

PART III.

WHAT IS PROBABILISM ?

(The MONTH, London, January, 1868, p. 82.)

Probabilism is the name of a doctrine or rule by which theologians ascertain the existence of rights and duties in certain doubtful cases. It has been utterly misrepresented by the Jansenists and Protestants, and it is misunderstood by well meaning Anglicans, and even by some Catholics. It is well worth our while, therefore, to set this matter in a clear light. When it is fairly examined, it will be seen that Probabilism is grounded on the fundamental laws of our free intellectual nature. We accept the issue as it is put forward by the author of Tract No. 6, p 19, where he speaks of the "very dangerous doctrine that it was lawful to follow a probable opinion in opposition to one more probable." He adds that "this was among the *propositiones damnatae* of Innocent XI., and that it led to the dangerous development of casuistry, which has brought reprobation on the whole study." We pass over a crowd of other charges brought against Casuists, in order to examine this one more fully. In the first place, therefore it is an error to suppose that Innocent XI. ever condemned the doctrine of Probabilism (1). Any one acquainted with theology will see this at a glance. We recommend our Anglican Casuist to read Viva on the Condemned Propositions, before he undertakes to interpret them, a task requiring some theological discrimination.

Nature and object of Moral Theology and Casuistry.

In order to understand the meaning of Probabilism, we must call to mind the nature and object of moral theology and casuistry. They constitute the science of moral and conscientious duties, a science which is indispensable for the proper administration of the Sacrament of Penance. The spiritual director is liable to be consulted by all classes of persons upon all sorts of conscientious obligations, and he should be able and ready to give prudent advice to all who consult him. Hence the science of moral theology and casuistry (which is nothing else than applied moral theology) embraces the entire circle of moral and religious duties, considered from a religious and practical point of view.

(1) What really was condemned by Innocent XI. was the doctrine "that it is lawful in any case (*generaliter*) to act upon a probable opinion, no matter how slight (*quantumvis tenuis*) the probability might be." Everybody will see that the writer before us does not understand what he quotes.