

## HISTORY AND TRUTH : A STUDY OF THE AXIOM OF LESSING

### I

“CONTINGENT truths of history can never be proof of the necessary truths of reason.”<sup>1</sup> Of the assertions of Lessing there is none which has come down in theology with greater power, more searching challenge, or closer reference to modern discussion. Simple and concise, yet pregnant with meaning, it goes to the very heart of the Christian debate. It is all the more dangerous because it has a ring of reason and truth which commends it to all who would have a faith based upon the reason of man rather than the revelation of God.

When the dictum is examined and its implications are thought out many interesting and important points are seen. First, Lessing makes a clear-cut distinction between the realm of thought, or truth, and that of action, or history. History is contingent, but truth is necessary. History is in time, temporal, but truth is above time, eternal. Lessing does not suggest, of course, that historical events are not real, or that they have not a truth of their own. But he denies that they are necessary, or that they have eternal validity. Again, he does not deny that the truths of reason appear in history, as human thought or even as human action. But he denies that truth is tied down to, or is only known in and through these temporal manifestations. The objectivity of rational truth is not that of an historical event, but it is the objectivity of a timeless reality.

It must be noticed that Lessing places truth within the sphere of reason. The final necessary truths are rational truths. Lessing clearly understands by this “truths of the human reason”. In other words, he ascribes to the faculty of reason a finality which distinguishes it from those other faculties which express themselves in action, or feeling. Reason itself belongs to the sphere of timelessness : it is the god-like faculty which marks out men from the brutes, which are confined within the contingent world. Of course, Lessing does not mean to assert

<sup>1</sup> “Zufällige Geschichtswahrheiten können der Beweis von notwendigen Vernunftswahrheiten nie werden” (Gosche VI, p. 241).

that the rational processes of men are independent of temporal circumstances. What he does mean to assert is that by these rational processes men enter into a world which is above contingency, that the truths at which they arrive, in mathematics, philosophy, religion, are truths which are inescapable, because they are final reality ; and that these truths have a validity which does not depend upon anything in the contingent world (not even the rational processes of any particular man) for substantiation, and which cannot be shaken by any happening in the temporal sphere.

In so far as Lessing applies the axiom to certain branches of knowledge, e.g. mathematics, probably few would question his assertion. In the world as we know it two and two must make four, and this truth does not rest on contingent events for proof and is not affected by such events. But Lessing carries the application further, into the world of religion, of theology. For Lessing, religious truths too are truths of reason and that in the twofold sense, that they are rational in themselves, and that they are truths which any rational man must discover for himself by the exercise of reason. Lessing thus considers it a mistake to seek to ground these truths upon the contingent happenings of the world of history, whether the experiences of the Hebrew people, the alleged miraculous events of Bible days, prophecies, or the historical facts attested in the New Testament and the Creed. His objection rests upon these grounds. First, these events, belonging to history, are contingent. Possibly they did happen, but there was no absolute necessity in the matter. They might not have happened. The truths of religion would still remain. Second, the events themselves require demonstration. Even if the best historical evidence exists, they always remain open to question. It is not right that important truths should rest upon a foundation so insecure as an historical fact.<sup>1</sup> Third, the truths themselves, being rational, may be known by reason alone, and thus there is no need for historical substantiation, except perhaps in the case of the ignorant who have not learned to use their reason. To take an example, it is an eternal truth that God is Almighty. But we do not say that God is Almighty because He works miracles, for the miracles are contingent, it is very difficult to prove that

<sup>1</sup> "Historische Wahrheiten können nicht demonstirt werden : so kann auch nichts durch historische Wahrheiten demonstirt werden."

they really happened, and in any case reason tells us that God is Almighty quite irrespective of miracles. It is therefore false to use miracles as a proof of the Almightyness of God.

The arguments of Lessing are turned in the main against the apologetic which would prove Christianity true upon the basis of miracles, prophecy, the Bible, but the question goes much deeper than that, as Lessing himself knew quite well. It raises the whole matter of the revelation of God, and especially of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. At this point a religion of reason is brought face to face with the Christianity of revelation. Of course Lessing himself would not deny a certain kind of truth in the Bible or in Jesus Christ. He would deny that the truths were dependent upon these historical manifestations, and he would also assert that they could be known apart from them, by reason alone. Thus for Lessing the Bible revelation and the Incarnation are not truth, necessary as is truth itself : they are only means to truth, and in the last resort unnecessary. That means that their authority is derivative, not normative. They are authoritative in so far as they set forth rational truths, but they themselves are subject to the overriding judgment of reason. And that means finally that the person and work of Jesus Christ, which belong to history, must be subordinated to His teaching, which belongs to the timeless world of rational truth.

