

AUTHORITY AND CONSCIENCE.

[The following is a report of the speech of Professor Clark at the Detroit Church Congress, which was referred to by Bishop Potter at the Church Congress at Toronto, which is re-published by request].

Professor Clark began by remarking that many persons who had heard the previous papers and speeches, might come to the conclusion that there was the greatest diversity between the opinions of the speakers. For instance, Dr. Philip Bruby's paper might be regarded as a plea for individualism, while that of the Bishop of Easton might seem a protest against it, and an argument for mere authority. Further consideration, however, might satisfy them that there was no real disagreement between them. By the plea for individualism, was meant substantially the supremacy of conscience; and the authority which the Bishop defended was an authority which had been accepted by those who were required to respect it, and which was supposed to be exercised in a legitimate manner. These two theories were both quite reconcilable the one with the other, and he doubted whether thus interpreted, either would be objected to by the propounder of the other.

Let them endeavor to see clearly in what points they were agreed, and then it would be easier to trace out the true relations between conscience and authority. It had already been said that we assume the right of private judgment and the supremacy of conscience. By conscience he meant not only the sense of duty but the moral judgment—that sense within a man which discriminated between good and evil. With regard to authority, one of the previous speakers had seemed to identify it with infallibility, but the two ideas were quite distinct. Indeed, in the practical sense of the word, infallibility was impossible. Why was it that men threw themselves into the arms of infallibility? Because they craved for certainty. They wanted to have the same kind of assurance in regard to moral and religious truth which they had in regard to mathematical truth. The thing was impossible. For even if he believed that the Pope was infallible, he could not be sure of his own infallibility; so that the infallibility of the Pope would bring no absolute certainty to him without an infallibility of his own to guarantee it. Authority, however, was quite possible, and was generally recognized apart from infallibility, as in the case of parents, rulers, and the like. By authority he meant a power claiming obedience and submission without assigning a reason for it. In regard to intellectual belief and moral conformity, authority would mean a power which required us to believe that which was not self-evident, or which could not be deduced from any other knowledge which we possessed; or, on the other hand, which required of us something as a duty which was not prescribed by our conscience.

Well, then, what were the relations between authority and conscience? One thing was quite clear, that authority had no right to dethrone conscience. Conscience was supreme. When a man saw, or thought he saw, that a thing was true, he must accept it; that it was false, he must reject it. When he perceived a thing to be right, he was bound to do it; when he saw a thing to be wrong, he was bound to avoid it. This was quite clear. But this did not end the question. There still arose the query, how far authority did influence conscience as a matter of fact, and how far it should be allowed to influence conscience as a

matter of principle. He would say a few words on these two points.

As regards the question of fact, a slight consideration of the subject would show that authority did very powerfully influence conscience and lead to its formation. It was quite clear that a man's conscience was not a power independent of education, and of the influences by which a man was surrounded. This was shown by the great diversities which were seen to exist between men's convictions of good and evil. Even among men belonging to the same nation, believing the same religion, receiving very much the same education, there were wide differences in moral judgment and conviction. How much wider between men of different nations, religions, civilizations! There was hardly a vice which had not some where been counted a virtue. There was hardly a crime which had not been elevated into a duty. It was quite clear, therefore, that a man's conscience was, in a great measure, formed by authority. The perceptions which we gained, we received in great measure from others. Our conscience, in fact, was to a great extent the result of the action of other men's consciences upon our minds.

This statement, however true, might seem open to the objection that a man had no conscience at all, but that all was the result of education. If some men, as seemed the case, had no conscience at all, if other men's consciences differed widely, must we not say that there was no real conscience, but every man's was exactly what it was made. If so we might say the very same thing about reason. Did we agree that man was not a rational being, or that there were no definite laws of thoughts, because some men were idiots or lunatics! or because some men's minds were so badly trained that their reasoning was extremely defective? On the contrary, we knew that the apparent or real exceptions proved nothing, and that reason could not be educated, if it did not exist. So if there were no conscience fitted naturally for the discernment of moral differences, there could be no education of the conscience with such results as one attained.

He might take an illustration from the perception of the distinction of colours. Mr. Gladstone had argued some time ago, that the old Greeks did not seem to have had the same perception of the finer shades of colors that we possessed, from the fact of their using the same term to indicate colours which we should think very different! and it was very likely that the education of the race, like that of the individual, was gradual. Did any one think of arguing from this that the eye had no sense of colour? certainly not. The eye must be educated to distinguish one colour from another, but when it had learnt these distinctions, it could never lose them so long as it remained healthy and sound. And so with the conscience, it has to be educated; but when once it sees the right and the wrong, the good and the evil, it can never lose the distinction, unless it is prevented by a sinful will. And here is the true relation between authority and conscience as a matter of fact. Authority is the teacher, but when the conscience is once taught, it retains that which it has received as its own possession. It no longer remembers how it has gained its vision. It seems to be its own as much as the sight of the eye.

Passing from the question of God, to that of obligation, and asking how far the conscience ought still to have regard to authority, we were perhaps entering upon more debatable ground. Some

would probably say that no regard whatever ought to be paid to authority, but they might come to see that such a conclusion was precipitate. They had already seen that conscience was not independent. What, in fact, was conscience? It was the voice of God. When a man heard the voice of duty speaking within him, that was not merely the utterance of his own heart, it was the echo of the voice which spoke from the eternal throne of righteousness. Well, then, might a man not reasonably ask whether God had taken any means of enlightening the conscience making clearer to man the right and the wrong, the beliefs to be entertained, the duties to be practised, the sins to be avoided. If, for example, he were told that God had actually revealed Himself and spoken to man by His incarnate Son, and that this Son had appointed and commissioned men to go forth and teach with authority in His name, would it not be the part of enlightened conscience to ask what guidance it might receive from such authority? He was not advocating any blind acceptance of any who might offer themselves as guides. By reason and by conscience we might verify their claims. But, when we had done so, should we not be honouring our consciences by submitting it to the guidance of the authority of God? and if that authority were truly divine, then we need fear no clashing between its teaching and the utterances of an enlightened conscience. It would commend itself to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

He wished there were time to show the bearing of these principles upon the authority of the Church, but that was at present impossible. He would only, therefore, add that in the truest experience there would be no sense of embarrassment in adjusting the claims of their seemingly conflicting powers. He who had the deepest sense of personal responsibility would call for no impossible liberty, but would rejoice that light would come to him from a source higher than himself. He who yielded himself most completely to the authority of God would have no sense of bondage, of Him the old collect said truly, *Cui servire est regnare*—"Whom to serve is to reign,"—or as our own called has it rendered, "Whose service is perfect freedom."

A RESOLUTION WHICH CUTS ITS OWN THROAT.

THE Congregationalist ministers and churches in assembly, recently passed the following resolution: "While this association sympathizes with those churches which have heroically founded, and cheerfully sustained denominational colleges at a great sacrifice in the early history of our country, still it is the opinion of this association, that to grant State aid to such institutions, would be out of harmony with the educational progress of Ontario, as well as detrimental to their own spiritual interests!" How very strange! State aid would damage the spiritual interests of denominational colleges, but, at the same time, is a good thing for a State College! Once for all we must ask the friends of any State aided, secular college, to realize that we are not to be hood-winked by the cry which makes denominational Colleges something constitutionally alien to popular rights. The secular State college is a denominational institution, it is based upon "secularism," which is just as much denominational as Wesleyanism or Presbyterianism. The Congregationalists are wholly inconsistent, they do not object to take money by the State machinery out of the pockets of Church people, in