

in the Old Testament, but by means of their acquaintance with a religious vocabulary already current among the Mystery-associations.<sup>1</sup>

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### STUDIES IN CONVERSION.

#### IX. RABBI DUNCAN.

IN the New College, to which, after the Disruption, Chalmers' professorial activities were transferred from the University of Edinburgh, the subject of our last study had, as one of his colleagues, a kindred spirit, who was affectionately known throughout the country under the title of "Rabbi" Duncan; and among many points of resemblance connecting the two men the foremost was this, that each had gone through a strongly marked conversion, which became the gateway into all the profoundest experiences of the soul.

In outward fortunes, on the contrary, two men could hardly have been less alike. Duncan had been a minister of the Church of Scotland in Glasgow; then, when, through the rising tide of Evangelical enthusiasm, Missions to the Jews were founded, he was put in charge of such a mission at Buda-Pesth, the origin of which is associated with the venerable names of Robert Murray McCheyne and Andrew Bonar; and thence he was called home, when the Free Church was setting up a college, to be the professor of Hebrew. With all the leaders of the Disruption movement he enjoyed the closest intimacy, and he followed every step of the history of the new Church with sympathy; but his name holds no place in the public debates and controversies of the time; his gifts not being of such a kind as to fit

<sup>1</sup> Considerations of space prevent us from referring to the allied term *φωτισμὸς* (*φωτισμός*), but the same principles of investigation are justified in its interpretation.

him for such appearances. It was in his professorship that his life-work was done, and his immediate influence only reached a few. Even in the class-room, indeed, the effect of his labours was limited by deficiencies and eccentricities. His personal habits were odd in the extreme; and he became the hero of innumerable stories, true and untrue, such as people delight to repeat about a man of this type. Yet he was a scholar, acquainted with a score of languages, especially those of the East; and he was a philosopher and theologian of omnivorous reading. But he was much more than this—he was a man of unquestionable genius. He possessed the insight which goes like a flash to the heart of abstruse and mysterious subjects; and he could make others see his vision. His students, though they had much to bear from his habits of irregularity, were proud of him, knowing that, somewhere between the commencement and the end of the hour, something would be said which would shine in the memory like a jewel; and they were aware that, if they could get him away from the class-room, it was easy to engage him in conversation, which poured from him like a torrent and revealed the riches of an original and thoroughly furnished mind.

It was through the ingenuity of one of his students, more conscious than the rest of the value of such opportunities, that the world at large owed its first knowledge of the Rabbi. William Knight, afterwards Professor of Moral Philosophy at St. Andrews, not only assiduously cultivated his acquaintance, but, during a summer-vacation, carried him off to the home of his father in Fife, where, in long, sunny walks, he boswellized him; and he gave the results to the public under the title of *Colloquia Peripatetica or Deep-sea Soundings*.<sup>1</sup> It was a tiny volume of a hundred-

<sup>1</sup> Professor Knight's volume reached its sixth edition in 1907, and this edition contains some additional *colloquia*.

and-fifty pages, but it disclosed to those who had eyes to see a thinker of the first rank. It proved Dr. Duncan to have been possessed not only of immense erudition but of the most penetrating insight into the genius of philosophical and theological systems and the most delicate powers of expressing the niceties of thought in language. It proved him to have been a man of great breadth of culture and sympathy, who, while holding what might be considered a narrow creed of his own, could enter into the feelings and convictions of Christians of every branch of the Church. And it proved that he could express his ideas in terms the most eloquent or in epigrams which stick in the memory like arrows.

It may be well to quote, from this source, a few of his sayings, in order to give those unacquainted with him some notion of his mental calibre :—

“Genius lies very much in that region where the profound is simple, and the simple profound. The great thoughts of such men as Chalmers are very simple when expressed, but only a man of genius could think them.”

“Everyone should have a strait creed for himself, and a wide one for other people.”

“Hyper-Calvinism is all house and no door, Arminianism is all door and no house.”

