TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD IN RELIGION

SIX LECTURES DELIVERED AT CAMBRIDGE TO UNDERGRADUATES IN THE LENT TERM, 1906

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"Our faith cometh of the natural love of the soul, and of the clear light of our reason, and of the steadfast mind which we have of God in our first making."

JULIAN OF NORWICH.

PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION.

THESE Lectures were given at the invitation of a Committee, composed of resident graduates in the University of Cambridge. This Committee, though quite unofficial, contained representatives of all schools of thought in the Church, and some Nonconformists. Its members were of opinion that, in view of the wide interest taken by Cambridge undergraduates in religious questions and discussions thereupon, a course of constructive lectures on the basis of the Christian Faith might be advantageous.

The Committee did me the honour to ask me to give such a course. The Lectures were delivered in the Victoria Assembly Rooms, on Wednesday afternoons, in the Lent Term, 1906, and were attended by from 250 to 300 persons, of whom about four-fifths were undergraduates. The Lectures are published, by request, just as they were delivered, with a few verbal changes.

W. R. I.

PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

In this Edition a few sentences, chiefly in Lecture IV., have been recast. My critics, who have dealt very kindly with my little book, have recognised my motive in taking nothing for granted, and have not misunderstood my frank admission of unsolved difficulties. But a few expressions seemed to me to need modification, and I have been glad of the opportunity to rewrite them. The changes are few and slight, for I have reason to believe that the Lectures were found helpful by many who heard them, or have since read them. The Cambridge undergraduate is in earnest about his religion, and is ready to listen to any thoughtful teacher who will address him as a grown man, and with absolute candour. *Summa est ut moveamur ipsi.* We can help our younger friends best by sharing with them our own deepest convictions. Other sides of the truth can be taught by other men.

W. R. I.

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TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD IN RELIGION

I.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

IT is a profound saying of Aristotle that the occasions of strife are small but its causes great. We have need to remind ourselves of this when we are tempted to throw aside with disgust the newspaper controversies about religion which have been so noisy in the last few years. Even when, as is usually the case, the arguments used prove nothing except the invincible prejudices and bad temper of the writers, prejudice and ill temper are facts which have to be accounted for, and they are sometimes based on an inarticulate logic which has some of the cogency of natural instinct. Just now the logic seems to be more inarticulate, the fighting more random than usual, because some of the old weapons, both

of attack and defence, are almost useless, and the field of combat is so confused that it is difficult to distinguish friend from foe. It is a perplexing age for those who need guidance. The simple expedient of obeying orders, of believing on authority, is difficult when there is so much conflict of opinion. For if authority A tells me to believe, and authority B tells me not to believe, and I decide to follow A without listening to B, that is only the same as saying, "I will believe because I choose," which is not a dignified position for an intelligent or even for an honest man. I hope we shall soon have a new apologetic, which may satisfy the needs of the rising generation as Butler's *Analogy* seems to have satisfied the very different religious needs of Georgian England, and as Paley's *Evidences*, strange to say, seems to have satisfied those of a later period. But we have not got it yet, and I do not think that I should help you much by following the lines of any standard theological treatise, in the lectures which I am to have the honour and pleasure of delivering here. I think I shall have a better chance of interesting some of you if I follow my own bent, and tell you how some of our most pressing problems appear to me. I am not so presumptuous as to hope to contribute anything of permanent value to the great debate which will continue its leisurely course centuries after we are dead. The last

word on this as on other subjects may be left to "the last man," who would seem to be the proper person to speak it. I shall be well content if I can give you something to think about, and if I can convince those of you who are in perplexity about their beliefs—and this is the class whose interest I am most anxious to enlist and retain—that there is, at least, nothing to be ashamed of, morally or intellectually, in loyalty to the old Church and the old faith.

There are some of my hearers, I have no doubt, who would prefer a discussion on more conventional lines. Men's minds are differently constituted; and there are still many who do not share the feeling of disappointment with our semi-official apologetics which keeps back others from active sympathy with the Church. But the wants of this class are provided for in standard books; and though they will find something wanting in these lectures, possibly they may profit by hearing an attempt to put old truths in what is to them a new light.

There are in each generation certain dominant ideas which tend to become a sort of framework in which all experience is set, and to furnish a dialect in which all thoughts are expressed. Anyone who wishes to influence his generation must accept this fact; he must consider how the permanent truths of religion

can best be arranged in this framework, and expressed in this dialect. Onesidedness cannot be avoided when the subject embraces the whole of human life; but each generation may contribute something to the knowledge of God, and that contribution is sure to be closely connected with its own characteristic ideas. To rake up bygone controversies is seldom useful; not because the subjects were unimportant, or the arguments feeble; but because the life has so far gone out of them, that it is difficult for us to understand the points at issue and the position of the disputants.

The doctrine of development has so completely passed into the consciousness of our generation, that it is more necessary to guard against various popular misunderstandings of it, than to insist on its importance in the history of religion. It has brought into popular discussions an unmistakable advance towards scientific method, which is discernible in a distrust of rhetoric, a more exacting standard of truth and intellectual honesty, and a better understanding of the value of evidence. There is a tendency to treat religion and ethics as branches of psychology, and thus, with history and sociology, as part of anthropology, the general science of mankind. The studies which have at other times seemed of primary importance to religion, but which

now, in an age dominated by the scientific spirit, have receded into a subordinate position, are pure metaphysics, and all the subjects which are dealt with by *commentators*—Biblical scholarship, dogmatic theology, and the like. These latter subjects are, no doubt, vehemently discussed, and raise questions *within* the Church which demand the exercise of statesmanship; but in the great question of belief or unbelief they are, I think, of quite secondary importance. It is almost frivolous to make the whole truth or falsehood of Christianity turn upon the historical truth of a particular miracle, or the authenticity of a particular document, when among the real questions at issue are the character of the relations between the spiritual and natural world, and the difference, if any, between revealed and natural religion. Until we have satisfied ourselves on these great general questions, it is useless to argue about the virgin-birth or the manner of the resurrection. So far as these historical problems have any real importance, it is contained in their relation to those general problems which I have mentioned, and our decision of the particular case will almost certainly be determined (in the absence of direct evidence capable of compelling conviction) by our views on the larger question.

