THE OLD FAITH AND THE NEW THEOLOGY

A SERIES OF SERMONS AND ESSAYS ON SOME OF THE TRUTHS HELD BY EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS, AND THE DIFFICULTIES OF ACCEPTING MUCH OF WHAT IS CALLEDTHE "NEWTHEOLOGY"

EDITED BY

CHAS. H. VINE

OF ILFORD

EATON & MAINS : NEW YORK

JENNINGS & GRAHAM : CINCINNATI

1907

IV

IMMANENCE AND INCARNATION

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IN the remarks I here venture on I should like it to be understood that I am dealing with a school, or rather a tendency, developed mainly in Germany, whose representatives differ considerably among themselves on certain points. I mention this because I do not wish to act as the critic of individuals. There are few individuals in whom all the features of the movement are embodied. And any individual may readily and truly say that such and such a feature does not mark him.

The idea of the divine immanence affects the preacher's mental world rather than his moral message. It belongs to his study and not to his pulpit. It pertains to his scheme of the world rather than to his gospel of its destiny, to his culture and not his vocation. It is not even a theologoumenon, but rather a philo-

sopheme, whose influence for thought has been great, for theology, but indirect, and for saving faith nothing. We certainly do owe it something that it would be unfair to ignore. We owe something to a theory of the divine immanence which, more than a century ago, rescued us from a distant deism, confirmed our faith in the rationality of the world, and went on to deepen our cosmic emotion to be almost an order of religion. It is a theory which has thus had its effect on some moods and expressions of religion. But with evangelical faith it has little to do. It preoccupies us with the physical notion of monistic process, instead of the moral notion of personality and freedom of action and crisis, sin and sanctity. It does not go to the depths. It speculates about a Christ made flesh, but it never gauges the true seat of Incarnation—a Christ made sin. It is not a theology of Incarnation. You do not surmount by it the Unitarian position, but only the deistic. Plenty of Unitarians would hold it, and do. The whole New England school of transcendentalists did, with their opalescent creed. Its classic head is Spinoza, who came to his own a century ago. Without a positive Christianity it becomes pantheist, and not

theist, because it destroys the fundamental relation of God to the world as Creator to creature. It promotes a theosophic mysticism detached from positive faith. It makes God at best more of a near presence than a moral historic power. And faith is above mere piety in that it does not think of God's presence so much as of His saving power. Christianity did not come to teach us God's presence, nor merely to convey it. And, above all, the notion, dear as it is to the modern mind, is defective in this, that it discourages the sense of guilt and the miracle of grace. It antiquates the Reformation. Every modern tendency has to be discarded which does that. It loses redemption in evolution. And if a modern idea so great as that of God's immanence in the world be pressed to the denial of God as a self-complete moral person, complete and holy, and not at the mercy of nature and evolution, then the doctrine must be left to the philosophers entirely and the iridescent religionists. It is of no value for morals. It has not the note of redemption. It is even of mischief. And for moral purposes we must turn to a doctrine which the young readily confuse with immanence—the doctrine of Incarnation. Im-

manence is only philosophic, Incarnation alone is ethical ; not because it is human, but because it is seriously human, human in the large and thorough style, i.e. historic. We turn from a doctrine of God's immanence in nature, and especially in human nature, to the doctrine of His Incarnation in a Redeemer from nature and from the moral enmity of its egotism against God. Monism is quite irrelevant to the Christian life, which is not concerned as to how we construe God but how we face Him. For moral life we must have a dualism and a reconciliation, not a monism with a mere identity and continuity. And with monism the preacher has nothing to do, unless he is a philosopher in the wrong place, and a guesser where we want a revealer.

Such at least is the line the Protestant preacher must take, who is more concerned with a gospel than a theosophy, and more engaged with sin than sentiment. His theosophy of immanence will give him but a relative sin, not an absolute—a lapse and not a sin ; and therefore it yields but a relative Saviour and not an eternal, who brings an amnesty and not a salvation, who claims from us but a partial devotion and not an entire, and who asserts a kingship more figurative than real. The immanence of God in human nature gives you but the development of the divine in man in unbroken unity—which is a mere philosopheme, absolutely fatal to a gospel, and welcome chiefly either to the half-taught, or to moral minors. I say moral minors, because it is a doctrine which when translated into ethics means determinism, and the extinction of that freedom of will which gives morality any existence.

