

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY.

I. THE CHRISTIAN HOPE.

It will probably be agreed that modern feeling makes it more than usually difficult to preach with effect about what divines have been accustomed to call topics of eschatology—death, immortality and judgment. One proof of difficulty is the marked infrequency with which the thing is done. Sermons on the joys of heaven or future retribution are now tolerably rare. Not a few preachers studiously avoid such themes, and the congregations even of some who speak out, it is likely, would confess to a good deal of spiritual confusion. The progress of the Christian Year will always force a certain number to face the subject at least now and then, and the uneasy sense that they have held off as long as possible, and longer than they ought, may occasionally impart a rather hectic emphasis to belated declarations. Others find in allusions to the future a too tempting opportunity for eloquence ; and a few paragraphs, crowded with bright image or lurid menace, are introduced not from any profound or compelling motive but with a view to oratorical impression, and are felt by the best part of the audience to be artificial. The great majority, however, who will not resort to such expedients, are the most painfully conscious that the policy of relegating eschatology to the background or keeping all statements about the Christian prospect as pale and indeterminate as possible will not serve, and that the Christian people have a right to guidance in this field no less than in others where it is easier to expatiate. The fact that eschatology comes into the Creed is significant and arresting, but in their efforts to comply with its brief and solemn indications men have found themselves embarrassed by the richness of material set forth in modern Biblical Theologies and have begun to think that even

Scripture texts, merely as texts, are an inadequate criterion of the truth which it is their business to teach. As a result, we may expect that when reaction from the present neglect sets in, as it must, people will look round for a doctrine of the future whose moral and religious value comes directly home to the religious mind—truth born of faith and therefore triumphantly able to evoke it.

Ecclesiastical thought, as distinct from the New Testament, can scarcely be said to have devoted any special care to "the Last Things." As the conviction grew and spread that the visible earthly Church is the Kingdom, and its triumph the Kingdom's consummation, the centre of gravity slowly changed from future to present. Over and over again it was heretics who kept the eschatological interest alive. In their hands conceptions of the future were mainly employed to censure actual Church life, a method which naturally quickened the suspicion with which official theology inclined to treat the subject. To the official mind, it has been said, the other world was the presupposition of Church activities more than their goal, and nothing is more significant of the subordinate place assigned to the next life than the fashion in which, for mediæval theology, the fortunes of the departed were made dependent on the functions of the earthly priesthood, its sacrifice and intercession. Although the Reformation was a period of acute eschatological feeling—for Luther the end of all things is at hand—yet the unbridled enthusiasm of the Anabaptists discouraged a more theological treatment of the topic in later Protestantism. With the awakening of critical thought in the eighteenth century, and the discovery that prophetic portions of the New Testament owe much to the symbolisms of late Jewish apocalyptic, there gradually arose a disposition to consider eschatology as a falsification, whether blameworthy or inevitable, of

the original message of Jesus, or at least a purely temporary husk round the precious kernel. Then a change came. Bengel, the devout and gracious biblicist, had struck the new note earlier, but not till the nineteenth century had well begun was it echoed back on every side. Men awoke to unfulfilled and even unattempted missionary tasks, and were thus forced to reflect more deeply on the historical purposes of the Eternal ; discussions on heredity opened their eyes to the complex character and conditions of personal responsibility ; and these influences made a re-examination of eschatological conclusions at once natural and unavoidable. Professor Orr, indeed, throws out the suggestion that if the doctrine of Eschatology has ever had an epoch, in which its various issues were submitted to thorough and prolonged scrutiny, that epoch is " our own age, with its generally widened outlook on the universe, its larger conceptions of the divine love, its better knowledge of heathenism, its *fin-de-siècle* feeling—all which have combined to press on it with peculiar intensity the questions of the future destiny of the individual and the race."¹ These words refer, however, to the middle third of the nineteenth century, scarcely to the present day. Doctrinal theology has not recently given much attention to problems of the future, and the extraordinary prominence which Eschatology has received in certain quite recent interpretations of New Testament thought has once more tended, as in the eighteenth century, to invest the subject with a strictly historical interest, and to postpone the question of its religious value.