“‘Who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’—ah, yes; and they will be prouder of their redness than of their whiteness.”

“‘Very religious’ was the character given of some devout but unrenewed man. ‘He is very religiose,’ was the Rabbi’s answer.”

“The Christian Fathers found salvation only in Christ, but they had a bleeding heart for Plato, whose philosophy one of them called a sigh for Christ.”

“There is an immense power in Christianity to evoke

latent talent. There is nothing that I know of so powerful to call out the 'mute inglorious Miltons.' ”

“The cultus of the Ritualist and of the old Scotch Seceder are at opposite extremes. In the one we have the external form, often without the internal spirit; in the other we have the internal element, without the smallest regard to its outward form. But it is the ghost and the body together that make the man.”

“The *Te Deum* is a grand piece of writing—by far the finest fragment of post-apostolic devotion. I am particularly fond of these lines—‘Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ. Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father. When Thou tookest upon Thee to deliver man, Thou didst not abhor the Virgin’s womb.’ When Thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death, Thou didst open the Kingdom of heaven to all believers.’ The *Te Deum* must be very old. It was sung at Augustine’s ordination, but it is much older. No one can tell the influence of that hymn during the fourteen centuries it has been in use. There are magnificent prayers in the Roman Missal. They are chiefly relics of a very early and much purer age; and many a good Romanist gets on very well in his Church by the help of these alone.”

“‘Fulfil yourself’ is the vague and cloudy cry of some shallow analysts of human nature. Fulfil what? Again I ask, fulfil what? Your fallen nature, or the new creature? The summons to let your nature, whatever it may be, get free play, with all its corrupt instincts, is a summons to pandemonium. Let men start from the new creature, and the fulfilment of that is the perfection and completion of man.”

“A merely æsthetic religion, like that of Goethe and all worshippers of the beautiful, is a miserable substitute for piety, and it never stands the tear and wear of time, especially in great sorrows. It is the offspring of sentiment divorced

from law ; and that is an illegal divorce. It leads to a crude philanthropy, to moonlight views of God's government of the world. It has often led to a hazy latitudinarianism, and sometimes to what is even worse, an antinomian evangelism, great raptures and gross viciousness going together. Æsthetic religionism is at bottom the bringing of religion to God, instead of bringing the soul to God to get religion. Let the effort to clothe yourself with the raiment of the beautiful be changed into an effort to strip yourself. Humble yourself, and think of the law. Yet God is an æsthetic Being ; let me never forget that fact. The æsthetical in religion must not be eradicated : it must be supplemented."

In Professor Knight's book there are important references to the conversion ; but the full account is due to a friend of the Rabbi's youth, subsequently known to the world as Principal Brown, who not only had firsthand knowledge of the facts at the time, but was himself a part of the facts, as will be seen from the following narrative.<sup>1</sup>

John Duncan, like so many of the distinguished Scotsmen of his century, was an Aberdonian, having been born in the city of Aberdeen in the last decade of the eighteenth century. He was of humble parentage and might have been supposed to be destined to follow some common handicraft ; but the thirst for knowledge, so characteristic of the North, was early awake in him. During an illness which he had as a child he was heard sighing, " Oh that God would spare me till I get on the red cloakie " (meaning the student's gown) ! He early lost his mother ; but he had the good fortune to get, as stepmother, a woman of rare discretion and sympathy, who entered into his feelings and encouraged

<sup>1</sup> Principal Brown published, in 1872, *Life of John Duncan, LL.D.* (second edition the same year), and, in 1874, *The Rev. John Duncan, LL.D., in the Pulpit and at the Communion Table*. See also Dr. Moody Stuart, *Recollections of the late John Duncan*, 1872. Professor Blaikie's *Life of Principal Brown* should also be consulted.

him to attempt the career of learning. Thus he succeeded in passing through both the high school and the university. But he made no mark in either. Already the eccentricity of his genius and the disorderliness of his habits were strongly marked. He could not keep to the prescribed paths, wherein the rewards of learning are gathered. Nevertheless, his mind was early awake, and he was keenly pursuing pathways of his own. When he ought to have been doing the exercises prescribed in the classes, he was greedily acquiring foreign languages or reading voraciously in philosophy.

