

ARTICLE III.

SCHLEIERMACHER AND THE CHRISTIAN CONSCIOUSNESS.

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EVERY man, however forceful in personality, is to a degree the son of his age and people. In considering Schleiermacher, it will be advantageous to trace the movement of religious thought down to his day.

With the growth of culture in modern Europe, appeared in each country the inevitable attempt of liberated reason to reckon with revealed religion. In each country the liberal movement took a characteristic form; in England deism, in France materialism, in Germany rationalism.

The rationalistic movement originates with Leibnitz. We find in Leibnitz an emphasis of the intellectual, the supremacy of reason, as strong as in any English sensationalist or French materialist; and at the same time Leibnitz is a devout Christian. He indignantly repudiates the insinuation that faith and reason are irreconcilable, and it is his purpose to show that Christianity contains nothing which may not be reasonably believed. Following out this tendency, Wolff developed his famous criteria for testing an alleged revelation,—little thinking that these tests would soon be used not to substantiate, but to destroy, the Christian miracles. Reimarus first applied Wolff's criteria rigidly to traditional Christianity. As his result, the Old Testament history is declared to be "a tissue of utter follies, infamies, deceptions, and cruelties, of which selfishness and ambition were mainly the motives. What is said about supernatural

inspiration, revelation, prophecy, and miracles, is mere delusion, deception, and abuse of the divine name." The books of the New Testament were written by Christ's disciples in a natural way, with no original claim to inspiration. Christ's teaching must be distinguished from the additions made to it by his disciples. Jesus looked for an earthly Messianic kingdom; but when his plan was frustrated by death, his followers stole his body and invented the story of the resurrection. In conclusion, revelation in general is discarded as impossible; and it is also superfluous, for the truths of natural religion are a sufficient guide and support in life, are known alike by all men, and should be regarded as sufficient for salvation. Reimarus therefore abandons Christianity, and would substitute for it the natural religion of his time.

It is commonly said that Lessing's great service to the philosophy of religion is that he distinguished the religion from the book,—Christianity from the Bible. It might be more accurate, or at least more helpful for the understanding of the real principle of this whole movement, to say that he accomplished the astonishing feat of metamorphosing the natural religion of Reimarus into genuine and historic Christianity. This he accomplished by means of a new theological principle and test of religious truth,—not the old Protestant standard, the Bible, but Christian consciousness. Lessing goes "back to Christ," through the corruption and error and myth of Scripture and of all succeeding persons and ages, and finds in Christ simply the moral ideal of the natural religion of the eighteenth century. The essential question of course was, Is this Christianity? This is what Pastor Goetze insisted on discovering; but Lessing discreetly refused fairly to meet this question. He considered it more prudent, as most of his successors in this line of controversy have done, to affirm that he was contending for the pure religion of Christ, and to attack Goetze, in Christ's own

words, as a scribe and Pharisee who clung to the letter and refused to accept the spirit which Lessing was sent to reveal.

Kant completes the rationalistic movement by rejecting the miraculous entirely, but at the same time destroys rationalism in its early form by showing that natural religion cannot be proven on rational grounds; and in his "Practical Reason" he leads the way to a return of religion as faith and feeling. The Romantic School now appears, in reaction from the barren extremes of rationalism, and on the religious side the kindred tendency found expression in the pietistic movement. At the same time the rediscovery of Spinoza affected profoundly the thinkers of the age, who, disturbed by the alleged crude supernaturalism of Christianity, were greatly attracted by the noble intellectual strength and the immanent, unvarying law of the Jewish philosopher.

It was these complex elements which entered into Schleiermacher's mental life, and it was this extraordinary situation which furnished the theater for his activity. The son of a pious clergyman, educated among the Pietists of Herrnhut, thrown early into the ferment of student life in Jena and Berlin,—it was thus that the religion of feeling was developed.