The doctrine of immanence, taken alone, means, further, that in this process of spiritual evolution every religion has its place, and Christ's place is but on the summit, and on the summit only up till now. As we progress His place may be, probably will be, taken by another. For, whereas the theology of the Gospel teaches that the whole Trinity was involved in revelation and redemption, this theory teaches that the whole and final Godhead was not acting in Christ. You cannot expect the finality of what is merely an evolving series in its middle, but only at its close, which is still far away. God, it believes, has yet more light and truth to break out of our holy race than was contained in Christ. We may yet have what Tyndall used to desiderate—a figure yet to come who should add to the

sainthood of Jesus the genius of a Helmholtz and of a Milton. So in Christ we have neither final revelation, absolute guilt, human dignity, nor eternal salvation. All is flattened, diluted, and dispowered. And the cross is but in the nature of things. It is somewhere in the suburbs of Godhead, and not at its centre. Sin, therefore, does not go to God's heart. It does not sting Him mortally. It is not death to God, but a negative factor in His scheme. It does not challenge and kill what makes God God. It does not raise the last issue of humanity, and it does not elicit the last resource of God. It lives in the region of idyll and high-class melodrama. Guilt is not the tragedy of the universe. And indeed wise men do not take things tragically at all. And so they lived happy ever after.

You may lecture about all this with great charm and interest. It is the nemesis of our godless cult of simplicity, due to mental casualness and want of intellectual will in Christian people. But it will not preach. Effective preachers hold it, but it destroys a preaching church. There is not enough moral passion left for preaching. It makes an optimistic, congenial, ethereal, limpid religion :

O fons *Blandusie,* splendidior vitro,
Non sine *floribus*
Unde loquaces
Lymph2e desiliunt tux,

but it makes no Gospel, for it demands no grace.

And I will confess that I am more concerned about the effect of this doctrine in erasing the miracle of grace from God's relation with the soul than I am about its discrediting of miracle in God's relations with nature. For the idea of God as immanent love may turn Him into no more than the upper Nature, Nature on a higher plane. He is a striving Nature, which at last experienced the immense relief of complete self-expression in Christ. And that is all that some mean by the satisfaction offered to God in Christ. A pent-up God at last got relief in Christ, and His joy lies in that relief. I need hardly point out that that is a deification of Christ beyond what is claimed by any doctrine of Incarnation known to the Church. The practical result is that our religion, in becoming part of the action of this immanent love, becomes a quite natural thing, and easily drops to a matter of course. Christianity becomes but natural religion highly spiritualized. Its goal is nature refined and not redeemed,

saved not from itself but only from its lower self. And our faith loses the sense of wonder.

It has been pointed out that a distinguishing feature of the literature of last century was the revival of the sense of wonder at the world. It seems to me that if it be so in literature, it has been at the cost of religion. The sense of wonder in poetry has been stolen away from faith. The only sense of wonder left in modern religion is a poetic, esthetic thing ; it is not moral. There has passed away from faith that moral amazement and awe which are inseparable from the mystery of grace. It has ceased to be to us a most strange thing that God should love, forgive, and save us. And to-day there is only a minority of Christians whose piety takes the form of standing and overwhelming wonder that God should touch or save " *me.*" We wonder at prodigies, and sensations, and a thousand things supplied to us by the news of the day. We wonder at cosmic discoveries and physical imaginations. Our wonder is plied till it is almost benumbed and we lose the power to wonder. But whether or no it be from a like cause—stupidity from over-feeding, or from the trivializing of grace—we have lost the power to wonder at grace. And we do not marvel, as

Christ did, at the hardness of the human heart. It was the one thing unintelligible to Him. We dispute hotly about miracles, and all the time we lose the sense of marvel, because we have lost the sense of grace.

And yet how shall an evangelical faith or pulpit endure, how can it, if in wonder at the universe of God, it lose its wonder at the grace of God—wonder that God should think, and think to such loving, saving purpose, of small and evil me ; should have sought me sorrowing, and snatched me to His joy ; should have faced for wicked me His own holiness and judgment ; should have conquered for good and all the evil power that held me ; that He should have borne my judgment, cancelled my guilt, and taken away the sin of the world ? It was no theology of immanence that uttered the bold, old cry, *0 felix culpa !* 0 blessed sin, that brought thrice blessed God for its radical damnation.

That is not the work of the immanence of God, the immanence of His world salvation, and His evolving Atonement. Rather is it from His eternal eminence, and His descent on a created world. The mere doctrine of ¡mmanence reduces God's action from a historic

moral act of universal effect to *a cosmic process* extending into the moral world, and, in so far as it is process, destroying ethic. To our moral consciousness grace is not God's emergence from nature to find Himself, and to draw His full eternal breath in Christ. It is His invasion of our nature to find us. The faithful Creator, as Redeemer, finds the creature that the mighty Creator has made. And grace alone turns to a Son the Child that love had framed.