Objections to the inclusion of Eschatology, as a doctrine of sure and certain hope, in the Christian faith, may be raised from more than one point of view. No credible or inspiring doctrine of the future, it may be said, is necessary to faith ; indeed it cannot be necessary, for it is impossible. How can

¹ *Progress of Dogma*, 280.

any man be certain of conditions or events that lie ahead ? Providence, sin, forgiveness—these and suchlike topics rightly enter in the full statement of faith ; their foothold in experience is secure. Here we can both understand and verify assertions. We can say for certain what impression of God we receive from Christ, as we can that Nature makes the impression of uniformity. But no such realisation of existent fact is felt when we gaze out to the next life. Accordingly, let us confine ourselves to “ this grace wherein we stand,” this present fellowship with God our Saviour, leaving its eventual outcome to His wise love. *Wenn ich nur dich habe, so frage ich nichts nach Himmel und Erde.*

This position, if not fully Christian, may be taken by a deeply religious mind. Other critics go further. Is it not so, they ask, that the average man has become wholly indifferent to the future ? Does he not receive all declarations on that subject with a kind of passive resistance ? Now it is undeniable that not merely materialism but even in large part modern idealism is hostile to eschatology as such ; “ in the thinking of civilised men,” writes one observer, in familiar words, “ there has been for years a steady ebb from the shores of another life.”¹ Waiving the question whether our age is in this respect like or unlike many another, we shall all concede that immortality has often seemed to lose its glory for good men absorbed in science, in social reclamation, in present imperious duties to which religion herself is summoning every earnest mind. Nor is this indifference an atmosphere simply, the more penetrating in virtue of its elusiveness and intangibility ; quite frequently the matter is argued out in calm and measured terms. It is held, for example, that a state of unmitigated bliss would be intolerable to an intelligent being for a week, let alone an eternity. Some, like

¹ Principal G. A. Smith, in *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament*, 209,

James Payn, confess they are so tired, they long only for rest ; and the safest rest is in the grave. They assent eagerly to the Hindu proverb : It is better to die than to sleep ; with an almost passionate resignation they repeat the exquisite lines of the Roman poet :

Soles occidere et redire possunt ;
Nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux,
Nox est perpetua una dormienda.

To the rejoinder that the opinion of humanity is against them, and the horror of extinction universal or nearly so, they answer first by questioning the alleged fact, then by arguing that what men fear is not death, but dying. Death, moreover, cannot touch us, for " where we are death is not, and where death is, we are no longer."¹ Again, doctors have testified that in many years' practice they have never known anyone afraid to die ; and could men die so peacefully, it is asked, or could they in rapidly increasing numbers resort to suicide, if belief in a conscious future were still vigorous and beneficent or had anything further to contribute to the moral resources of mankind ?

Let Christian preachers, then, it is said, recognise in all this a characteristic attitude of the nobler spirits in our time. Let them acknowledge frankly that many people, not inferior in excellence or virtue to their Christian neighbours, have bravely chosen to avert their eyes from the dream of another life, confessing with Romanes that the precept to " work while it is day " has gained an intensified force from the terribly intensified meaning of the words that " the night cometh when no man can work," and expending on this account a purer zeal in unselfish toil for a better order upon earth.

What answer can we make ? This first of all, that Christian Hope is essentially but one aspect of Christian faith ; no

¹ Cf. Haering, *Der christliche Glaube*, 547.

more, but certainly nothing less. It is not a consequence of faith, an inference obtained by unimpeachably valid logic ; it is not a natural or independent intuition ; it is part of faith itself. It is the same mind which says, "Thou, O Lord, art my portion," and "I am continually with Thee : Thou wilt guide me with Thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory." Our relation to God in Christ, that is to say, has a future as really as a past, a future which is no mere casual or problematic appendix to the present but its living prolongation. Apart from this, the so-called Christianity which remains must terminate in a pessimism not less dark than the belief in Fate, or *εἰμαρμένη*, which crushed the mind of Greece and Rome, a belief from which the Gospel promised emancipation, and against which were directed some of the most spiritual intuitions of the Mystery-religions. A purely immanent and mundane Christianity may be constructed any day by the manipulation of ideas ; what is certain is that it cannot be believed in. It is indeed the living paradox of faith that the more we consciously receive from God now and here, the more passionately we crave its continuance and the more ineradicable becomes the conviction that this longing will not be put to shame. The pain of loss is real only for those who have possessed.¹ Christian Hope is set not upon a mere multiplicity of things—which must some of them be relative

