ARTICLE IX.

CRITICAL NOTE.

"THE CHRIST OF TO-DAY."[1]

THIS book takes its place among a considerable group of books which have appeared during the past quarter of a century in this country and Great Britain, and that constitute what I shall venture to call the popular literature of the new theology. I employ the word "popular" for the purpose of distinction between such works and those that are written for the especial use of scholars.

Belonging to the popular literature of the new theology as thus defined may be mentioned Bushnell's "Forgiveness and Law" (the final form of "Vicarious Sacrifice"), Beecher's "Life of Jesus the Christ," Swing's "Truths for To-Day," Newman Smyth's "Old Faiths in a New Light," Munger's "The Freedom of Faith," Fisher's "Faith and Rationalism," Abbott's "Evolution of Religion," Briggs' "Whither," Phillips Brooks' "Toleration," and "Progressive Orthodoxy," by the editors of the *Andover Review;* Drummond's "Ascent of Man," Fairbairn's "The Place of Christ in Modern Theology" (to which our author makes special acknowledgments), and, though reaching back in their origin beyond the quarter-century, yet, as exerting their most powerful influence within these later years, the sermons and other works of Robertson and Maurice. Indeed, to understand at all adequately the literature of the new theology of our own day, we must go back still further and name a little volume that, though written early in the present century, may almost be said to have been discovered only a little while ago, "The Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit," by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. To this list must also be added, and by no means given an inferior position, two books by members of this Association, "The Newer Religious Thinking," by Rev. D. N. Beach, and a volume in which Dr. Herrick has shown that "Some Heretics of Yesterday" are relied upon by conservative theologians of to-day as champions of orthodoxy.

The books which I have enumerated differ one from another in innumerable respects; but they all have, I think, at least four great charac-

[1] A Review, read before the North Suffolk Association of Congregational Clergymen at its meeting in Boston, Tuesday, March 31, 1896. By Milan C. Ayres, Editor of The Boston *Daily Advertiser* and a member of the Association.

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teristics in common. In attempting to point out certain features of Dr. Gordon's treatment of his vast and vital topic "The Christ of To-Day," I shall divide my remarks and citations into four groups according to these four common characteristics of the popular literature of the new theology, and in several instances I shall refer to one and another of the books mentioned as having with this one under review a general similarity.

I. All these teachers of the new theology agree in taking it for granted that the time has come when, for increasing multitudes of the most thoughtful and spiritually-minded men and women, belief in certain leading dogmas of the old theology is no longer possible.

Says Dr. Gordon, in his introductory chapter, under the heading "The New World into which the Christ has Come": "All reflective disciples of Christ have been moving into a new realm of thought and feeling, and, like men on an ocean voyage, they hardly know how far they have come. The same sun and moon and stars and sea seem to make the fact of progress insignificant; but the day arrives when a new territory is sighted, and the reality of advance can no longer be doubted" (p. 5).

There was an incident which many of you will remember in our Association nearly eight years ago, at Newton Highlands, in June, 1888. The Rev. William Barrows, D. D., of blessed memory, preached the sermon. We who had long known him as one of the most progressive as well as one of the most Christlike of men, sat amazed as he went on to unfold and set forth and "prove," after the strictest method of the Westminster Catechism, by ample and indiscriminate citations of texts from the Old Testament and the New, from biblical history, prophecy, poetry, and prose, marshaling as of equal authority Job's three friends and the four Evangelists, that God, from before the foundation of the world, selected certain individuals who were yet to be born, and predestinated them, some to everlasting happiness and others to everlasting torment; not at all out of consideration as to their choice of character or conduct of life, but solely for his own praise and glory. You remember that when we, each in turn, were called upon by name, as was our custom then, to criticise the sermon, there was not one of all our number, not one, not he who was most strenuously opposed to the new theology—or supposed himself to be—who did not strongly, even indignantly, dissent from the doctrines of that sermon, and condemn them as frightful and God-dishonoring. And you remember that when the doctor answered his critics, he quietly informed us that the sermon had been delivered to us word for word as it was written by him fifty years before, in all sincerity and love of truth, as God had given him to see the truth; that it was his trial sermon, pronounced sound and orthodox and eminently satisfactory by the presbytery before which he appeared as a candidate for ordination directly after graduating from the theological seminary.

