

# Why the Modernists?

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VEIL of silence has enshrouded the controversy over the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, so sensationally featured in the daily papers just about a year ago. It must not be imagined, however, that the religious conflict which it inaugurated between the conservative and liberal elements of the several Protestant Churches has become a dead issue. The strife still continues, all the more deadly because of its silent nature.

The attack on the Virgin Birth was not an isolated outbreak; rather it but marked the opening engagement in a long struggle between two views of religious doctrine which are absolutely contradictory and irreconcilable. On the one side are the Modernists whose purpose seems to be to divest religion of every trace of the supernatural. This may not be their avowed aim, but it is the logical result of the movement they have inaugurated. The denial of Christ's virgin birth is but a step removed from the rejection of His divinity. Were the Modernists to take that step, their Christianity would cease to be divine and would become a mere human institution like Buddhism. To use the words of Bishop Manning of the Protestant Episcopal Church, this movement "has its roots in a determined presupposition against the possibility of miracles, against the supernatural as such, and so against the very message of the Gospel as declared in the New Testament."

Opposing this dangerous tendency are the Fundamentalists. They hold that the fundamental truths touching on the divinity of Jesus Christ, as accepted by all Christians, must be understood in their strict and literal sense; that if these be not true, Christianity itself is not true. While admitting that Protestantism affords great latitude of belief, the Fundamentalists strive to fix certain limits which no one can pass without forfeiting his right to be considered a Christian. Bishop Manning, speaking for the conservative element among the Episcopalians, makes this point clear in his statement, "There is wide room for difference of

apprehension and interpretation of the articles of the Creed, but manifestly this liberty has its limits."

Such, in brief, are the religious difficulties which confront Protestantism, today. This condition has been aggravated and brought to a head by the controversy over the Virgin Birth, but its roots reach back to the preceding century when certain materialistic writers, aiming at the destruction of all religion, claimed to show that the advance of science had dispelled the old mass of superstitions that people called "religion." The notion of a personal God who had created the world, appeared antiquated, they said, in the light of what geology and modern astronomy had discovered about the origin of the universe. Evolution taught that man was only a highly developed animal, so that it was a mere fiction of the imagination to say that he possessed a spiritual soul which survived after death. These principles at once gained enormous popularity, due to the glamour of science in which they were enveloped. The world had gone mad over science, so much so, that even the most palpable absurdities were unhesitatingly accepted when advanced in the name of science.

Our own age, too, has been infected by this baneful philosophy which would reduce man almost to the level of the brute. Its principles have contaminated almost every agency to which man looks for guidance and information. The very text-books used in the schools and colleges of the country often contain assertions subversive of the most sacred truths of Christianity; while the columns of newspapers and magazines frequently offer some veiled or open assault on the supernatural element of religion. Here is a specimen, written by the columnist of a great New York daily: "Surely Creeds have nothing to do with facts. We think better of Creeds than that; they are based upon intuition, hopes, surmises; they are poetry." So persistent and widespread is this propaganda, that it is not surprising to learn that half the people of the country today are without any definite religious belief.

Nor, is it to be wondered at, that some Protestant pulpits have been infected by such poison. Even the most obvious falsehoods will gain some credence if repeated often enough. In view of this fact it is neither just nor right to accuse the Modernists as a whole of insincerity and desire for notoriety. They seem to

believe that the course they have adopted was dictated by the best interests of religion. Fr. Colemans, writing in the *Ave Maria* (Vol. XIX, 1924, p. 492) has described their state of mind perfectly: "As older conceptions of nature have given way before a fuller and clearer knowledge of facts and laws, so religion, [they believe] if it is to be a factor in the modern world, must discard antiquated doctrines to be integrated with modern science."