## II

The question arises, and must be closely considered, whether there does not lie behind the dictum of Lessing some real truth, overlaid though it may be by rationalistic elements wholly alien to the Christian faith. It is important to remember that the age in which Lessing lived, the later eighteenth century, was one of crucial change. Traditional theology was crumbling before the assault of rationalism, and the new empiricism with its objective scientific method was beginning to dominate thought. At some points Lessing himself was a pioneer of the new empiricism, which has exercised its sway over theology up to the present time, but in the main Lessing was a rationalist of the older type. Although the axiom was aimed primarily at the traditional position, it can also be considered as a warning against a too wholehearted committal to historicism, and along both these lines lessons can be learned.

First, the axiom is a warning to Christians against a false apologetic. It is a temptation that every thoughtful Christian experiences at some time or other, to attempt a rational vindication of the Christian faith and its doctrines along the lines of historical demonstration, prophecy, miracles, the life of Christ. There is naturally some place for this type of apologetic, as will be seen later, for the facts of Christianity do rest upon credible testimony, and are not lightly to be set aside. But the danger is that Christianity can easily be reduced to a human system, humanly attested, if this method is carried too far, or rather if too much weight is attached to it, and apologetics can harden into something mechanical and lifeless. Apologists who take this line also lay themselves open to the very serious attacks of rationalist historians, and every minor doubt cast upon any small portion of the Bible story means a calling in question of the whole faith.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the axiom asserts against empiricists that there is an eternal sphere of truth above and beyond the temporal, historical order, and in this the Christian, although he will not agree with Lessing as to the precise nature of this sphere, will fully concur. The empiricist eliminates everything non-historical. He is determined to know nothing but that which can be seen. Truth for him lies only in that which is outwardly demonstrable. If empiricism is applied in thoroughgoing fashion to the Christian faith, it will be seen that even if all the facts as recorded in the Old or New Testament are granted, nothing of real value is left. There are miracles, but nothing is known of the power of God. There is the death of Christ, but it is only a judicial murder, and nothing is known of the atonement and the forgiveness of sins. There is the empty tomb and a series of appearances, but nothing is known of the resurrection of the dead.

The Christian, with Lessing, must maintain that there is an eternal sphere of truth, although for him that truth will be not the truth of reason but the truth of God. He does not separate eternal truth from the history altogether. Nor does he wholly identify the two in such a way as to suppose that the eternal is self-evident in and demonstrated by the historical. The relationship between history and truth is paradoxical; not static, but dynamic. The eternal is in the historical, but the historical

does not wholly exhaust it. The historical is as it were a form, a meaningful form, but the content goes beyond the form. Thus the death of Christ is an historical event, with an historical meaning. But its true significance is eternal, beyond history, with God. And this significance cannot be grasped either by historical study, or, for that matter, by reason, but only by faith.

Lessing himself, of course, had something quite different in mind when he opposed eternal truth to history, and he separated the two in a far more radical manner; but at any rate the dictum does point the Christian along these lines. A traditional apologetic of a rational or empirical type is guarded against, and the danger of a wholehearted empiricism which eliminates the supra-historical and the supra-natural is indicated. So much can be learned, or learned again, from the axiom. It now remains to set forth the far more serious criticisms which the Christian will have to bring against it, some of which have already been glimpsed in passing.

### III

At three major points, basic to the whole standpoint of Lessing, the man of faith will find the axiom of Lessing either definitely false or else quite misleading, and thus harmful to truth.

The first point is this, that Lessing makes the mistake of identifying rational truth, which is human, with the truth of revelation, which is divine. In the realm of pure science this identification would not perhaps be questioned, although the rational knowledge of man must not be made a measure of the divine reason. But in the realm of religion the man of faith does question the identification, because he knows that the human reason is blinded to the truth of God by sin. The truths of Christianity are not irrational, in the true sense, but they are not truths which can be known by the human reason—indeed to the wisdom of man they are foolishness. The only truths in religion are revealed truths, and reason can only attain to these truths as it works upon the basis of revelation. Lessing would find a connecting point between God and man in reason. He forgets, or denies, that the connection has been broken by sin, and can only be restored by the act of God.