We are all of us believers in a new theology, in progressive orthodoxy;

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we are each one beholding the old faiths in a new light; we are every man of us daily and momentarily doing the newer religious thinking, our Christ is the Christ of to-day, and, in important respects, not the Christ of bygone yesterdays. There are only two differences among us. The first is a difference of degrees. The second is that some of us are conscious of the change and others are not; unless and until we are brought up face to face with the fact by some such round turn as Doctor Barrows gave us in June, 1888.

It must be distinctly understood that this changed attitude does not, as is often imagined and reproachfully asserted, involve any abandonment of the essentials and fundamentals of the faith. Without one exception known to me, the leaders and exponents of the modern thought of Christ are firm adherents to the doctrine of his divinity; and by divinity I mean Deity. Dr. Gordon has, indeed, as which of us has not, a generous sympathy with much that is characteristic of the nobler types of Unitarianism, but he is in his theology Trinitarian to the core. He says, still in the introductory chapter: "Mutual recognition is the basis of all fruitful discussion. As a tenacious Trinitarian, I rejoice to recognize the benefit to the Christian church of the Unitarian contention. No intelligent Christian person can fail to honor its insistence upon the fatherhood of God, the real, and therefore the divine, humanity of our Lord, the function of history as a revelation of God, the place of the Bible at the center of religious history, and salvation as a moral process under the Spirit of God" (p. 36).

It is commonly supposed that the decline of the old theology has come about in consequence of attacks made upon it by the persistent and polemical advocates of new theology. Nothing could be further from the fact. The newer religious thinkers take the world of spiritual experience and feeling and all the conditions of the enlightened mind of to-day as they find them, and seek so to present the Christ of to-day that men shall be able to find in him their Prophet, Priest, and King. Dr. Gordon begins by pointing out that the church has come into a new world, a world infinitely expanded in space by reason of the science of modern astronomy, infinitely expanded in time by reason of the sciences of geology, chronology, and cosmogony, infinitely expanded in its conception of the nature and destiny of man by reason of the new sciences of ethics and sociology. Then he says:—

"But there is evident, I think, as the direct outcome of life under the shadow of an immeasurable material order, a new and large way of treating our whole human problem, and the parallel mission of Christ. An immense library of theological literature has thus been quietly outgrown. Its logic has not been considered and refuted, its narrow premises have been entirely transcended" (p. 10).

Again: "It is impossible to believe that the unmeasured worlds of prehistoric man that at the present time are rolling into the vision of the

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nobler spirits, and whose wonderful contributions in the way of brain and muscle and rude inventions, of the indispensable preliminaries of civilization, are receiving wider and more reverent recognition, did not stand in the eternal loving thought of God in Christ. The idea that confines salvation to the remnant, whether that be the remnant of the Hebrew prophet, or of the mediæval saint, or of the Puritan, is to-day incredible. If cherished, it can have but one issue—atheism" (p. 15).

In this last citation we have the basic idea of that hypothesis which convulsed our Congregational Zion a few years ago, that God will not condemn any man finally until he shall have had revealed to him for his acceptance or rejection the redeeming love of God in Christ. That is the root thought of "Progressive Orthodoxy."

As showing how, in "The Christ of To-Day," recognition is made of the impossibility of accepting certain of the old theologic postulates, I cite from page 156:—

"The old argument against the higher criticism from the fact that Jesus used the Old Testament, and which assumes that if Moses had not written the Pentateuch and David the Psalms and Solomon Ecclesiastes —which takes for granted that if the traditional view of the origin and composition of the Hebrew Scriptures had not been true, Christ would have told his disciples so—is self-evidently worthless. The principle of the incarnation involves an accommodation of the eternal to the temporal conditions, and it was clearly beyond the power of divinity in three short years to sweep the Jewish mind clean of all its errors and superstitions. He had a whole world of mistakes and superstitions and lies against which to go on record, and he had no time for one so comparatively insignificant."

