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THE CHURCHMAN

MAY, 1886.

ART. I.—THE CAUSES OF MODERN DOUBT.

AN acute student of the history of human thought has observed that great waves of opinion seem to pass periodically over bodies of men, gathered into nations or otherwise united by the affinities of civilization. That such a wave of sceptical opinion is passing over our own country at the present time, few competent observers will deny. One of the ablest and calmest among our Christian apologists says, "Doubts are diffused far more widely than is generally avowed. The very air is heavy with them; they pervade alike literature and society; they are not confined to the learned, they perplex parents, and confuse the young."¹

If this malady of the intellect is to be wisely and successfully treated, we must go back with unfaltering knowledge to the causes which have produced so wide-spread an evil. Without a clear acquaintance with the origin of the mischief our attempts at a remedy are more likely than not to be mere gropings in the dark. The Christian thinker is irresistibly drawn to ask—What are the causes of modern doubt? Nor can he rest without a distinct and comprehensive answer.

The general causes of unbelief fall, of course, into two distinct classes—the intellectual and the moral.

The moral causes, that is, enmity of heart, antagonism of sympathy and feeling towards Christianity, are always at work amongst men. They exert a force that varies little from age to age. At the present time there is no reason to conclude that such causes are working with more than usual intensity and activity. Beyond question they *are* working. But this is not a licentious age, like that of Charles II., which either seeks in unbelief a shelter for its sin, or endeavours to soothe its conscience with the anodynes of doubt. The rapid increase of

¹ Wace, "Christianity and Morality," p. 3.

wealth may in some classes have fostered vice, and facilities for continental travel may have familiarized many Englishmen with unaccustomed forms of practical irreligion; but no one will contend that our difficulties find their ultimate or proximate cause in the swift growth of our national prosperity, or the greater opportunities for international communication. Immorality has not produced the present unbelief, any more than the present unbelief has, to any appreciable extent, produced immorality.

Our inquiry, therefore, into the origination of modern scepticism must be carried on amongst the intellectual causes. An examination of these is made exceedingly difficult by reason of two facts. The first is that the two principal causes already named—the intellectual and the moral—can scarcely ever be found acting separately, so as to be studied apart. Now one may be the stronger and more conspicuous, now the other; but generally they are closely combined. If the intellectual assailant be a man of immoral or unspiritual life, he will be naturally inclined to disbelief; he will eagerly lay hold of arguments that tell against Christianity; he will even at times unconsciously shape his reasonings or scientific theories into a form needlessly unfavourable to accepted Christian truth. The second fact is the difficulty, peculiar to those “who live in the stream and current of a quickly moving generation,” of estimating aright the nature of those movements in which they themselves are taking part; and still more, of ascertaining the causes that produced movements as yet only partially developed. One foremost apologist considers this latter difficulty so great as to render such an inquiry as we are now undertaking a vain search. “The causes,” he says, “defy any formal classification.” Were this so, it might well be feared that we are still very far from the application of an effectual remedy. But the quest is not so hopeless.

At the outset, when we scrutinize closely the mental movements of this century, one notable fact stands out instantly and conspicuously. This century has witnessed an amazing and almost bewildering progress of knowledge. There has followed, in consequence, a great awakening of the human mind. In some departments our knowledge has been more than doubled. Dr. Günther, for example, tells us “that while the total number of animals described up to 1831 was not more than 70,000, the number now is at least 320,000.” In astronomy, by the discovery and application of spectrum analysis, our knowledge of the nature and structure and evolutionary history of the heavenly bodies has been enlarged to an almost incredible extent. These are but two instances out of many. Moreover, this unparalleled increase of scientific and other knowledge

has led to changes, to revolutions, indeed, in some of the older branches of science, and to the creation of sciences altogether new. "New material of thought," new premises to reason from, have been presented to men in a manner unequalled within the Christian era. The revival of classical learning in the age immediately preceding the Reformation of the sixteenth century, great and wide-reaching as was its influence, is scarcely to be compared for potency with the astounding discoveries of the last fifty years.

Now it has been admirably shown by Canon Farrar, of Durham, that "when any new material of thought is presented to the human mind, or when any alteration in the state of knowledge on which the human mind forms its judgment, imparts to an old established religion an aspect of opposition which was before unperceived, the religion is subjected to the ordeal of an investigation. Science examines the doctrines taught by it, criticizes the evidence on which they profess to rest, and the literature which is their expression."¹ This remark may give us the clue to a satisfactory classification of the causes which have brought about the phenomena of modern scepticism.

