

The Argument from Experience.

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A GREAT change has taken place in the use made of personal experience as evidence in religion. It has been raised from a subordinate to a principal, almost an exclusive, place. The argument has always been used in some form. It is the old argument, 'One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see.' The phrase used at the Reformation was 'The Witness of the Holy Spirit.' The work of the Spirit in the heart, answering to the Christian experience described in Scripture, attested the truth of Scripture. Protestant Churches especially, in the stress they have laid on the personal element, have always given the argument a high place.

It is a question, however, whether the emphasis given in some schools to this line of argument is not excessive. Formerly the evidence of experience was regarded as the supplement and crown of other witnesses, historical, rational, moral. A living experience is the common characteristic of all Christians, lettered or unlettered; and in the case of multitudes it is the chief, if not the only ground of faith they know. But in our days it is set forth as the only trustworthy ground for all, superseding the evidences which have played so large a part in the past; historical and philosophical defences are discounted. Natural theology is discarded altogether, 'theoretic' reasoning is out of court. It would seem as if great numbers of Christian men, tired of elaborate arguments and casting about for a short and easy method of getting rid of doubt, were disposed to rely entirely on subjective experience. 'That only is true which you have verified in your own heart and life, and that *is* true. Here is rock, all else is sand.' Far be it from us to undervalue the force of the argument, or to suggest doubt to minds at rest. Still it is right to prove all things and to beware of building on too narrow a basis.

The argument is put somewhat as follows: 'I come into the presence of Jesus Christ, seek to understand His secret, open my heart to the influence of His life. As I do so I become conscious of a transforming power at work on me, which I can only regard as divine. God has met me in Christ. Slowly but surely I become a new

man and live a new life, Christ's own spirit takes possession of me.' Then one who has passed through this experience begins to draw inferences. 'This experience is its own verification. I need no other attestation. Reason and history can add nothing to my certainty. I need no doctrine of justification or Christology.' It is obvious that the position, thus briefly sketched, implies much that is not expressed, implies, in fact, much that is disclaimed in words. It is assumed that the picture of Jesus Christ seen in the Gospels is substantially true, indeed historical. Anything that would materially alter the lines of the picture would preclude the possibility of faith and of the experience just described. Change in details might not have this effect, but material change would. We are thus committed to the substantial truth of the evangelical history. And if so, investigation of the ground and environment of the history becomes inevitable. Dr. Dale, in his *Living Christ and the Four Gospels*, puts the case of one who has found a new life in Christ falling into doubt respecting the Gospel history and yet in virtue of his wonderful experience retaining his faith. It is not difficult to understand this. The question which Dr. Dale does not discuss is how any one who began with such doubts could ever arrive at the experience.

Observe also the extraordinary influence ascribed to Jesus Christ. He has become the medium of a moral transformation in me. He has done what God only can do, as God has done it through Him. Then who or what is Christ? What is His relation to God and to man? It is no use forbidding me to ask such questions or to say that these are theoretical matters which are of no practical concern. Intelligent men will not rest in blind faith. They will persist in asking, 'Why should faith in Christ have such unique effects? Like effect, like cause.'

Again, we have been told the effect upon us of steadfast contemplation of the image of Jesus Christ. But other effects are conceivable. What about the impression made on me by the vision of moral perfection? What about the contrast between that lofty ideal seen in realized fact and

my sense of weakness and failure? The teaching of Christ convicts me of sin, but the life of Christ covers me with shame and confusion. In the case of countless multitudes the first effect is to call forth the confession, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.' The whole story of sin and the need of forgiveness is raised with a force not to be gainsaid. Before the figure of Jesus Christ can have the consoling, elevating influence described, my personal relations to God and law must be put right; in other words, the whole subject of sin and redemption is raised and claims the first consideration. This is the side of religious experience which is ignored or lightly treated by influential schools of thought in our day. Yet it is too serious and fundamental to be swept aside as illusion and exaggeration. When the significance of sin, forgiveness, atonement, and the new birth is minimized, the doctrine of Scripture is mutilated and a new gospel is set up. Justice cannot be done either to Scripture or to the facts of life, if this side of experience is underestimated. If it is included, much more drastic means of amendment are called for. We can think of no more effective means of producing conviction of sin, and the conviction that forgiveness is the first though not the only need of man than the holding up of the life of Jesus Christ before the eyes of men. The Holy Spirit convicts men of sin, righteousness, and judgment in this way. And the result is not a meagre but a rich experience of moral transformation such as is not too strongly described in Paul's Epistles.

