

POPULAR APOLOGETICS.

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE MINISTERIAL ASSOCIATION OF TORONTO
MARCH 27TH, 1880, BY REV. JOHN BURTON, D.D.

It must be manifest that a strong undercurrent of religious questioning has set in, which it is neither wise nor possible to ignore. Its existence is not to be wholly deplored, inasmuch as a faith we receive by inheritance is in danger of losing its freshness, and stiffening into a mere form.

"O'er the roofs of the pioneers
Gathers the moss of a hundred years;
The living faith of the settlers old
A dead profession their children hold."

The zeal and freshness of a new birth is in measure lost by that life being found in an old traditional way. At the same time we are not to forget that there is a steadfastness in that which has a conscious rooting in the long past which no youthful freshness can yield. One could scarcely live amid the cloisters and gloom of the Abbey at Westminster without being in part an ecclesiastic, or stand by the martyrs' monument in old Grey Friars' Yard and not imbibe some of the old Covenanters' spirit; and, therefore, if whilst still held by the hallowed associations of the past we are so far disturbed as to shake off "the moss of a hundred years," the coming years will be fraught with a more thoroughly Christian Christianity than the world has yet experienced since the first descent of the tongues of flame. At any rate it is the minister's part to accept the facts of the providential life around, and strong in the faith of the Gospel to go forth guiding under-current and stream alike to God. We disown the pessimist's croak, and look forward with hope as

"Fresh and green from the rotting roots
Of primal forests the young growth shoots;
From the death of the old the new proceeds,
And the life of truth from the rot of creeds."

Not only is this an era of religious questioning, it is an age of growing general intelligence. Here we may easily *over* as well as *underestimate*. The student is apt on the one hand to imagine that the general public should keep pace with his "midnight oil," on the other to see a great gulf fixed between his attainments and that of the many; guarding against either extreme, we must nevertheless admit that knowledge is not the exclusive property of the favoured few, and our popular novelists are—with "Review" knowledge—discussing some of the deepest problems of Christian lore.

"Supernatural Religion" has passed through five editions, Grey's "Creed of Christendom" has a steady sale, and both are read with a silent attention, more deep than outspoken approval. We should not ignore such facts.

We shall, however make a great mistake if we form our general pulpit ministrations after the apologetic mode. The ambassador for Christ should give no feeble "perhaps." Exposition and application must be decided; "speaking," not pleading for—"the truth in love," and by manifestation thereof commending that truth "to every man's conscience in the sight of God." Yet even here most effective apologetics may be preached, as our further reflections will make manifest, nor would we, should occasion occur, altogether prohibit more formal evidencing of the truths of Christianity.

Christianity being a new life, may be considered as its own best evidence. Indeed the very call for apologetic effort, otherwise than the manifestation of its life may be viewed as an evidence of weakness in Christianity as now existing, nevertheless, as we have to do, not with the ideal, but the actual, the call must be met. We would posit, first, the trite, yet trite because true, position, that the very best apology for Christian verity is *itself*; its own native loveliness and living power must ever be its chief means of winning sway over the hearts and lives of men. The mind incapable of comprehending an argument may melt before "your chaste conversation coupled with fear." The Christian is the world's Bible, Christian lives its apology, the world's need sufficient ground for Christ's mission of salvation. Said an old, one eyed, lame confessor at the Council of Nice; "Christ and His apostles left us, not a system of logic nor of vain de-

ceit, but a naked truth to be guarded by faith and good works." "Nothing new in this presentation"—nothing—"Hold fast that which we have, that no man take our crown."

But, secondly. More formal apologetics may seem to be demanded. How far? Unless Christianity becomes pure mysticism its life must assume some objective form. Faith, its living power, cometh by hearing, and hearing by *the Word* of God, where the necessity of objectivity is plainly stated. Now as faith thus assumes an objective form, it of necessity becomes open to hostile criticism and must needs push its way into the region of the intellect. It is vain to seek the divorcing of the intellect from faith; both must be satisfied, else the elements jar and the man becomes "double minded," and therefore unstable in his ways. An intelligent faith, even in its strivings, is more manly than a blind implicit faith; at least thus we Protestants believe, else had we better at once bow before the infallible chair. We must meet such lovingly, faithfully, manfully.

The onward march of a conquering host must in the details of its course be guided by the general contour of the country into which it is advancing, and the character of the watchful foe. Thus it is that whilst Christianity in itself *semper eadem est*, its apologetics must necessarily vary. The eloquence of Minutius Felix would sound strangely out of place to-day, and the arguments which met English Deism in the early part of the eighteenth century will not meet the materialistic Atheism of to-day. The "Analogy" of Bishop Butler may remain a text-book in our theological halls, yet the modern evolutionist of the Haeckel school willingly allows himself to be impaled upon the atheistic horn of the dilemma from which the Deism of that day shrank back.