In Schleiermacher, religion as faith and feeling is reasserted against the unsatisfactory and barren extremes of rationalism. This tendency is good, so far as it is a return to the spiritual intuitions of pure Christianity; it contains, however, false and contradictory elements, owing to unwise concessions to the prevalent philosophy. These errors, however, may have served a temporarily useful purpose in an age so intoxicated with the idea that since Kant all things had become new. God was a pantheistic first principle; personality and such power of voluntary change as is presupposed in the traditional view of God's creation and gov-

ernment of the world were rejected as an anthropomorphic limitation of the absolute; the creation and the world development is an eternal and necessary process; miracle is of course impossible; prayer can be only a communing with your higher self—the over-soul,—and immortality “to be eternal in every moment.” The fact that such a system met with general acceptance in Germany, and still has a wide influence there, is a painfully striking evidence of the deep gulf which divided the intellect and the religious feeling of the time. Men were willing to seize upon almost any means to bridge the chasm, and were ready to close their eyes to inconsistencies if only something of the traditional faith could find expression in terms apparently satisfactory to critical culture.

In his first important work, “*The Discourses on Religion*,” Schleiermacher announces his characteristic doctrine; religion lies not in the sphere of intellect or will, of thought or conduct, but essentially in that of feeling. The proposition, however, that all normal feeling is religious, is evidently in need of further definition. Feeling is a mental form which may be filled with any content, from the lowest to the highest. However Schleiermacher may assert, as above, that he still holds the opinion that all feeling is religious, yet we find in fact, in his later writings, an attempt to distinguish certain feelings as peculiar to religion. “The common mark of all otherwise differing expressions of religion, through which they distinguish themselves from all other feelings, and consequently the essence of religion, is this; that we are conscious of ourselves as absolutely dependent, or, what expresses the same thing, as in relation to God.”¹ It is well for one who has been puzzled by the German term “*God-consciousness*,” to note the closing words of this quotation. The consciousness of absolute dependence is to Schleiermacher the same as the consciousness of relationship to God. As the Hegelian regards God as thought, and it is never

¹ *Christliche Glaube*, p. 14.

very clear whether this thought is human or divine, so that the philosopher can discourse in a pious way of "seeing all things in God," of knowing God in the simplest act of knowledge; so the disciple of Schleiermacher, placing the essence of religion in the feeling of dependence, claims that in this subjective feeling of dependence we immediately know God. The pantheistic philosophy of religion which prevailed in Germany in the early part of the century obliterates the common distinctions of the divine and the human, and makes clear thought and intelligible language on these points well-nigh impossible. It is well for plain people to remember this fact when they find difficulty in getting a clear notion as to the "God-consciousness" of our German neighbors.

Schleiermacher's great theological work is "The Christian Faith according to the Principles of the Protestant Church" (1821). Its leading principle is the application of his conception of religion as feeling to the traditional doctrines of the church.

He abandons entirely the traditional method of prefacing the treatment of the specifically Christian doctrines by a natural theology—the attempt to form a basis for the revealed truths by proving, so far as possible on rational grounds, the existence of God, inspiration of the Scriptures, etc. Rationalism had abused natural theology, beginning with the attempt to prove, and ending by practically denying all Christian doctrine. Schleiermacher will therefore allow reason no authority in religious matters, using as the test of Christian truth simply the normal expression of Christian consciousness. Each party, both the friends and the enemies of natural theology, has a half-truth, and the reconciliation of the two positions is, in essence, the fundamental problem of theology; it is difficult to say which position, emphasized to the exclusion of the other, is the more dangerous error. In preaching to the unconverted, or to those ignorant of

