men from sin and lead them to a pure and blessed life ; that God has replaced the natural despair of the heart by a real and living hope—all this was first taught, and afterwards the Son of God came for our redemption. These convictions must possess the heart and mind before we can examine, not to say accept, the evidences of the Person and Work of Christ which in order of time were subsequently disclosed. They are the great postulate of a Christian faith. “ He that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.” No further evidence will be given than Moses and the prophets. “ If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.” And their witness is corroborated in the pages of Christian history.

E. ABBEY TINDALL.