Anyone who has followed this controversy must admit that back of it lies the alleged conflict between Faith and Science. It is clearly implied in the statement of one of the Modernists, "Scientifically we are adults; religiously we are in the nursery. When adult sciences strike a nursery religious mind, there is a shock." In their zeal to preserve religion from destruction and in their anxiety to ward off the ridicule heaped upon its teachings, the Modernists believe that the ancient creeds must be given an interpretation conformable to modern progress, even if that means a denial of everything that the past considered vital and sacred. The pity of it is that their fears are entirely groundless. As Chesterton points out in one of his books, "Nearly all the latest discoveries have been destructive not of the old dogmas of religion but rather of recent dogmas of science." This assertion has been supported by the statements of Sir Bertrand Windle and of many other noteworthy men of science.

The spell science has cast upon them is so strong that the Modernists have forgotten the true nature of religious truth; have forgotten, as Cardinal Newman has so lucidly expressed it that:

"The very idea of Christianity in its profession and history is . . . 'Revelatio revelata'; it is a definite message from God to man distinctly conveyed by His chosen instruments, and to be received as such a message; and therefore to be positively acknowledged, embraced, and maintained as true on the ground of its being divine, not as true on intrinsic grounds, not as probably true or partially true, but as absolutely certain knowledge, certain in a sense in which nothing else can be certain, because it comes from Him who neither can deceive nor be deceived."\*

Had the Modernists fully realized the unique note of certainty inherent in Christian teaching, as emphasized by the Cardinal, the difficulties raised against religion on purely scientific grounds would not have led them into the false position they

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\* "Grammar of Assent," p. 387.

hold today; for once the fact of revelation is admitted, the necessity of accepting the truths it proposes, in the same, unchanging sense, logically follows. If the teaching of the Gospel be from God, it represents the highest and ultimate expression of **Truth** that men can attain; and **Truth** is as stable and changeless as the eternal hills.

Science itself rests upon the immutability of truth which is the object of its ceaseless quest. Facts are collected, researches made and hypotheses formed with but one end in view to ascertain **Truth**. It is a slow and laborious process. Many tentative solutions must be advanced and then rejected before the correct one is reached, so complex are the problems confronting the human intellect, and so powerless is it to grasp them at the first attempt. Here is where the apparent conflict between Faith and Science enters, due, as St. Thomas Aquinas points out, to the fact that the conclusions of science are often not well established. The tentative character of many scientific theories was never so evident as it is at the present time. New developments in every field of science have overthrown many scientific "laws" that once seemed as certain as the course of the stars, and have, at the same time, badly shaken the confidence of scientists in the finality of any hypothesis. Science is being taught humility. New theories that would have been regarded in the past as the "last word" on the subject, are now accepted tentatively and with reservations. Compared with this groping of science, how lucid and distinct the teaching of revelation appears. Unlike purely natural knowledge it comes **direct** from Truth itself and commands the assent of all minds by reason of a motive more certain than the most evident proofs of human reason—the veracity of God.

Evidently, then, the objections against the truths of revelation, which are drawn from science, are irrelevant and of no weight. Scientists are indeed justified in asserting that naturally there can be no generation without the action of both parents; that naturally, the forces of nature operate uniformly; and that there is not a natural power which can restore life to the dead. Thus far, they remain within their proper scope. If, however, on these purely natural grounds they assail the Virgin Birth and reject the miracles and resurrection of Christ, as some have done, they speak, not as scientists, but as false philosophers.

They substitute mere opinions for demonstrations, since it lies beyond the realm of human reason to determine how far the God who created nature, can modify its operation whenever He sees fit. Indeed, faith instead of contradicting reason assists it in the pursuit of its proper object, natural truth. This particular function of faith, so often ignored, is admirably described by the great French mathematician, Cauchy :

"One ought to reject without hesitation every hypothesis which is in contradiction to revealed truth. I do not say this in the interests of religion but in the interests of science, because truth cannot contradict itself. It is for having neglected this rule that there have been scientists who have squandered in futile attempts much precious time that might have been happily employed in making useful discoveries."\*