¹ Many years since, I think in one of Flügel's books, I read a quotation from Jean Paul Richter—the reference I could never find—in which this point is made indirectly and by suggestion yet with startling dramatic force. It is a scene in which a man lies upon his deathbed, expecting the end with inexpressible sorrow, not because he is about to meet a God he fears, but because he is going to part finally with a God he loves. "One friendship perfect and divine" had been his fount of happiness, and in a few hours it would vanish utterly and for ever. Richter pictures him bidding farewell to wife, to children and to friends ; then looking his last upon old familiar scenes. "And now," are his final words, "now I must bid Thee also farewell, O my Father." If the writer meant to teach by paradox, suggesting to the religious mind a fact it simply cannot think, he has succeeded beyond all expectation.

and uncertain—but upon Him who is Last because He is the First.

We encounter here one of the few vital questions in this province, and I will offer no apology for dealing with it at greater length. Eschatology has suffered in the general mind because the beliefs it treats of are regarded as somehow optional and arbitrary, not merely in detail but as a whole; and there will always no doubt be those who echo the youthful Schleiermacher's famous contention that to surrender immortality may be noblest of all. But when, putting away abstractions, we betake ourselves to history—which is wiser than us all—we discover that however religion ought to be defined, hope and trust are of its very essence. The concluding sentence in so many a story of childhood, "They all lived happily ever afterwards," is in reality a religious postulate. It is a very primitive form of the ultimate value-judgment which attributes to personality a worth beyond time and greater than the whole world. Look where we may, prophetic religions and religions of redemption seem always to have taken this line; they have pointed forward to a blessed consummation of human life, even when they differed widely as to the meaning of blessedness. Eschatology, in short, is not devout poetry, covering up hideous doubts or fears, like moss upon the torn and ragged stone; it represents a vital and inalienable impulse of the religious spirit. For by its very nature, religion takes account of the last and final things. Its business is with ultimate realities, which have projected themselves into our experience in the form of unconditioned values—values which flatly decline to be relativised by the levelling operations of the understanding in science or the scientific research of history. Neither science with its ultimate categories—ions, atoms, cosmic laws—nor history with its highest terms—classic periods, movements of civilisation and the like—can give or even

conceive what is wanted. Complete and lasting satisfaction is vainly sought in the social experience, or in any remodelled social system we can picture. But religion is religion only as it rises into the sphere of finalities, to unite us with the eternal in modes over which change has no power. Elsewhere we have no choice but to accept the relative; faith alone has, and better still has promise of, the absolute.¹

Considerations of this sort, however, gain a profounder impressiveness as we see them give concrete shape to the religion of the New Testament. In Dogmatic as now taught Eschatology comes last, constituting, so to speak, the final movement of the symphony; it is usually the briefest section of the whole and may quite likely stand for something still briefer in the private creed. But in the New Testament it is the atmosphere in which men live and breathe. Scholarship, we all know, has awakened up to this in the last twenty years. Book has followed book, proving in ever finer detail how the convictions, the incentives and the consolations of the first Christian believers were—not purely eschatological but—eschatological through and through. Technical study, I say, has brought this out recently; but before it was a theological commonplace, the secret was already known to keen and passionate religion. In a letter of the early 'eighties Francis Crossley, the heroic philanthropist of Manchester, writes: "The coming of the Messiah was the refrain of every Jewish prophet's song, and not less the central image in every glowing picture of the future the Apostles of Christ have painted." He adds (and for this principally I quote his words): "It is the very flesh of the Bible: remove it, and a skeleton is left." "It is the very flesh of the Bible"—certainly an estimate of the New Testament hope as true as it is striking. Thought upon the great realities—the Kingdom, the Person

¹ Cf. Troeltsch's article "Eschatologie" in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*.

of Jesus, the Spirit—is tinged with eschatology in every fibre, and at times all but defined in eschatological terms. Hence it is little more than a stimulating exaggeration to say that delineation of the last things was *the* dogma of primitive belief. To be a Christian is “to wait for God’s Son from heaven, even Jesus, who delivereth us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. i. 10).

