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Modern Witnesses to the Value of Authority in Religion.

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The present century exhibits a widespread reaction against the principle of Authority in Religion. The whole conception is most unpopular. And for that very reason it requires to be reconsidered. Popularity is not the test of Truth. Nor is a state of Reaction likely to secure an accurately balanced estimate of principles. Reflections of this kind have led a number of thoughtful modern writers to impress upon us the value of this unpopular principle from which so many have reacted. It seems desirable, in the interests of impartiality, that some of their reflections on behalf of Authority in Religion should be grouped together.

Arranging the witnesses more or less in chronological order, the first place may be assigned to the eminent Unitarian teacher, Dr. Martineau.

Dealing with the principle of an Authority external to the individual, Martineau observed that 'two claims are preferred to this exceptional position,—one by Catholics on behalf of "the Church"; the other by Protestants on behalf of "the Bible." They agree in assigning to something outward an authority before which the inward protest of even our highest faculties must sink in silence: they differ in attributing this authority to a *corporation* in the one case, to a literature in the other. In the latter case, the Holy Spirit, having once created the books of Scripture, remains, as it were, stereotyped there, and liable to all the disadvantages which Plato charges upon written language,—that, though you would think the page alive with the thoughts it has, it looks up at you always with the same face; is dumb to the questions you ask; and, if tossed about in contumely or mistake, cannot defend itself, but needs its father to help it. In the former case, the Holy Spirit perpetuates its work by taking for its organ an ever-living hierarchy, which is there to speak in every age, to interpret and supplement the dubious text, to correct the aberrations of reason, and relieve the perplexities of conscience.'[1]

'If neither the hierarchy nor the canon can make good a claim to dictatorial authority, it by no means follows that the sacred function ascribed to them is gone, and that nothing divine is committed to their keeping. It may well be true that, for the religious guidance of men, there is a real order of dependence of the multitude upon the few, and of ordinary ages upon special crises and transmitted products of fresh spiritual insight, though the relation has degenerated into servility. But the oscillations of unreasoning impulse always shoot past the true centre without a pause. The easy credulity of mankind first insists on investing the priest with magical powers, and then, on discovery of their failure, turns upon him fiercely as an imposter. The blind idolater of "Holy Writ" will have it all infallible, that it may spare him the cares of thought and conscience, . . . and then, when his moral sense has outgrown the Israelitish standard, and with his critical discernment he finds himself in the midst of myth and legend, of *vaticinia post eventum*, of conflicting histories and incompatible doctrines, he vents his displeasure, not upon his own arbitrary expectations, but on the written text which was in no way bound to fulfil them, and the persons whom he had himself arrayed in hieratic robes, and now disclaims as mortals in working dress. Thus to stipulate for everything or nothing, and fling away whatever is short of all your fancied need, is the mere waywardness of the spoilt child: it is a demand absolutely at variance with the mixed conditions of any possible communion between perfect and imperfect natures. Not heaven itself can pour more or purer spiritual gifts into you than your immediate capacity can hold; and if the Holy Spirit is to "lead you into *all truth*," it will not be by saving you the trouble of parting right from wrong, but by the even keener severance of the evil from the good through the strenuous working of a quickened mind.'[2]

The next place may fairly be assigned to Lord Balfour. His analysis of *The Foundations of Belief*, published in 1895, is largely concerned with the relation between Authority and Reason in Religion. The startling emphasis laid by him upon Authority has been immensely provocative of discussion, and is of undeniable importance as the matured conclusion of a Scottish Metaphysician,

[1] J. Martineau, *The Seat of Authority in Religion*, 129 f.

[2] *Ibid.* 287 f.

intimately familiar with the tendencies of modern thought, and of extensive practical experience in the requirements of human nature.

Lord Balfour says that 'to Reason is largely due the growth of new and the sifting of old knowledge; the ordering, and in part the discovery, of that vast body of systematised conclusions which constitute so large a portion of scientific, philosophical, ethical, political, and theological learning.'[1]

'When we turn, however, from the conscious work of Reason to that which is unconsciously performed for us by Authority, a very different spectacle arrests our attention. The effects of the first, prominent as they are through the dignity of their origin, are trifling compared with the all-pervading influences which flow from the second. At every moment of our lives, as individuals, as members of a family, of a party, of a nation, of a Church, of a universal brotherhood, the silent, continuous, unnoticed influence of Authority moulds our feelings, our aspirations, and, what we are more immediately concerned with, our beliefs. It is from Authority that Reason itself draws its most important premises. . . . And even in those cases where we may most truly say that our beliefs are the rational product of strictly intellectual processes, we have, in all probability, only got to trace back the thread of our inferences to its beginnings in order to perceive that it finally loses itself in some general principle which, describe it as we may, is in fact due to no more defensible origin than the influence of Authority. . . .

'It is true, no doubt, that we can, without any great expenditure of research, accumulate instances in which Authority has perpetuated error and retarded progress; for, unluckily, none of the influences, Reason least of all, by which the history of the race has been moulded have been productive of unmixed good. . . . Yet, if we are to judge with equity between these rival claimants, we must not forget that it is Authority rather than Reason to which, in the main, we owe, not religion only, but ethics and politics; that it is Authority which supplies us with essential elements in the premises of science; that it is Authority rather than Reason which lays deep the foundations of social life; that it is Authority rather than Reason which cements its superstructure.'

