

Is Probabilism therefore a "very dangerous doctrine"?

Our readers have now before them this "very dangerous doctrine" of Probabilism, and they will be able to judge of the charges brought against it. The truth is, that modern writers do not trouble themselves to understand it at all, but take up the calumnies of Pascal and Mosheim without examination. If intelligent Protestants, such as the writers of the article on Penance in Fraser, and of Tract 6, were to examine the theory of Probabilism for themselves, they would be likely to admit that the principle was evidently true—so true, indeed, that they might add that it was hardly worth while taking such trouble to prove it. But however reasonable and well supported it may be, Probabilism is one of those things which required explanation, as it has been habitually misunderstood and misrepresented by Protestant writers even to the present hour, and so we have entered into it more fully, perhaps, than many of our readers will like.

Probabilism is a principle of natural right implying liberty, until it is known to be curtailed by lawful authority.

In conclusion, we shall only ask them to compare our doctrine with the charges of our adversaries. Is there anything in probabilism to show that it is "a plea for uncertainty in moral actions"; that "it makes right and wrong a question of probability"; that it is "a web spun by the Jesuits to make straightforward action impossible" (Maurice p. 22); that it is "one of the great scandals of casuistry" (Tract 6 p. 20); that it is, in a word, any one of those monsters which have been conjured up by Protestant imaginations? Probabilism is evidently none of these. It is a principle of natural right which signifies that we retain possession of our liberty until we know that it is curtailed by lawful authority. Moreover, it is a doctrine chiefly intended for the training of Casuists and directors, who alone are qualified to judge of solid probability. But it is wrong to suppose that the education of a Catholic Priest is confined to casuistry—besides this, and his dogmatical and scriptural studies, he has to learn and to practise ascetical theology during a protracted course of preparation for the priesthood. As for the faithful, it is well known that in the Catholic Church they have abundant means and helps to practise a life of perfection,—sermons, retreats, missions, sodalities, multitudes of pious books, and a variety of religious orders suited to every disposition. It is most unfair to fasten on a compendium of casuistry, and make it appear that it is the spiritual guide of Catholics. The work of perfection begins where the works of obligation terminate, and the promotion and cultivation of perfection is one of the chief duties of a Director. When will Protestants examine fairly the full operation of the Catholic system?