Reserving then the question how far New Testament eschatology, in framework or minute detail, is or can be ours, we may call the apostolic mind to witness that Christian hope is no otiose addendum to faith ; it is fibre of the living strand. Life in Christ, felt and known within, tends to a goal by its vital movement. Victory over sin, over sorrow and over impotence—such a victory as can never be again forfeited—is part of the Gospel promise, whereas salvation culminating in death is nothing but a phrase. The soul cannot do justice to the glad tidings, or to the fellowship with God inaugurated by forgiveness—cannot respond to the challenge of His redemptive action for us and in us—except as it travels forward, in desire and presentiment, to an irreversible completion. Thus faith is more than the inspiration of hope ; it is its regulator, its law. We have no right to expect what is not contained by spiritual implication in the Father’s self-bestowal in Jesus ; that would be to desert faith for uncontrolled and uninspiring reverie : but also we have no right to expect anything less than Jesus’ sacrifice and triumph bid us claim. At present, the Christian mind is in danger of anticipating too little rather than too much. Its somewhat insecure hold upon Jesus’ thought of God—the greatness of that thought, its transcendence, the place it gives to omnipotence—has narrowed the sweep of expectation. But the great periods of Christian life—the first century *imprimis*, but also the Reformation—have been rich in eschatology. The noblest hymns, particularly those inspired by the Lord’s

Supper, are full of it. The soul, when left to itself, is sure of it and can only be suppressed in deference to a theory. Further, as history proves, religious progress is signalised not by the gradual elimination of "the rapture of the forward view," but by its ever-increasing purity and elevation. Hence it is a just and illumining remark that every system of Theology ought once at least to be read backwards, commencing with the last things, since it is in the conclusion we find the truest index of the whole. If a man has really understood what the Divine Fatherhood means, or the forgiveness of sins, or the new nature; if his faith leads him, as faith in the New Testament does, to take utter fulness of life as the Divine gift and to build his view of redemption to the scale of Christ's infinitude—this will all come out convincingly in his exposition of the Church's hope.

Obviously, however, this is not to be confused with the position, often loosely identified with it, that the traditional scheme of eschatology is acceptable as it stands. The fullest exposition is here not the best. Detail, in eschatology, may be the signal for an inrush of sheer negation. The pendulum has a way of swinging sharply from confident omniscience to quavering doubt, and if in one age there has been much wild talk as to the precise date of Christ's return, or the composition of the spiritual body, or the distance from earth at which the living are to meet the Lord in the air, in the next a tendency will prevail to ask whether *anything* can be known. It will not do to examine men as to their soundness regarding the "lake of fire" or the "second resurrection."

In any case, it is mistaken to speak of "the traditional scheme," as if there were only one. Eschatologies have been fairly numerous; most of them approved or tolerated for a time, all moulded by contemporary modes of thought, and all tending more or less to bind up with the Gospel certain ideas which had come to a given age with the force of a

new revelation but which we can now see to have no claim to fix *the* Christian interpretation of the future. Further, in painting things to come, tradition has drawn without historical discrimination on the different books of Scripture. The resurrection has been pictured in colours copied from Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones ; the judgment scene has owed something to the visions of Amos ; the cartoons of St. Paul, St. Peter and the Apocalypse have been blended freely, as though it were not merely probable but known that all three writers thought alike, even in minute detail. Commentators have now and then been dull ; and after all portions of the Bible are sealed to him who has no poetry in his soul. We may say briefly of tradition in this province that it has offended in four main ways : by a specious amplitude of information ; by insistence on points in which faith has no vital stake ; by occasional self-contradictions where one side of the alleged antinomy possesses little or no religious value ; and by its uncritical or statutory use of Biblical phraseology. In general, too, there has been a tendency to indulge fancy at the cost of faith. The graphic symbols of the preacher have been petrified in doctrine. In view of this, a work of revision is become necessary whereby to detect the dead matter lodged in tradition, and to replace " categories with which the mind will not work any more " by conceptions which really help us to exhibit the hope actually cherished by believers.