The Fundamentalists are in the right in maintaining the immutability of Christian doctrine. Unfortunately, their position possesses a fatal weakness, the want of a reliable standard which would enable them to determine with absolute certainty whether any particular doctrine be divine or merely human. This criterion cannot be reason. That faculty is under the same handicap in regard to the things of faith, as a man born blind, in regard to colors. The blind man cannot see colors; he must believe what others tell him about their existence and nature. In much the same way, human reason cannot **see** the truth of the mysteries of faith nor can it understand their nature; it must believe whatever God has been pleased to reveal concerning Himself, knowing that He cannot deceive. Again, the blind man can obtain no direct idea of color; he speaks of crimson, for example, as like the loud blast of a trumpet. The human reason in its present state can obtain no direct idea of supernatural things, it can know them only by analogy and in terms of material things. Many religious doubts arise from a failure to understand this limitation of the human mind when confronted with supernatural truths.

Many Protestants consider the Gospels as the sole rule of faith, but the sacred writings are susceptible of varied and even contradictory interpretations, as the present controversy proves. Others regard the Creed as the measure of their faith; but the most ancient of these, the Apostles Creed, probably did not take definite shape until after the Apostolic age, and certainly this

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\* "Sept. Lecons de Physique Generale" quoted by Fr. Zahm in "Catholic Science and Catholic Scientists," p. 169.



formula bears within itself no evidence that it is something more than a mere human compilation of religious beliefs.

During the trial of Bishop Brown, an Episcopalian churchman accused of heresy, one of the spokesmen for the Fundamentalists asserted, "A dogma is not true because the Church says it is true, but the Church says it is true because it has become convinced of that truth by religious experience." He would make "religious experience" the test of truth, yet the Modernists might appeal to the same standard as a justification for rejecting the same dogmas which their opponents defend. Such a vague and flexible norm hardly makes for certainty in matters of belief.

In the final analysis, the sole standard of belief among Protestants is the principle of private judgment, and if their faith is to rest on that basis. "The conclusions of the Modernists are logically and scientifically unassailable and will appeal as such to an ever-increasing majority of thinking men." If all men are free to form their own judgments regarding the doctrines actually taught by Christ, the attempt of the Fundamentalists to hold the Modernist party to any definite doctrine becomes an unjustifiable act of intellectual oppression.

In the face of the difficulties raised by the basic Protestant principle of "Private Judgment," how is the immutability of the Christian faith to be preserved? How can thinking men justify their unwavering adherence to the sacred beliefs "once for all delivered to the Saints"? The Catholic Church alone, holds a satisfactory solution to the problem. She has been established by Jesus Christ, Himself, to be a living, perpetual tribunal whose office it is to declare in His name and with infallible authority the extent and meaning of the truths He came on earth to teach mankind. Whenever she passes judgment on a matter of faith or morals, there abides in her a special divine assistance which preserves her from the slightest possibility of falling into error. She it is, who bears unimpeachable testimony to the inspired character of the Gospels and to the truth of the doctrines formulated in the Creed. The most striking proof that this special help does abide with her, is to be found in the immutability of her doctrines. There is substantially no difference between the faith of the Catholic today and that of his brethren in the Apostolic age. It is true that from time to time, the Councils and

Popes have defined doctrines held only implicitly by previous ages, but these declarations are merely the statements of truths contained in the original deposit of faith delivered to her by Christ. Never has the Church contradicted herself or abandoned a single article of her creed.

This fidelity of the Catholic Church in preserving unchanged and intact the deposit of faith entrusted to her keeping by Jesus Christ, her Divine Founder, should have a special attraction for Protestants today, when so many outside the fold have had the very foundations of their faith destroyed and are "carried about with every wind of doctrine." If such as these, only knew the Church better, they would find in her a haven of peace for their souls. They would realize that her infallible teaching, instead of being a trammel to their reason, is in reality a guide that would lead them deeper into the mysteries of God than their unaided quest could ever carry them; and they would come to recognize that her devotions and sacraments, instead of being a barrier between the soul and its Saviour, are in very truth, the bonds of love that unite the two in the closest and most consoling of unions.