Christianity, the natural pedagogical method is to lead them from some known truth to the Christian thought. This is Paul's method on Mars' Hill. His sermon, as we have it, is all natural theology, excepting the last verse; and here, where Christ is first mentioned, a rational and historic proof is stated that Christ is the ordained judge,—i. e., God has raised him from the dead. At this point, it is to be observed, the discourse was interrupted by the scoffs of the hearers; so that, had Paul proceeded on Schleiermacher's method, he could have obtained no hearing at all. The point which Schleiermacher emphasizes—necessary to the proper control of the rationalizing tendency—is that Christian truth must be "spiritually discerned"; that it can be appreciatively known only in personal experience,—he that doeth the will shall know of the doctrine. The fatal defect of this position, when totally separated from natural theology and apologetics, is that it becomes completely subjective—it hangs in the air, with no basis in objective and universally valid fact. It is this subjective feature which makes Schleiermacher's system so incomprehensible to the common-sense thinker. Why is Christ sinless? Why is he divine, so far as I consider him so? Because I find him such in my Christian experience. Schleiermacher's position shows the influence, not only of the philosophical and critical conditions of the time, but also of the German ecclesiastical system. In a country where the children are all baptized in infancy and confirmed a dozen years later, the efforts of the Christian teacher are directed not so much to the conversion of the ungodly, as to the defense of existing faith from the attacks of antichristian unbelief.

For Schleiermacher, then, the problem of theology is simply the analysis of the content of Christian experience. "Christian articles of faith are the conceptions of the religious states of the Christian mind, expressed in language." Objective facts and relations, such as the creation of the

world, are approached from this subjective standpoint. The section which treats of creation has the general heading, "Description of our religious self-consciousness, so far as the relation between God and the world expresses itself therein." It follows, from the feeling of absolute dependence on God, that the world was created, and is sustained, by God; further than this,—the when and the how,—Christian consciousness does not inform us and we need not inquire. This method of treatment is thoroughly characteristic of Schleiermacher and should be carefully noted, as it suggests what are for him, in every case, the criterion and the limits of Christian truth. Who and what is Jesus Christ? He is the revealer of God, the Saviour. Why? Christian consciousness declares it. How does Christ reveal God and save men? Christian consciousness has no answer to these questions, and it is unnecessary to raise them. If you go farther, as most plain people will wish to do, and inquire on what grounds Christian consciousness lays claim to infallible authority, you cease to be a Christian, and Schleiermacher has nothing more to say to you.

Instead of beginning with a natural theology, the starting-point for Schleiermacher is the experience of the Christian as a member of the existing Christian community. As a member of the community, the Christian is conscious of salvation from sin and of union and peace with God; this consciousness cannot flow from the church itself, for it is composed only of erring and sinful persons; therefore this religious consciousness finds its source in the Founder of the community,—Jesus of Nazareth. As to the deity of Christ, it consists not in a supposed miraculous birth, or a metaphysical oneness with God, but in the unique perfection of his God-consciousness. Any man whose personality is constantly determined by the God-consciousness is divine. This has been true, however, only of Jesus.

I have criticised Schleiermacher's general position as too

subjective; and yet it is not subjective enough to accomplish his main purpose—to reconcile science and Christianity. The principle of his reconciliation is the specious but impossible one of totally separating the scientific or philosophical sphere from the religious. This principle has been made familiar to us by Herbert Spencer. Spencer would limit the religious to the unknowable background of knowable phenomena; Schleiermacher to the subjective states of the devout consciousness. Neither attempt can succeed, for in each case the spheres of faith and knowledge overlap. Religion refuses to be relegated to the unknowable, to be reduced to “an x” of mystery”; but persists in making some positive assertions about the known world, and in exerting a real influence in it. And it is just as impossible for a man to keep his religion—if he has any worthy of the name—cooped up within his own head; for it must assume some positive knowledge of, and must hold some real relation to, the historical and existing facts of the external world. Strauss is plainly right when he says of Schleiermacher’s position: “If not by reason of their source, yet by reason of their content and expression, the theological propositions belong to the province of knowledge, so far as they assert facts, historical, psychological, and the like; and here the demand of course appears that they contradict neither the formal nor the material laws of knowledge, that they involve us in no difficulty with science. . . . The conflict between philosophy and religion, therefore, in this situation returns anew.”

Schleiermacher’s religious theory is evidently strong in opposing the extremes of rationalism by insisting on religion as faith and feeling,—that religious truth must be spiritually discerned. Its weakness lies in its false and dangerous subjectivity, disregarding the Scriptures and natural theology, so that, just as Lessing identifies original Christianity with the natural religion of his time, the prevalent

philosophy of the day, Spinoza's pantheism, is declared by Schleiermacher to be genuine Christianity.