One attraction of the new mode of argument is that it is supposed to furnish a simple, unassailable ground of certainty, independent of historical and other difficulties. As we have seen, it does nothing of the kind. We cannot ignore criticism of the historical truth of the Gospels. Our faith grows out of their assumed historicity. To shut our eyes to questions does not settle them. What becomes of the image of Christ, if the history in which it is embodied is unreal or doubtful? We may also point out how heavy a burden is laid by the new method on the individual judgment. It is not easy to see how we could meet the cross-examination brought to bear by scepticism on individual experience. If my faith in God and my whole spiritual life stand or fall with my subjective perceptions and judgments, what becomes of Christian certainty?

The new position also seems to undervalue the claims and authority of reason in the religious life. However reason may have been unduly exalted in some schools of thought, this does not justify its supersession. Faith, if it is to be worthy of God and man, must be rational. The intellect has indefeasible rights. Any doctrine essentially contrary to reason is out of harmony with human nature and the world, and is doomed to failure. While the great Christian teachers of the past have no doubt often gone astray, their record as a whole is a glorious one. The powers of man's intellect have never been more splendidly illustrated than in the service rendered to religion. The long succession of thinkers from Origen to Butler stands in the front rank of the world's benefactors. To abandon the defence of religion in the field of intellect would be an unworthy counsel of despair and a course fatal to man's highest interests. If we were compelled to choose between simple practical faith and a reasoned creed, we should keep the practical and let reason go. But we are shut up to no such choice. We distinguish the one from the other, we keep each in its appropriate place and season, but we hold both. Each would suffer from the absence of the other.

The new method proposed does good service in calling attention to the insufficiency of intellectual grounds of religious faith. That faith can never be matter of demonstration, nor is it desirable that it should be. We do not believe in God as we believe in arithmetic and facts of sense. It is well that scope is left to reason and trust, to personal character and inclination. God desires free, not forced faith. Religion is a practical matter, and in practical matters we are bound to act on the balance of evidence instead of waiting for absolute certainty. Despite all the Hegelians in the world, 'probability is the very guide of life' to such a being as man. At the best, moral certainty is the highest ground we can reach. If we go down to the roots of things, we find that knowledge of every kind starts from faith, mathematical truth from axioms, scientific truth from trust in the senses and the fixed order of the world. Our faith in the laws of nature rests only in part on induction; induction has to be supplemented by faith. In short, human certainty is conditioned and limited. The difference in this respect between religious and other truth is only one of degree. In difficult questions, or where evidence

is evenly balanced, experience gives the casting vote. In the agelong controversy between necessity and freedom speculative reasoning leaves one in doubt, but practical experience speaks with no uncertain voice. The most convinced believer in necessity or determinism never acts upon it. The same may be said of the debate between Protestantism and Romanism. The conflict of argument is interminable. The evidence of history is far easier to appreciate.

A mischievous error is committed when individual experience is made to supersede definition and exact statement. If this only meant that theological and philosophical argument is not needed by the vast majority of believers, good. Or, if the meaning were that only fundamentals need definition, and that secondary questions may be left open, good. But much more is said. Exact statements and even exact ideas of what lies behind the acts and words of Jesus Christ are ruled out as useless. We may not ask, Who and what is Christ Himself? Yet men will ask, and will not be content with a confession of ignorance. We cannot help asking further, If the Church had proceeded from the first on the new basis proposed, what would have been its history? The old theology is cast aside because of its

philosophical associations. Those associations only affect the outward form. Early believers always asserted that the substance of their faith was taken from Scripture, and modern negative teachers endorse the statement. The modern aversion to the association of religion and philosophy is a strange phenomenon, reminding us of the fierce Montanist Tertullian, who cursed philosophy in the name of religion. The general mind of the Church was very different. Witness Origen and Augustine and Aquinas, who loved to trace the analogy between the different departments of the divine working, and who believed that truth in one sphere could not contradict truth in another sphere. I will trust my soul in their company. 'Malo cum Platone errare quam cum istis recte sentire.' English Christianity has no reason to be ashamed on this score. Our best divines have never despised reason. The names of Cudworth, Berkeley, Butler, Martineau would honour any country or age. The Christian apology of our day compares favourably with the best of former times. Best of all, there was never an age when Christianity was more earnest in carrying out its mission of mercy and truth, righteousness and peace among the sons of men.

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