We naturally turn for aid, in the first instance, to the historic method, and the light it casts on the general religious development. Religious men have invariably hoped, even in presence of death ; and hope has always clothed itself in a dress of symbolism. Part of a given eschatological conception must be new, since the world moves on ; more will be old, perhaps very old indeed, for eschatology according to experts is the region in which custom dies hardest. As it

has been put by Dr. Charles : " Eschatological beliefs are universally the last of all beliefs to be influenced by the loftier conceptions of God." ¹ Regarding a concrete scheme, therefore, we must ask two questions: What are the religious truths to which this emblematic dress was given? and, Why was this dress chosen, and no other? A permanent nucleus of belief linked the series of changing forms together, and with this the philosophy of religion may deal, or Christian Dogmatic. Also this belief put on a changing garb of figure and symbol, and the pedigree of this symbolism is a theme for history.

We owe a debt which it is not always easy to pay cheerfully to modern investigators who are trying to bring out clearly the ethnic background and antecedents of New Testament ideas of the End. Success in their inquiry means this at least, that the Gospel did not shrink from categories and thought-forms into which the human soul had already poured its hope and passion. Why should it be felt as other than an ennobling thought that Jesus' way was paved for Him by devout minds of previous days? Time was when the Church ascribed the Psalms, with scarcely an exception, to a single author, so condemning whole centuries to silence; and the thought that the Psalmists were a great company of singers, and that in religion the good need not be the enemy of the best, came with the delight of a discovery. Similarly, it is uplifting to believe that spiritual movements in Babylonia or Persia may have prepared " earthen vessels " into which the treasure of apostolic conviction might be poured. Each case where this could be demonstrated would mean not one religious thought the less, but one centre of religion the more. If examples are sought, one may be found in certain exterior traditional elements in the New Testa-

¹ *Immortality* (Drew Lecture), 9.

ment picture of the last great Assize, which have been traced with approximate certainty to the thought of the Farther East. Or again, it is common knowledge that Bible eschatology as a whole is set within a definite framework—the conception of two distinct worlds or aeons; the present age, *ὁ αἰὼν οὗτος*, or simply *ὁ αἰὼν*, largely subject to the powers of darkness, and the coming age, *αἰὼν μέλλων* or *ὁ αἰὼν ὁ ἐρχόμενος*, which by its victorious advent abolishes all tragedy. It is upon this grand apocalyptic opposition that St. Paul builds up his main view of the last things. Its roots also lie in the far past. Christianity seized upon it to express that dualistic strain which always marks genuinely religious thought when it contemplates a world in which sin—that “atheistic fact,” Dr. Carnegie Simpson has just called it—has made a lodgment. But, as Wobbermin says, “the paradoxical fashion in which the idea is presented with its time-determined scheme—the future age is become present, yet has not ceased to be future—shows clearly what aim the idea is subserving, viz., the unconditional supremacy of one world to the other.”¹ Time and eternity, related as empirical to real being, are exhibited in pure contrast and without the faintest tendency to represent eternity as only time on a larger scale, in the great Pauline words: “Our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. iv. 17, 18).

Our present task, however, lies not in problems of historic affiliation, but in the greater question as to the significance of old eschatological figures for the modern mind.

Whatever be the issue of scholarly research, what has counted in the Christian religion, then or now, is not the old vocabulary but the new message. All rests upon the redeeming fact of Jesus—His attitude to the Father, to Himself and to man; this unique experience in which He lived and died and rose again. It is on this that New Testament minds dwell, often simply taking the inherited language for granted. In every religious crisis it is the new that holds the future, and it is Jesus' way to make all things new. As Holtzmann has expressed it in a well-known passage, His effect on contemporary thought may be compared to the plunge of a great rock in the waters of a still pool. When the upheaval has passed, the surface is covered with new wave-movements.