The causes are not one, but manifold; not simple, but complex. There is in fact what Stuart Mill calls "a plurality of causes," and this "plurality of causes" may be most conveniently classified as *literary*, *scientific*, *philosophical*, and *theological*. In dealing briefly with each of these it should be clearly understood that when any science, system or theory is said to have contributed to the origination of modern doubt, the writer does not intend necessarily to reflect upon it, or to brand it thereby as a thing of evil. The abuse of a system is no argument against its general character.

I. *Literary*.—Foremost and chief amongst this class of causes must be set the new science of historical criticism. Within the memory of living men the ideal of history has been revolutionized. The old notion and type of history are now fairly discredited. A well-known historical critic has happily compared the old masters of history to the old masters of painting. "The old writers," he says, "generally thought more of the brilliancy of their colours and the effectiveness of their pictures than of their exact truth. They thought little of close conformity to the scene or object delineated, provided they produced striking compositions with grand outline and rich tints." This witness is true. The old historians were great in grouping, but they were not great in research. By their own avowal men knew how they had put into the mouths of their

¹ "Critical History of Free Thought," p. 9.

heroes fictitious speeches, and it had long been suspected that deeds, equally fictitious, had found a way into their record of the hero's life. In justice to the old historians it must be said that the materials for accurate history were almost entirely inaccessible, and they could hardly do other than they did, if history were to be written at all.

But the new light, so long waited for, has come at last. History within this century has assumed an entirely new form. Critical investigation of facts, critical inquiry into the causes of change, critical study of the origin and development of nations and languages, have taken the place of the old portrait-drawing. "Research" is the historian's watchword to-day. Above all things he desires to make sure of his facts. No one can be surprised that a careful critical examination of statements coming down unchallenged from antiquity has resolved many a so-called fact into a myth, many a marvellous incident into a mere legend; or that it has stripped genuine facts of great accretions which had in the course of centuries gathered around a comparatively small nucleus of truth. Much, therefore, that had been universally accepted has vanished altogether and for ever from the realm of history. From Niebuhr onwards a great process of analysis and reduction has gone on. Not only so, but old facts have been set in new lights, and shown to possess an unsuspected significance. In a word, history, especially ancient history, "has become a reality, instead of the nebulous unreality it had been before."

Now it was inevitable that sooner or later the method of critical investigation should be applied to the historical books of Scripture, and that the statements contained in these books should be subjected to the most searching scrutiny. The very fruitfulness of the method in its application to secular history, ensured a similar treatment of sacred history. No Christian thinker can possibly object to this. He cannot deny to the historical critic the most careful and thorough-going examination of the historical facts of the Bible; on the contrary, he will ever heartily welcome attention to those facts which are the basis of his religion, and most welcome that attention when it is most intelligent and concentrated. The Truth never fears a cross-examination, because she never loses by it. That scrutiny has already taken place; historical criticism has been freely applied to Scripture. The issue with many investigators, and these amongst the most learned, able, and painstaking, is a firmer faith than ever in the thorough truth and reliability of the facts recorded in the Bible. The authenticity and genuineness of St. John's Gospel, for instance, are established on a stronger basis of argument and proof than they previously rested upon. We have already gained much, and shall probably gain more from

this unflinching and unsparing investigation, this patient sifting through and through of the facts of Biblical history. But in other minds the issue is doubt, nay, positive disbelief. Goldziher and Strauss, for example, have done their utmost to resolve, the one Jewish history, the other Christian history, into a series of myths. Ewald, Pfleiderer, Graf, and Wellhausen, with many more, whilst not going nearly so far as the two former critics, have nevertheless discovered, as they believe, great "developments," "compositions," and "additions," in the history of Israel, and the lives of Jesus and His Apostles. The questions raised by them are far too wide to be discussed here, but the writer may be allowed, in passing, to deplore the startling want of reverence manifested by the majority of hostile inquirers. Their irreverence suggests, and many portions of their writings confirm the suspicion that they came to the task with a rooted disbelief in the miraculous. For them the supernatural was the impossible: therefore when any narrative of a supernatural occurrence was met with in Biblical history, the incident was *ipso facto* proved to be a mere legend; the history was so far mythical, or the fruit of a "pious" imagination, and the sole business of the critic was to demonstrate its inexactness. Such a method is indeed "short and easy," but it is by no means satisfactory and convincing. Moreover, it must be urged against these critics that every man's intellectual preferences or prejudices seem to be his main canons of historical evidence. Their mode of procedure is arbitrary to the last degree. Hence the results obtained are, as a rule, in no two cases the same. Too often, indeed, the critic appears to have abdicated the functions of a calm investigator and impartial judge, to play the part of ardent advocate of some pet theory.