I have given this sketch of Schleiermacher's religion of feeling, thinking that this study of the Christian consciousness in its early and characteristic form might be an aid to some in estimating and using this much debated thing. It is of course claimed by our advanced theologians of to-day that such a discussion as this is a matter of ancient doctrinal history, and that Schleiermacher's subjective position has been transcended by later thinkers; but when a man offers you a scheme of religious thought in which Christian consciousness plays a conspicuous part, I would suggest that you take his Christian consciousness and compare it carefully with that of Schleiermacher. In nine cases out of ten you will discover that the latter is the father of the former, and that the child bears very distinctly the ear-marks of its parentage. And if you want a book to begin on, in testing this matter, I would suggest Dr. George Gordon's new work, "The Christ of To-day."

Christian consciousness has its proper place and uses, no doubt, as a test of truth and guide in conduct; but we should remember that it first appears, historically, as opposing the supernatural elements of our religion in the interest of worldly reason, and its false subjectivity makes it easy to read into Christianity any passing vagary of philosophy or ethics. Men have constantly been induced, in the past, to give up some traditional Christian belief in the confidence of getting a better grounded and more satisfying doctrine from reason or science. Has not Christian consciousness played this role in the past, to the deadly peril of Christian truth? Is it not doing so to-day? How else can we account for the airy cheerfulness with which our advanced theologians advise us to abandon inspiration, the traditional view of the Scriptures, etc., in the serene confidence that sometime, somehow, somewhere, the critics will give us something in-

finitely better; and assure us that in the interval Christian consciousness will in some mysterious manner preserve us and the church of Christ from spiritual shipwreck?

I met one of these advanced thinkers while a student in Berlin some years since,—a man who had let it all go, given it all over to the critics. He was a young minister in the German State Church. He said that when Strauss published his "Life of Jesus," declaring the New Testament to be a tissue of myths, people were greatly disturbed, they thought Christianity was all gone. "But," he said, "we can admit all that, and *wir haben doch die Sache*." But what did this young man have, after admitting Strauss' work to be sound? He was a Ritschlian, an adherent of what is now the dominant theological school of Germany. But what does the Ritschlian have? Is it pure and original Christianity, found by going back to Christ? The Ritschlian theology is a compound of Kant's "practical reason," Schleiermacher's "Christian consciousness," and Lotze's "worth-judgments," read into the New Testament with a supreme disregard of exegesis and historic sense,—i. e. just as with Lessing and Schleiermacher the prevalent philosophy is identified with genuine Christianity. Now this has been the outcome in Germany; why not here, if the same process is followed out in the same way?

This type of theological theory tends inevitably to destroy dependence on objective, historic standards of truth, and leads a man to exalt his own opinions and prejudices as deliverances of the Christian consciousness. I met a theological student at Heidelberg who didn't believe in eternal punishment. Why? It was *ganz unphilosophisch*. The unity demanded by philosophic thought rendered it impossible that two kingdoms, of light and of darkness, should stand eternally in conflict. How about the Saviour's words, I inquired, where he seems to teach eternal punishment? What did Christ say on the subject? The young German

didn't seem to know. When I quoted a passage or two,—They were probably *eingeschoben*,¹ it was not probable that Christ said anything of that sort. And the student didn't apparently care much if He did; eternal punishment was *ganz unphilosophisch*, and that was enough. This young man had studied theology four years at Heidelberg University, was just going up for his final examinations. He was a successor of Luther, about to set out and preach the gospel; yet he seemed to have little love for or confidence in the Scriptures. Philosophy was his authority,—i. e. his own whim or opinion. Was this what he was taught at Heidelberg? Probably not. He was probably told to go "back to Christ," beyond the errors and misconceptions of Luther, Calvin, Augustine, Paul, John even, to Christ. But where are we to find Christ? In the Gospels. But the Gospels are full of myth and error, and there are any number of critics each with a different Christ. It is therefore perfectly easy to select a Christ-consciousness to suit your preconceived theory or whim. Why, then, not follow your whim, without going to the trouble to fit a Christ-consciousness to it? This young Heidelberg student seemed to have drawn this inference—practical, and on his premises apparently reasonable.