From the philosophic politician we may turn to a third writer on Authority, the Rev. Dr. Oman, who maintains that:

'The supreme religious fact is *not* the individual. It is the Social, the Corporate Institution. It must be so: for the unit in human life is not the individual. It is the family. It is not the individual as a separate unit.' . . .

'An historical Revelation is a necessity of man's position working out his freedom by finding his place amid his fellows who are called to the same high destiny.' . . .

'The search after the true Church can never cease to have a foremost place in man's endeavour. His debt to it is incalculable. Its authority in some form he must perpetually acknowledge.'[2]

From the head of a College at Cambridge we may advance to one of the ablest and most distinguished teachers in India—Radhakrishnan. His antecedents are Hindu; he has held the important position of King Edward's Professor of Philosophy in the University of Calcutta. His knowledge of European thought is profound, and he has given us brilliant expositions of its most recent advances in his Gifford Lectures.

On the subject of Authority he writes in his book on Idealism:

'The spiritual genius who can think out a religion for himself is one in a million.' . . .

'If we are not to languish as spiritual nomads we require a shelter.' . . .

'The importance of Authority and the value of tradition are great. If we are not to lapse into individualistic rationalism . . . if we are not to be led astray by our wandering whims, if our personal intuitions are to be guided by the accumulated wisdom of the race, only tradition can help us.'

'Mankind does not begin completely afresh with each individual. The first principles need not be proved by each of us. There is a body of accepted knowledge, a deposit of faith on which we can all draw. Though Religion is in a sense each individual's personal affair, it is dependent on past tradition and grows out of it. But loyalty to tradition is one thing, and bondage to it quite another.'

From the Hindu Professor of Philosophy in India we may go on to the writings of a distinguished Platonist in America. Elmer More requires no introduction to English students. He is deeply interested in the relation of individual reflection to social authority in Religion. It may fairly be said that individualism finds in him a congenial exponent, while at the same time he is profoundly conscious of the indispensable character of corporate authority. His final conclusion is that exclusive reliance on individual reflection is not the pathway to the full acquirement of religious Truth.

'For our growth and sanity in religion we must

[1] Pp. 240 ff.

[2] J. Oman, *Vision and Authority*.

have something to supply what the inner light will not afford to the isolated souls of men; something . . . to supply our limited intuition with the accumulated wisdom of the race, . . . some agent to set before our eyes in consecrated forms the everlasting drama of the divine condescension, and to force upon our understanding the symbolism of these transient phenomena and the spiritual potentialities of this material world, some organ to express our wavering faith in an abiding Creed. . . .'

'Thus it is that at the last religion can be neither purely individualistic nor purely determined. In one sense individualistic, yes, in so far as the ultimate responsibility of choice cannot be withdrawn from the conscience of each man, whether he shall accept this dogma and this form as complying with what seems to him the verity of his own inner life, or shall reject them as expansions in a false direction; but determined also to this degree, that he will be extremely hesitant to set up his private judgment against a formulated tradition, and will prefer to abide in humble, yet not abject, submission to the Authority of a wider experience than his own.'

The last of the series is D'Arcy in his very remarkable book on *The Nature of Belief*. Critics seem agreed that this book is one of the ablest that have appeared of late. We are here in a totally different atmosphere, for the writer is not only a Roman Catholic, but a Jesuit. He rests the value of Authority in Religion on two main arguments—the historic experience of the race, and the limitations of the individual being.

'The majority of men have always lived under authority and taken their beliefs from others. It is their right and duty at times to question customs, laws, authority, and beliefs, but it certainly is not normal or wholesome to question everything. There may be a few who in the full vigour of their extraordinary powers are capable of doing this, but the average man and woman have neither the capacity nor the time.

'The truth surely is that men are a compound of strength and weakness, and so various in character and talents that it is madness to demand of them all the same critical judgment on the questions which have troubled even the greatest intellects. We all start life with beliefs which we have learnt from others, and we all need a discipline to mould our character and our thought. Nor does this cease at some adult stage. We never cease to rely on community life and to lean on good friends, to give of the one talent which may be ours and to gain by the gifts and talents of others which we do not possess ourselves. We stand on the shoulders of the past and learn to the end of our lives from the accumulated experience of mankind.'

The significance of this series of writers on the value of Authority in Religion is increased by the variety of their outlook. The first is a Unitarian thinker, the second is a Scottish philosopher, the third is the head of a Presbyterian College in the University of Cambridge, the fourth is one of the very ablest Indian thinkers of our time, the fifth is an American Platonist and exponent of Mysticism, and the last is a Jesuit. The impressive fact is that, while their presuppositions differ greatly, to say nothing of their individual tendencies, they all agree, from their theoretical analysis, and from their practical experience, that Authority is indispensable for the individual if he would arrive at possession of religious truth.

Literature.

MODERN SCIENCE AND RELIGION.

THE Bishop of Birmingham has published his Gifford Lectures under the title of *Scientific Theory and Religion* (Cambridge University Press; 25s. net). It is an imposing work of over seven hundred closely printed pages. The lectures cover the whole field of scientific inquiry, from physics and astronomy, up through biology and anthropology, to a consideration of the great ultimate problems of mind, God, and immortality. To those who listened to the Lectures when delivered orally this weighty volume will come in one sense as a disappointment. For Dr. Barnes, in delivering the lectures, discoursed on Relativity and its geometrical basis with great charm and in the most lucid English. But now, in the lectures as published, he has seen fit to work out the mathematics of the theory at great length, with the result that the first three hundred pages of his book are