Be this, however, as it may, no one can doubt that in the application of the methods of historical criticism to the historical books of Scripture, we have one very potent cause of the present unbelief. As little can anyone doubt that were the worst and most destructive conclusions of historical critics established, the result would be fatal. Christianity is built on a foundation of facts; its historical truth is of vital importance to its authority and progress in the world. If Jesus Christ be only a creation of the sanctified imagination, and not a veritable historic personage, He is not Divine; our faith is vain.

II. *Scientific*.—The causes of unbelief which fall under this head have been originated almost entirely by the amazing advance of science during the last half century. The widespread influence of that advance has been felt by all intelligent persons, and even by many who are not intelligent. Its action on the public mind has been both general and specific.

The general effect has been produced, not by the bringing to light of this or that scientific truth, not by the widening or even revolutionizing of this or that science, but by the fact that so many scientific theories, long established and hitherto universally accepted, have been completely overturned; so that, as the late Professor Jevons has observed, "in innumerable instances the confident belief of one generation has been falsified by the wider observation of a succeeding one." The rejection of the corpuscular theory of light for the undulatory theory; the general adoption by biologists of the theory of evolution in place of the theory of repeated distinct creations¹; the abandonment in geology of the theory of change through violent periodical convulsions, and the ascription of the geological structure of the earth to the action of ordinary forces working through immense periods of time—these are a few instances illustrating that general overthrow of previous theories which has taken place during the present century. Now, it is simply impossible that so large a number of long-established theories should be demolished without a feeling of general uncertainty and suspicion taking possession of the human mind. Men ask instinctively, May not theories as yet unassailed prove to be equally unfounded?—Are all that we take to be facts really and truly so? A spirit of scepticism is engendered, which infects not only the scientific, but all departments of knowledge, theology not least. The spirit of the age is, in one word, a spirit of doubt.

It is not difficult to perceive how dangerous such an attitude of suspicion and distrust may be to some people, when they come to the truths of revelation under its malign influence. For, not to revert to the moral ally which unbelief has in the human heart, it must be remembered, on the one hand, that a fair and open mind is most likely to find the truth; and, on the other, that some of the greatest truths of Scripture, such as the doctrine of the ever-adorable Trinity and the Incarnation of our blessed Lord, do not admit of proof by any methods of human reason or science. Where Christian truths do admit of verification, it is not usually such verification as this age loves to have. In such circumstances, and with such a spirit, to slide into unbelief is not a hard matter. From such an attitude of general suspicion and uncertainty, from the feeling of deep distrust in regard to everything that refuses to come within the limits of mathematical, or logical, or scientific demonstration, there is too often a swift and brief transition to the conclusion that, concerning the existence and will of a

¹ The writer cites the evolution theory simply as an illustration, without at all expressing his belief in it. The evidence for it, as yet, is far from being complete.

Divine Being, nothing whatever can be known. Agnosticism thus becomes the creed of the distrustful seeker after truth—may we not add, the blighting curse of his intellectual and spiritual life?

But the advance of science does not operate solely in this general way. Almost every step in that advance has produced its own distinct effect. Take the new facts that have been brought to light, the new theories that have become current, such as the antiquity of man, the building-up of the earth's crust through almost countless ages, the doctrine of evolution as applied to the human race. Whether these admit of being harmonized with the actual statements of Scripture cannot now be discussed, though we think Christians have no need to be alarmed on that score. It is certain, however, that they are incapable of being harmonized with some interpretations of those statements which have been commonly received. Such interpretations may have to be abandoned—in some instances are already abandoned. Now, this process of abandonment is for a certain class of minds, especially the imperfectly cultured, one of considerable peril. They seem quite unable to distinguish between the surrender of particular interpretations of Scripture statements which have nothing but human authority to rest upon, and the surrender of those statements themselves. It is as if fact and theory had in their minds so become one, that the abandonment of the theory involves of necessity the renunciation of the fact. Instead of setting out to examine fact and statement anew, in order more certainly to grasp the meaning and exact nature of both, they relax all effort, indolently let faith slip, and surrender themselves to vague unbelief—a mistake surely unreasonable enough, but undoubtedly far from uncommon.