It is very curious to note how the critics of an Atonement, as something offered to God (who, they say, needs no such thing), continue in principle that old fallacy. It only shows how little they work principles out. They translate Atonement simply as something offered for saving purposes by man to man. But it is still offered by man. What they do not seem to know is that in a theology of grace, *i.e.* in Christianity, Atonement has meaning and value only as offered by God to Himself.

In the discussions which abound at present there are two features that may be noted.

i. A cosmological interest is being substituted for a teleological. That is to say, preachers (of all men) are more concerned to read Christianity in the light of theories about the

universe than to read it in the light of God's moral purpose with the world, which is redemption in Christ's cross. It is singular to learn that the great need is for ethical restatement of doctrine, when the whole thought moves in semi-physical categories that have no ethical quality. You cannot ethicize religion (certainly not theology) except by starting from the requirements of the supreme ethical category known to us—the holiness of God as Jesus Christ revealed Him.

2. The present conflict in the Church is more critical for Christianity than any that has arisen since the second century. The issue in the Reformation was small beside this. What is at stake is the whole historical character of Christianity. And what is substituted is an ideal Christianity. The position of many (and of some of our ministers) is that the Christ in the unseen to-day is not identical, or not necessarily identical, or continuous, as a personality, with the historic Jesus. The eternal ideal Christ is a divine principle quite separable from its classic instance—the personality of the historic Jesus. The reproduction to-day of the second-century Gnosticism is extremely close, and often startling, There are the same

vague speculations, often able, but often also of a pseudo-philosophic and dilettantist kind, welcome to connoisseurs of religion and amateurs of thought [1] rather than to men of faith and due knowledge. There is the same etherealized conception of matter, the same amalgam of physics and dreams, the same animus against historic Christianity. There is not one of the positions or negations, which are ignorantly described as the New Theology, which did not in some form or another burn in the Gnostic age and was not discussed by the first minds of that time and dismissed. It was then that the Church had the first and the greatest fight for its life. If Gnosis had prevailed, the Church and the Gospel would have gone under. And Gnosis means the rationalist, speculative theosophic Doppelganger of Christianity which works with some of its ideas, plays with its facts, and is indifferent or hostile to its historic finality.

We have really, and often exactly, the same issue to-day as then. And it is equally to-day a question of life and death. Far more is involved than a theology. The worst peril of

[1] I mean among the laity,

the time is the number of people who have no power to see that situation, either from geniality of heart, poverty of nature, or lack of training. The whole of the Christian Gospel is involved, the whole future of religion indeed. Let there be no mistake. This is no case of selecting certain views from many which may be held without affecting the prospects of the human soul. It is a case of choosing, I do not say for the choosing individual, but for the Church, for its Gospel, and for society, life or death. If those who think with me are right, the tendencies I allude to mean death. If we are wrong and yet succeed, we mean death to Church and Christianity. If, on the other hand, *tI ey* are wrong, their success means that death. For in its thorough results it is another religion. It is two religions we have at bottom. It is not variants of the same. Before we decide let us clearly and sharply grasp the issue without bland clouds and rosy mists.

There are modifications of the old theology which are demanded by the nature of evangelical faith itself, and there are criticisms of it which do not arise from faith, but from the demand that faith's experience shall submit to be

trimmed and even licensed by the pattern of a natural reason organized into a philosophy of the world. It is this latter claim that constitutes a new religion, with which when it comes to the last pinch there can be no terms made by the Church. Christian experience can never consent to be licensed by any philosophy, science, or criticism (however some of its statements may be modified) without adopting another religion in the act. If I am sure that my Redeemer Christ is Jesus, that Jesus is my forgiving Christ, it is a conviction deeper than any other possible ; and the conviction which denies that must rest on another religious foundation than Christianity. For Christian faith there is nothing so certain as that. There is no certainty, possessing a certitude which has the right to challenge that. Because our Redeemer is more central than the conscience He saves.

Jesus is the Christ of God. God exalted Jesus to be both Christ and Lord, King to be obeyed, and God to be worshipped. He so saves us that we must worship Him, by that moral necessity in experience which alone gave rise to worship by the whole Church. If He be not such a Christ, but only Christ in

such a sense that we are potential Christs ; if we have an equal right with Him in the principle which made Him Christ in such a successful degree ; if our only right in that principle of divine Sonship is not conferred by Him ; then the worship of Him which differentiates Christianity from an enlightened Judaism is idolatry. The historic prophet of our religion becomes one of its great obstacles, not to say corruptions. Jesus becomes the rival and not the revelation of God. And the godly rationalist, who has outlived (I will not say outgrown) his first faith is bound in his prayers to apply to Jesus with a most pathetic poignancy and trembling voice the familiar words:

> The dearest idol I have known,
> Whate'er that idol be,
> Help me to tear it from Thy throne
> And worship only Thee.