We would say in the meantime, let science do its own work. The evolution storm is of itself calming down. "I have fallen into a serious and unfortunate error," writes Darwin in a preface to Vol. II. "Descent of Man." A candour that would be refreshing from some prophecy-mongers and would-be scientific theologians. The true scientist is an explorer, and his theories tentative; if sometimes he dogmatizes he can too often plead the theologian's example. As Dr. Dawson once expressed it: "It is a fearful crime against the souls of men so to connect theological judgments with the truth of God that men of culture are repelled from what might otherwise awe by its moral elevation, and attract by its spiritual beauty. The scientific infidel is not always a wrong-doer to be put down. He is often a darkened soul struggling for light, and sometimes driven back from it by the follies and inconsistencies of Christians. The theologian may be held responsible for much scientific infidelity, as he adulterates the water of life with unwholesome earthly elements."

Science will answer science; the Christian popular apologist can wait.

An example of the necessarily shifting character of Christian evidences may be seen by contrasting the spirit of the age with the confession of Nicodemus "We know Thou art a teacher sent from God, for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest except God be with him." So far from working conviction, a miracle would set our scientists experimenting. These phases of thought can scarcely call for popular treatment. I should question the expediency of pressing miracles into the apologetics of to-day.

Nor do I attach much value to the so-called "proofs" that God is, in our general dealing with the world-spirit, for the existence of God must after all be held to be a *primitive belief*. He that cometh to God must *believe* that he is; all apologetics can do is to awaken or to strengthen the latent or wavering consciousness. To this end we can scarcely improve upon the theological argument as stated by Paley in the earlier chapters of his Natural Theology. "We would, however, stake more upon the moral argument which may be thus briefly stated, and is capable of popular treatment:

Diversity of opinion as to what particular act is right or wrong confessedly exists; but that there is a right which when known is imperative, the com-

mon consent of man declares. That the supreme rule is not in ourselves, is manifest from the sense of responsibility; nor in changing circumstances, because no circumstances can make evil as such, commendable to the conscience. Nor has experience invalidated the argument of the "Analogy," that "in the natural course of things, virtue, *as such*, is actually rewarded, and vice, *as such*, punished." We thus reach at least what Matthew Arnold calls the "Power without ourselves which makes for righteousness." Should it here be objected "we have been educated to this," the reply may be made, that the ear requires educating to discern between notes with exactness, does not invalidate the fact that those variations are real and may be mathematically computed.

This power granted, and we in conscious relation, we meet those moral longings. "The weary, aching, upward search for what we never gain;" the satisfying of which—Tyndall himself being witness—forms the most pressing problem for philosophy to solve.

We are now upon the very threshold of *revelation*, our revelation, the Bible. How do we propose to meet it?

The general method is the historical, such as we have been accustomed to in Paley's "Evidences," and later in such works as "Westcott's Introduction," and yet such researches, however necessary for the scholar, are utterly beyond the popular ear. Are they necessary?

I have long thought we have not an undoubted right "to begin at the other end," and claim authority on the ground of "possession."

The cravings of the moral nature have been referred to as an imperative factor in human experience. "Man cannot live by bread alone." Confessedly the Gospel of Jesus satisfies those longings, and when received, gives peace. Even the author of "Supernatural Religion," after three volumes of destructive criticism, closes with these words: "We may find real help and guidance from more earnest contemplation of the life and teachings of Jesus." In an earlier volume, the same writer exalts above all else the character of "the man who is truly inspired by the morality of Jesus, and penetrated by that love of God and of man which is its living principle." It is scarcely worth while wrangling with a man who would negative the fact that the religion of Jesus

"Satisfies our longings
As nothing else can do."

Christ is in possession of our moral world; is there any reason why He should be served with a writ of ejectment? Someone must possess it. He is in—is there any claimant that can justly put Him out. When seeking to win our way against Islam, or the systems of India, we have to make good our claim, and the missionary needs, as our Churches are learning, special training therefor, but with us, at least just now, no other claim is pressed.

No man, unless crazed with anger or lunacy, would dismiss a confidential clerk who had long and faithfully served him, to whom his business success was largely due, and whose services he still required. At any rate, if one claimed the situation, the claimant must substantiate his *better* right; meanwhile the one in possession remains. I want some reason for dismissing Jesus of Nazareth from the three-fold office of Prophet, Priest, and King, and thus I come under the shadow of His cross, I place the burden of disproof upon those who seek to disturb a present confidence and hope. That these methods will not silence all cavil, may be readily confessed, but that they afford a fair ground of confidence to the seeker after righteousness may with emphasis be affirmed. That we gain absolute certainty is not to be supposed. Bishop Butler's axiom "Probability is the guide of life," forbids such an expectation, but of Christianity, thus held, those necessary conditions of acceptance may be boldly maintained.

It contradicts no known truths, rather it satisfies all requirements of our religious nature. We may presume that to be the key which fits all the wards and raises all the tumbledrums of the lock.

It has certain vested rights in us from old and hallowed associations. Why should we cast aside an