His parents belonged to the Original Secession Church and intended him for the ministry in that body; but, when his preliminary studies were nearly completed, he announced, to their surprise and chagrin, his intention of entering the Established Church. For this step he gave them what reasons he could, but he did not disclose the real reason till long afterwards. It was that he had completely lost his faith. In subsequent years he used to say that he had been an atheist. Apparently the ordinary arguments for the existence of God had broken down in his mind; and it seemed to follow that there was no God. Whether he actually affirmed this is not quite clear: he would seem rather to have taken refuge in a vague kind of Pantheism; for he used to say that for three years he had been a Spinozist. He was not at all at rest, however, but plunged in misery; for he felt that there was nothing in Pantheism to control the impulses of his passionate and irregular nature. Pantheism has no personal God to claim authority over the conscience or to curb the will.

In these circumstances his entrance to the divinity hall of the Established Church proved a blessing to him; because the first professor under whom he studied there, Dr. Mearns, broke down his objections and convinced him

both that God exists and that He has revealed Himself in the Bible; and so satisfactory was the demonstration that Duncan never again questioned these great truths. In fact, the recovery of his faith filled him with ecstasy. "When I was convinced," he said in after life, "that there was a God, I danced on the Brig o' Dee with delight." That dancing figure on the bridge is one of the queerest sights in Church history; and it proves what a bizarre spirit dwelt in the brain of the ungainly and abstracted student.

This was not, however, his conversion. His convictions at this stage were processes of the intellect; he was consciously unreconciled to God, and he lived a prayerless life. When his divinity-course was ended, he did not take licence; for not only could he not sign the Confession of Faith, but he was conscious of an active aversion to such doctrines as the divinity and the atonement of Christ. When he was nearly thirty years of age, he at length did take licence, but it was only to please and silence his friends, and it was on the tacit understanding that subscription meant merely a pledge not to preach against the Church's creed—a view of the subject which he subsequently abhorred. Instead of seeking a church, he supported himself by teaching, and his erudition grew from year to year; but the irregularity of his habits, in which the most childlike unworldliness was combined with outbursts of wild hilarity and sociability, extended to his morals as well as his manners; and it seemed not unlikely that he might become a distinguished specimen of the type known in Scotland under the name of "stickit minister"—a creature causing merriment by his oddities, admired for his genius and acquirements, but haunting the shady pathways of dissipation.

His deliverance came through a youthful companion and friend. Principal Brown—to make use of the title by which this friend is now known—had not only been his pupil and an

admirer of his genius, but had been admitted to such close and daily intimacy that he knew him through and through. He shared also his sceptical views, until, during a session spent at Edinburgh, he was drawn into the tide of the warm Evangelical influences then flowing in the capital, and returned to the North a changed man. Duncan, having heard what had happened, was shy of meeting his friend, but at last they came together and, after long preliminaries, landed on the subject of personal religion. The younger man acknowledged what had happened to himself; but Duncan would only say that they looked at the subject from different points of view, and therefore could not agree. His friend, however, was led at last to ask what his religion had done for him, and he was compelled to answer, "Very little." "Is it making you holy?" "No." Thus Duncan's conscience was awakened to the confession of personal sin; and his friend told him of the power over sin which his new religion had given him.