Moreover, the first effect produced by some of those new doctrines is an effect neither legitimate nor likely to be abiding. The main part of Darwin's teaching is by no means incapable of reconciliation with the Christian faith, even should his theory be established in its integrity. Yet, as the Archbishop of York recently remarked in his address to Convocation, a "powerful drift towards materialism has set in since the publication of Darwin's principal work," the result of which is most peculiar. This, the Archbishop says, "accounts for much of the change in public opinion which we have noticed":

There is much religious apathy; much aversion from dogmatic statements and discussions. The new views of natural history, summed up under the word "evolution," are not to my mind inconsistent with true belief in God, and in the Lord's Resurrection and loving work for us. But as they are taught they have led many away from all interest in such doctrines. My brethren who have parochial cures could witness to that

out of their experience. It has led men, not to somewhat lower views of Christian doctrine, to a creed shaded down through semi-Arianism and Arianism to Deism, like the tints of the solar spectrum ; it has left nothing at all, it has left in the creation no loving purpose, no marks of design, and no God. It has left man no sense of sin inborn, no need of atonement, no fear of judgment, no hereafter. Some have flung back with defiant rejection the creed of their youth ; but far more are content to see with philosophic calm the worship continue, and the prayer, and the popular hope and fear of things to come, from which the meaning has for them departed ; they are not unfriendly ; the charitable works of the Church they truly approve, for unselfishness is philosophic as well as religious ; and the number is increasing, and many of them are not educated in religious truth, so that they could resist the overthrow of faith. It is this class which is our danger. They support the Church, not as pillars within, but as ill-adjusted buttresses without.

Of one thing—and, we might almost say, of one thing only—in connection with the rapid advance of science, Christians may justly complain. This is the too hasty generalization of many scientific men, from which, during the last fifty years, both faith and science have suffered no little trouble and damage. In an age of great and startling discovery, when new truths seem, as it were, to pour on scientists unbidden, the temptation to many minds is almost irresistible to let hypothesis outrun investigation, and to imagine that assumptions imperfectly tested may be received as established laws. This has been an unquestionable source of unbelief. In too many cases these half-verified theories, when unfavourable to revealed truth, have been vehemently urged against us as if they were undoubted “conquests of science.” After a brief existence they cease to be, for the keen-sighted, patient, and logical student comes and explodes them. But the evil they did lives after them ; the unbelief started into being does not pass away with the unfounded theory. It survives, relentlessly working out its mischief within the soul it possesses—it may even be, multiplying itself and entering into other souls—to accomplish finally a ruin that no human eye can at present trace. In the interests of faith and science alike, Christian thinkers cannot insist too strongly upon the thorough-going and entirely candid verification of hypotheses. Let the “problems of science” be turned into the “conquests of science” before they are seriously set in opposition to the Christian faith.

III. *Philosophical.*—These causes of modern doubt do not admit, from the nature of the subject, of more than mere enumeration. It is a lamentable fact that most of the prevalent systems of philosophy are either distinctly out of harmony, or most imperfectly in accord with Christianity. To ascertain the relation of any philosophical system to Revealed Truth, we need only examine its teaching as to the existence of God

and the immateriality and immortality of the soul. When this test is applied to the prevalent systems the result is eminently unsatisfactory. The Sensualistic philosophy resolves the spirit and higher faculties of man into so many fine and more subtle modifications of his material frame. The Pantheistic philosophy of Spinoza, Schelling, and Hegel diffuses God through the whole universe as its animating soul and organizing principle. The Agnostic philosophy of Herbert Spencer admits the possible existence of God, but denies us any real knowledge of Him. The Positivist philosophy leaves no place whatever for a Divine Being; it denies the possibility of a revelation and the true immortality of man; it exalts the laws of Nature as "the only Providence, obedience to them as the only piety." Thus, on philosophical grounds, objections are raised to the very possibility of a true theology. These systems have widely and deeply influenced the thought of educated persons, and in the future defence of Christianity more attention will have to be paid to the attack from this quarter than it has hitherto received.

IV. *Theological*.—Perfectly distinct from the causes already dealt with is this last class in our list, which is perhaps, in its influence, the most potent of them all. The Christian faith has fared like many a noble vessel on a long voyage. As it has come down to us through the generations, accretions have gathered upon it which seriously impede its progress. The gloss of erroneous interpretation, to which every age makes its contribution, has accumulated round the Scriptures. Theologians, like men of science, are sometimes guilty of crude deductions and fanciful theories. Christian apologists, occasionally more zealous than wise, have at times erected defences around the faith, which, are by no means impregnable. Enthusiastic sectaries push their favourite notions to excess, or exaggerate the favourite doctrine until it grows out of all proportion to the rest of the faith; they present the truth so one-sidedly that the proverbial falsity of the half-truth is attained. Thus, that which is no part of Christian faith is represented as belonging to the heart and centre of the truth, sometimes as being its very essence. Then, when the day of exposure and rectification comes, and these mistaken views and false defences are swept away, many simple Christians, and even some who are not simple, feel as if Christianity itself had gone with the banished notions. The truth suffers in their estimation through the destruction of that error which had improperly fastened upon it; although, in fact, nothing whatever has been done, except to clear the truth from that which was never an organic part of it, which was, indeed, only a hindrance and a burden.