II. I have said, in the first place, that the writers of the popular literature of the new theology agree in taking for granted that, while the foundations of faith remain, much of the superstructure of theological dogmas built thereon has ceased to be believed, or believable, by multitudes of enlightened and reverent souls. Now I say, in the second place, that these teachers, from Coleridge to Gordon, agree not only in recognizing the fact that the old superstructures of theological thought have tumbled down, or are tumbling, under the influences of the new sciences and the new civilizations of the modern era; but in the supreme purpose common to them all, of building again, in the light and love of to-day, the temples of faith. Their work is not destructive, but is constructive and reconstructive. Hear what our author says.

"One need not fear a resurrection of the old, finished theological system. For that there can be no resurrection. The present ideal is not the mediæval castle but the cathedral. It is ever beautiful for worship, great for service, sublime as a retreat from the world, and it is forever unfinished. The staging is never down, for any length of time, from every part of it. Constructions and reconstructions are continually going on;

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the vast historic edifice is fitted to the needs of the present. This is the type for the builder of the Christian ideas. He is to rear a temple to match the new light, the new need, the new age; and it is to be forever uncompleted, a symbol of the unfinished work of the Christian intellect, a prophecy of the building that is to come, a growing image of the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (p. 168).

They who are hastening to help build the cathedrals of the soul, where they may worship in what Dr. Munger calls "the freedom of faith," cannot justly be accused of having run before they were sent. Brethren, there is not one of you, who is a pastor, and who has succeeded in winning the real and unhesitating confidence of his people, who does not know full well that there is need of this construction and reconstruction; because this destruction, or rather this deterioration and decay, have taken place, in these latter times, through causes for which neither you nor they are any more responsible than for the melting of the few remaining snow banks under the warm sunshine of this last day of the chilly month of March. If you know what the hungering and thirsting, perplexed and anxious children of God are feeling and fearing, you know that Dr. Gordon says truth when he says, "There are thousands in our midst who long to hear the wonderful words of God in their own tongue. Into the dialect of present thought the meaning of the divine wonder must be put" (p. 35).

III. The method of construction and reconstruction in which those leaders of the newer religious thinking all agree, is not deductive, but is inductive. It does not proceed from the general to the particular, but from the particular to the general. It does not attempt to determine what the truths of the Son of God must be by abstract reasoning on the nature and attributes of the Godhead, but it reverently and lovingly studies the records of the life and teachings of the Son of God, and wonderingly accepts them as the revelation of the majesty on high. Says our author, "The loudest call is not for the venturesome spirit who shall ascend into heaven to bring Christ down, or descend into the depths to bring Christ up, but for the man who shall fathom the significance of the word that is nigh our humanity" (p. 32).

This is Phillips Brooks' supreme idea, which runs through all his sermons and his lectures, making them luminous with the new light of heaven, as the electric currents that are carried along countless wires save our city from the darkness of the night; the idea that Christianity is not a creed nor a ceremonial, nor an emotion, nor yet the acceptance of a book, but that Christianity is Christ, and that for one to be a Christian is for him to live in personal relation to Christ.

IV. Fourthly and finally, the author of "The Christ of To-Day" is in perfect unison with his brethren of like precious faith and like prophetic insight and foresight, in this: that he and they all, in a way and to an extent absolutely new in the history of theology, make the person of our

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Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ the source and center of their religious thinking. I do not mean that they use more words or more emphatic words in lauding him, that his name is oftener on their lips and the points of their pens, or that they make larger and louder claims on his behalf than others do. What I mean is that they, far beyond other men in the past or the present, actually work out their conceptions of Christian truth and duty from the postulate that Jesus the Christ of God is the One from whom, and through whom, and for whom are all things.

On page 29, in that introduction to which I have referred so often because it proclaims the purpose of the whole volume, Dr. Gordon says: "Mankind have been brought into a large place, and the daily vision is of broad rivers and streams; but unless Christ shall be installed over this new world, it will simply be a larger and more splendid corpse than the old. Over the total worlds of space and time and present humanity, and the spirit, he must be recognized as supreme; and these kingdoms, with all their glory, if that glory is not to fade into a dream and the highest hope of mankind is not to be blasted, must become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ."

This is neither more nor less than that "Christocentric" conception, which has been from the beginning the storm center of such debates as those at the recent meetings of the American Board, and those relating to Andover Theological Seminary.

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