But the completion of the work thus auspiciously begun was reserved for a more practised hand. A visit was at the time expected in Aberdeen from a celebrity of those days—César Malan of Geneva—and a plan was laid for bringing Duncan and him together. Malan was a Swiss pastor, who had been converted through the influence of Mr. Robert Haldane, an Edinburgh lawyer, who, beside founding, with his brother James, the Congregational body in Scotland, to counteract Moderatism, was privileged to carry the fire of the Evangelical Revival to foreign cities, visited by him, such as Geneva and Montauban. Malan was persecuted in his own country for his Evangelical views, but he was warmly welcomed in Scotland, which he visited again and again. He was a man of cultivation and personal charm; wherever he went he did the work of an evangelist, chiefly through conversation; and his watchwords were instant



salvation and consciousness of the same. He was made especially useful among the educated classes; and it is interesting to note how the blessing carried to Switzerland by Haldane was carried back to Scotland again by Malan.

Malan's method was to quote the text, "He that believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God"; then to ask, "Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ?" and, when an affirmative answer was given, to press the inference, "Then you are born of God." He tried this method on Duncan; but the Aberdonian was too cautious to be put through so simple a mill. In the conversation which ensued, however, Duncan having by chance quoted a text of Scripture, Malan exclaimed eagerly, "There, you have the Word of God in your mouth." "And," says Duncan, "it passed through me like electricity—the great thought that God meant man to know His mind: God—His Word—in my very mouth. It was perhaps the seed of all I have, if I have anything, to this hour. Seminally it was all there, though I cannot even now unfold it, much less then."

It is not difficult to see what the nature of this impression was. A godless man's way of thinking of God, when he thinks about Him at all, is to conceive a Being far away—as distant as heaven—Christ is a figure of the past; faith is the assent demanded to a creed. Thus had Duncan been thinking of religion; but here, before him, was a man in whom it was a present power and a present joy; and it flashed on him that God was also present, dealing with him through His Word, as if speaking with an audible voice. And to realise this is the kind of experience which in a moment can change everything.

Duncan had some more pleasant intercourse with Malan; and, besides, all his own faculties were roused and concentrated on the subject. Following Malan's method, he constructed syllogisms for himself, like this: "As I live, saith

the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live ' ; I am one of the wicked ; therefore, God has no pleasure in my death " ; and so on ; and he was helped from point to point by his friend, David Brown. Those interested in his spiritual welfare had hardly dared to hope for much from a mind so subtle and stubborn ; but it soon became manifest that he was radically changed.

To himself he seemed to have passed into a new world ; and three things in it astonished him. One of them was that the besetting sin to which he had been enslaved at once lost its power ; another was that he had the most ardent delight in the society and conversation of the people of God, however uneducated they might be ; and the third was that the doctrines of the Gospel, which he had disliked and despised, commended themselves to him as reasonable and acceptable. " Next day," he says, " as I sat down to study, and took my pen in hand, I became suddenly the passive recipient of all the truths which I had heard and been taught in my childhood. I sat there unmoving for hours, and they came and preached themselves to me. There was no investigation such as I had desired, but presentation of the truth to me passive." The interpretation of this singular experience may be, that for years he had been unconsciously convinced of these truths, but had unawares been keeping them out of his mind, because he had an interest in not letting them in, as they would have demanded a surrender which he was not prepared to give, but that now, when this barrier was removed, they immediately exerted their natural force in the region of conviction. He himself, however, believed that there was a deeper reason : he believed he was taught them of the Spirit. And he may have been right, because between the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of man, when it is restored to its proper disposition

towards God, there is an affinity which renders their rushing together natural and immediate; the key finds the wards of the lock, and there is instant adjustment.

There had been no deep conviction of sin in the experience through which Duncan had passed; but this came two years later, when he experienced what he used to call his second conversion. It came with great violence; the evil of his nature was so opened to him that he abhorred himself, and his past sin rose before him in forms so awful that he could hardly believe that he was forgiven. Indeed, on this side there continued with him permanently a measure of morbidity, which often darkened his spirit and obscured his presentation of the Gospel. This, however, may have been needed to keep his conscience always tender, and as a counteractive to the eccentricity and carelessness of his disposition.

At all events, the change, from the first, was deep, and it was permanent. Duncan became an eminently saintly man; his talents were consecrated to the service of Christ and thus a life which might easily have become a wreck was redeemed from destruction.

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