Troeltsch, surveying the past, rightly finds that eschatology, which implies a metaphysic, has always run in one of two moulds, between which even yet we are obliged to choose. On the one hand is the pantheistic type; and here all existence is apt to be an immanent self-adjusting unity, and the time-series of events becomes unmeaning; since there is no such thing as progress, the end of the cosmos is now as completely realised as it will ever be. Opposed to this is a type shaped by personal idealism; the fact of personality is believed in as paramount and absolute, and thought moves in a sphere controlled by ideas of freedom, purpose, creative force. God is here Supreme Will—Will that propels the world on into the future by a series of sovereign acts. And union with God is no mere fact of nature, as it is for pantheism in its varied forms; it is self-surrender to an infinite object. There is a real development and a real end, and the end comes out of the development by way of history. The two views, indeed, are as unlike as æsthetic mysticism and ethical faith in God the Father. Both offer redemption, but in the first case, as Troeltsch puts it, in a not altogether satisfactory set of contrasts, "it is redemption from the par-

tial to the whole, from the mutable to the abiding, from the unreal to the real ; in the second it is redemption from bondage to liberty, from imperfection to the perfect, from rudiments to completion, from conflict to triumph." As has been said, we must choose between them ; and it is worth observing that what really [occurs is a *choice*, a moral act motivated by ethical and religious conviction, not the syllogistic result of acknowledged premises. Nothing can dispense a man from this ordeal. We have to give either view, in Browning's phrase, our " vote to be true." Not that it is difficult to make points against Pantheism even intellectually. Its famed solution for the haunting problem of the One and the Many is after all no solution, but only the movement of a wet sponge over facts that refuse to be absorbed. Further, it concedes no value to the master-principle of love, in which, rather than in our intellect, our whole experience is gathered up and brought to clarity. But finally the choice of pantheism or personality lies with us, and is an act of intense ethical decision. Sooner or later we have to say in which alternative we find the more prevailing religious power and the deeper ethical satisfaction. Apart from a well-known type of mysticism, which accounts it gross that religion should rest on historical mediation and protests in the name of spirituality that everything must be embraced within the present unity of " God and the soul, the soul and its God," it has never been questionable on which side the Christian eschatology belongs. Hope, for the men who have made Christian history, is not an unconscious acknowledgment that their hold on God is weak, imperfect, and relative ; it is a sure and blessed element in a faith which clasps Omnipotent Love, and is persuaded by the Spirit's inward witness that the confusion and immaturity of earthly experience, terminating in death, is not the end. This, and this alone, is its real character, for God our

Saviour is no ineffable Absolute, the undistinguishing and indistinguishable Whole, in which finally all souls are lost, but the God and Father of Jesus Christ our Lord.

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DISCIPLINE IN PRAYER.

THE criticism is often passed upon religious experience that it is "mere emotion." This is to limit religious experience very much to the scope of feeling, and to exclude from it a very great deal that properly belongs to it—viz., thought and life, and the quiet examination of life—a great many unobtrusive elements which really form the more serious part of a man's experience of God. But, for the moment, let us limit ourselves to the matter of emotion. It is not clear why emotion should be ruled out. That, like other factors in life, it should be subjected to the tests of time and thought is obvious; but in itself it is at all events just as much right as it is wrong. It has a function, and that we have to recognise. We find very often that the religious life appears to begin with an immense flood-tide of emotion, that the emotion ebbs, and with its ebb the spirit is left as it were stranded, and the religious life ceases, or appears to cease. In this, at all events, the religious life stands very much on a level with all the higher modes of life.

For example, if we take the story of some great picture or great poem, what do we find? First of all, there has been a steady but unconscious assimilation of a very large number of facts; this thing, that, and the other impress themselves somehow on the mind of the artist, but he has not greatly cared about them. Then something happens, whatever it is; a great light shines upon this mass of facts,