To fix such a charge as this upon any system is a delicate undertaking, but the interests of truth are supreme. With all respect for those who have advocated such systems, the writer would venture to express his own strong conviction that much of the present difficulty is due to the hardest doctrines of an extreme Calvinism propagated in a past age, and to the peculiar and distinctive doctrines of the Church of Rome. On the one hand, the doctrine of the Divine Sovereignty has been so stated as to obscure God's universal love, and to set Him forth in hard and dark colours as a veritable terror to the human soul. On the other, salvation has been reduced well-nigh to a series of mechanical acts, unauthorized and unreasonable demands have been made on faith, and human freedom has been challenged by a spiritual tyranny. By these misrepresentations multitudes have been repelled from Christian allegiance and driven into the opposite camp. The scepticism which prevails to such a distressing extent in France, Italy, and Switzerland, is only too plain a proof that this change is by no means without foundation.

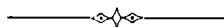
At the same time the position of Christian apologists has been, and is, one of extreme difficulty. As the attack has developed itself, they have had, not exactly to change front in face of the enemy, but to quit some positions and take up new ones. Such a process is most trying to all whom it concerns, and for those who cannot take a bird's-eye view of the situation it is extremely embarrassing to faith and courage. Nevertheless it is being successfully done, and in the fact that Christian leaders have had the wisdom and the daring to attempt it, consists one of the most hopeful signs for the future.

And in most sober truth we have nothing to fear. Every one of the causes we have enumerated is temporary in its hostile operation. Historical criticism is an instrument that we would not willingly be without. More and more it will win its way to settled canons of evidence. It will learn what it can do, and what it cannot do. Its youthful excesses will become things of the past, the maturity of age will bring gravity and reverence and wisdom, and from such criticism the Scriptures have nothing to fear. Science, too, which in its truth is simply the correct interpretation of the Divine Book of Nature, will not be found permanently out of harmony with the teaching of Revelation. The works of God rightly seen can never contradict the Word of God rightly read. And so it is with the other two—that philosophy which Christianity has vanquished again and again, and that science of the interpretation of Scripture which, amidst much searching, ever wins its way into the clearer light.

Above all things, we need at present the patient and trustful spirit which is content to wait for wider and more exact knowledge. Through all the Christian centuries antagonism has been the law of progress. Freedom of inquiry *must* exist, and it may exist without necessarily developing into unbelief. In such inquiry what is untrue goes at last to the wall; the things that cannot be shaken remain as a possession for ever. There is temporary peril, but there is permanent gain. "The elements of truth on both sides are at last brought to light, and become the enduring property of the world."

For the present the storm rages, and in it we cannot rest and be at peace. Nevertheless this storm, like so many former ones, will exhaust itself and pass away. And when it has discharged its burden, the Church of God will find again a happy calm of faith, and in that calm the disciples will discover that they breathe a clearer atmosphere, for the storm which threatened and raged so fiercely has swept away nothing that was capable of lasting blessing to men.

JACOB STEPHENSON.



ART. II. — THE NON-ESTABLISHED CHURCH IN AMERICA.

"TWO wonders in the world: a Stamp Act in Boston, and a Bishop in Connecticut!" exclaimed the *Boston Gazette* just a century ago; and now, there are not fewer than seventy of these episcopal "wonders" scattered throughout the United States of America, from Connecticut in the east to California in the far west. The "wicked heresy" of the year 1785 was in the year 1885 a very flourishing community, organized into 49 dioceses with 3,600 clergy, and representing the highest culture and the truest piety in American Christianity. It is true that the communicants of the Protestant Episcopal Church only number some 400,000, as compared with 2,250,000 Baptists and 1,700,000 Episcopalian Methodists; but I have found all sections of Nonconformity (and their name is legion) readily admit that the Episcopal Church is gaining rapidly in the affections of the people.

After the declaration of American Independence (1776), Episcopacy and Royalty were so associated together in the popular mind, that it has taken almost a century to eradicate the notion that the two ideas are inseparable. And even now, in village communities, there are marked indica-