This brings us directly to the second point, that Lessing makes the mistake of separating too absolutely the eternal and the historical with regard to the knowledge of God. The

<sup>1</sup> This fact is the more damaging because no historical event is capable of *absolute* proof—something has to be taken on trust.

orthodox of his day went too far in one direction, asserting that the doctrines must be true because the facts were valid. The empiricists were also to err in a similar direction, except that in their case revelation was eliminated and a human system was deduced from the facts. But Lessing went to the opposite extreme. Truth exists and may be known apart from history altogether, by pure reason—it must be recalled that Lessing wrote before Kant had established that there is no such thing as pure reason working independently of the world of phenomena. Thus the external features of Christianity—the Bible and the history which it records, even the life and death and the empty tomb of Jesus Christ—are for Lessing accidental and in the last resort unnecessary. The rational truths taught by Christianity are alone the necessary substance : the rest is only a means of knowledge to those who are unskilled in the use of reason. For the Christian this position is quite false. God does exist apart from any human knowledge of Him, and He is reason, will, power, love ; but God cannot be known in Himself by sinful man, even by rational sinful man, except He reveals Himself, and the only way in which God does reveal Himself is in and through history, by acts which culminate in the Incarnation and the work of salvation. Revealed truth and history thus belong the one to the other, not by a rigid identification, but as the eternal and the temporal belong together in Jesus Christ, by an hypostatic union. Remove the history, and there is no truth, only human speculation. Obscure the revelation, and there is only history, subject to human enquiry and human interpretation.

An important consequence of this right understanding of the relationship of revelation and history is that there is a real and important place for apologetic, the literary vindication of the Bible, and the historical defence of the facts attested by it. It will not be imagined that theological truths will be established by a successful apologetic of this kind. But it will be remembered that apologetic failure does mean an undermining of those truths, which are embodied in and only known through history. The revelation of God is not rational speculation, but actuality, an act, historically manifested, historically attested. The history does not of itself establish the true interpretation, but it is essential to it. The fact that Jesus lived does not of itself mean Incarnation, but there is no Incarnation unless Jesus

did live. It is possible to know and to accept the history, and yet not to believe the truth—for that reason apologetic is a secondary task. But it is not possible not to know or to deny the history and yet believe the truth, or it is possible only by maintaining a paradox which reduces the world and God to complete irrationality and thus to meaninglessness—for that reason apologetic is an essential task.

The third point is that Lessing makes the mistake of pressing too far the contingency of historical events. Contingency means that an event may happen or not, according to prior causes or choices. But if events are strictly contingent, as Lessing seems to assume, then the sovereignty of God and the providence of God are denied. God is banished from history and His place usurped by a strict causal nexus. But the Christian does not believe that historical events are contingent in this way. He may grant a relative contingency, but he also sees that events, and especially the events of revelation, are not left to the flow of circumstance and cause, and that they have more than a relative significance. Above the causal nexus stands God, who shapes things according to His own will and purpose. The ordinary laws of cause and effect, which need not be denied, are subordinate to the higher ruling and co-ordinating of God. This means in its turn that events have more than a relative temporal significance. They are relative, but in the light of the divine sovereignty of God they are also absolute. Because God is the Lord of history it is proper to speak not only of the contingency, but also of the uniqueness, the singularity, of the historical event. Especially is this so of the saving acts of God.

A final observation might be made with regard to the dictum of Lessing : it is in the last resort a denial of the Incarnation, and by that it stands condemned. The unique place and character of Jesus Christ are denied. Jesus is listed with men. His life too is made contingent. His teaching is separated from His person and work. Eternal value is ascribed only to what He said, not to what He did and was, and to what He said, not because He said it, but because it largely coincides with what Lessing considers to be rational truth. On Lessing's view it is possible to deny all the history, except perhaps that some man Jesus uttered religious truths and was martyred, and yet to be a Christian, by the acceptance of those truths. Jesus the Teacher,

at the most the Example, replaces entirely Jesus the Saviour. The Deity of Christ, and the work of Redemption which He wrought, are eliminated. It is on that basis finally that the man of faith quarrels with the man of reason, and that the axiom of Lessing must be opposed.

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