It was formerly held that a man can prove anything from the Bible. How much more if any passage, awkward for our pet theory, can be simply ruled out as *eingeschoben*. And so if you know any advanced thinker who has a particular hobby, you may depend on finding this hobby a very important element in the Christ-consciousness which he accepts as original and genuine. Is he a probationist, or perhaps an Universalist, as our Dr. Gordon, of Boston? Then you may be sure that in the opinion of his Christ-consciousness "even in hell the fire will burn and the worm gnaw in the interest of divine grace." Is he a Christian socialist, of

¹ Interpolated.

extreme type? Then the original and historic Christ becomes a social reformer *par excellence*, a more or less modified *sans-culotte* of the French revolutionists; and the Sermon on the Mount becomes a lecture in political economy. We have all been interested of late to observe that Colonel Ingersoll has taken to preaching. If the Colonel should develop sufficient assurance to claim that his religion, according to the Christ-consciousness of the latest and most reliable critics, is the original and genuine Christianity, we should have a very instructive illustration of the unique possibilities of the Christian-consciousness theory. But I believe Colonel Ingersoll has not yet advanced so far as to make this claim. This final step in the forward movement may be reserved, providentially, for Brother Rusk, of the Church Militant.

It is not best, we may conclude, to give ourselves over hastily to the Christian-consciousness theory; and yet it is perhaps almost as dangerous to reject it, in these strange days in which we live. For if you hesitate to accept the new Christian-consciousness, if you cling to the letter of Scripture or of the old theology, when the new theology would gladly lead you into the light and liberty of the spirit, the denunciations of the Saviour are hurled against you, "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees!" And we then find ourselves in the confusing predicament of Pastor Goetze in the old days, who fondly imagined he was defending the Christian faith, and was amazed to learn that he was in fact the enemy of the truth, while Lessing represented the genuine Christianity of Paul and of Luther. This is a clever style of argument, and usually effective in a popular discussion; but the question arises, in reference to the successors of Lessing and Schleiermacher, whether they are chargeable with intellectual confusion or moral dishonesty.

Now would it not be a good thing if we had a book, written by the Holy Ghost, an essentially reliable objective standard of truth, instead of leaving each man to follow his

own philosophical notion or whim? Yes, I think we can all agree it would. This is just the old theory. Then why not stand by it? If we have no such book, if the Bible is a tissue of lies, let it go, of course; but this has never been made out, has never been admitted except by a few men possessed by the insane delusion that the world will be instantly converted if Christianity can somehow be made scientific,—i. e. be emptied of all supernatural and genuinely religious elements. Now this sort of thing has been tested in the past, and found to be a dismal failure and temptation of the Devil; and there is no occasion to repeat the experiment in this country. We had better stand by the Bible, for when the Bible is gone we are gone religiously, and we should let no one deceive us on this point; when the Bible is gone we may as well organize a society of ethical culture, and begin all over again. We had better stand by the Bible, even at the risk of being out of fashion in the cut of our theology,—not having the latest from Berlin, Edinburgh, or Boston.

We hear often in our day of John Robinson's farewell words to the Pilgrims, "More light is yet to break forth from God's word." I sometimes wonder whether, if Robinson had known how this remark of his was to be used in future years, he would not have devoted the valuable time of his farewell address to other topics. If the good man were to appear among us to-day, however, I fancy he would affirm that his proposition is correct, but would insist that it be properly interpreted. There is no scarcity of new ideas in our time, and there is a general desire on the part of their advocates to back them up by scriptural authority; but the question is whether these new ideas are "light," and whether they have, in fact, "broken forth from the word." I doubt not that if Robinson should appear among us to-day he would suggest that all that is new is not "light," and that it is possible so to use the Word that a vast deal not of light, but of darkness, may appear to break forth from it.