If, then, I avoid these points of current

controversy, it is not from cowardice, but because I wish you to go behind them. I wish you to dig deeper among the foundations of religious belief, to consider what faith means, and what is its essential content. And though in my fourth lecture I shall discuss the relation of historical faith to ultimate truth, and in my fifth, the religion of Jesus Christ, in the earlier part of my course I shall ask you to accompany me in an impartial and dispassionate survey of religious belief as a historical and psychological fact. Just as we might trace the growth of the artistic faculty, distinguishing, as we might surely do, its normal and healthy manifestations from the morbid and debased conditions which have sometimes affected it, so I will ask you to consider religion as it has shown itself in human history. The only assumption I shall make is that we may take upon ourselves to call some religious phenomena good or healthy and others bad or morbid. The criterion must be the extent to which they conform to, or contradict, our standard of what human life ought to be. Priority in time is no ground for stamping a type of religion as inferior. The logical development of religion does not correspond to the historical; the assumption that it does is perhaps the greatest defect in Hegel's philosophy of religion.

Let us then go back to the beginning—to

the dawn of the religious consciousness. I am convinced that those who have traced the beginnings of religion to a single source, are mistaken. Neither the dream-hypothesis, nor "animism," nor (with Statius and Petronius) the simple feeling of vague *fear*, will account for the birth of religion. And to speak (with Max Müller) of the desire to establish relations with the *Infinite*, is to introduce a word which has not proved very helpful in religious philosophy. I should rather say that the raw material of religion is the sense of some Power beyond our control, on which we are dependent, yet not so absolutely dependent as to be incapable of entering into mutual relations with it. We cannot accept Schleiermacher's view that religion is *simply* "a feeling of dependence." For, in the first place, the feeling of union is as much part of religion as the feeling of alienation; both are essential parts of the religious consciousness. And secondly it is a mistake to say that religion is purely a matter of *feeling*. The old tendency to separate and almost personify the faculties —thought, will, feeling—seems to have revived in our day, and it is causing great confusion in psychology and philosophy. The tripartite division is convenient and helpful; but we say good-bye to scientific thinking when we begin to champion the will against the intellect, or the feeling against either. To

make religion a matter of feeling, or of will, or of intellect, to the exclusion of the other faculties, is to impoverish it, and the consequences of such impoverishment soon show themselves both in theory and practice.

Power, rather than goodness, is the attribute of the divine nature which first impresses itself on the human mind. It takes a long time to discover that God's almighty power is declared "most chiefly in showing mercy and pity." That is not a conception of irresponsible power which is suggested to the savage either by his desires or by his experience. His god is naturally a great chief, and the barbarian does not respect his chief the less for being exacting, domineering, and somewhat capricious. Such conduct is part of his prerogative.

Anthropomorphic deities are the result of reflection. They are ideal constructions, partly intellectual, partly artistic, partly practical. It is impossible to distinguish these elements in the primitive mind, and we must not forget how strangely they are often blended in the religion of civilised peoples. One of the greatest difficulties which the philosophical thinker has to encounter when he tries to understand popular religious beliefs, is due to the fact that while he only asks "what is true?" people who are not philosophers allow their beliefs to be largely deter-

mined by other considerations, such as, "what pleases me?" "what helps me?" or even "what have I been taught?" The causes of belief are always at first regarded as reasons for believing. Whatever has determined the judgment may be brought as evidence. "I was told so." "It is a story honourable to my tribe." "I saw it in a dream." In certain conditions of society these are reasons.[1] Another snare is that the reasons and proofs generally given for God's existence are not those which historically produced that belief, but are attempts to justify a belief which had other and more obscure beginnings. A man will seldom give up his faith because he is beaten in argument; and he is quite right, for his faith is not based on arguments about it, but on the spiritual intuition and craving, with their specific determinations, which is the ground of all religion.

As the higher faculties develop, more special feelings are distinguished. In particular, the double consciousness of alienation and of communion, the two poles between which religion must always oscillate, becomes more and more acute. The sense of *want*, of dissatisfaction, lies very near the heart of religion. In its simplest form it is the consciousness of our own weakness, in face of the inflexible and unpitying laws of nature. Man

[1] Carveth Read, *Metaphysics of Nature*, p. 16.

finds his hopes frustrated, his wants disregarded; he feels a stranger in an alien or hostile world. His attempts at readjustment may at first be dictated by mere self-interest. But his dissatisfaction soon goes deeper. It becomes a sense of guilt. It is borne in upon him that it is his own fault if he is at strife with the laws which all other creatures obey. The discord is not between himself as God made him and the universe, but between what he has made of himself or desires for himself and the righteous laws of God. This sense of guilt is only resolved in self-abnegation, which is the highest stage to which the sense of alienation from God conducts us. We discover at last that we must be willing to lose our soul in order to find it, to die in order to live, and that in having nothing we possess all things. This I believe to be the normal course which the sense of *want* takes in the human heart. First we try to get what we desire from the external world; then, when our hearts are not satisfied so, we turn inwards and find the seat of the trouble in the corrupt state of our own hearts and wills. Lastly, when neither attempts to subdue the nature of things to ourselves, nor ourselves to the nature of things, can restore us to peace, we are induced at last to find, as it were, a new centre outside ourselves, no longer referring everything to our own welfare, but to those larger