

CT 103

WHAT IS TRUTH?



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WHAT IS TRUTH?

WE are taught to look upon Pontius Pilate as a poor, vacillating, faint-hearted Pagan, and so he may have been; but if we are required to believe that the tragedy in which he was chosen to play so unfortunate and odious a part was pre-arranged by a superintending Providence, we ought to pity rather than despise him.

The enlightened Jews are reported to have asked Christ many questions, but none of them surpasses in utility and interest the one put to him by the poor Pagan Pontius Pilate, "What is *truth*?"

Unfortunately the writer of the Gospel attributed to S. John, omits to inform us whether Christ vouchsafed an answer to the pertinent question; but in the rejected Gospel of Nicodemus we read the following addition:—"Jesus said, truth is from heaven. Pilate said, therefore truth is not on earth. Jesus saith to Pilate, believe that truth is on earth among those who when they have the power of judgment are governed by truth and form right judgment." Whether these words record the answer Pilate received or not—whether he received any answer at all or not—matters but little in an age when sincere seekers after truth have long ago abandoned all hope of finding it in any of the sixty Gospels canonical or apocryphal. Even if the traditional

Christ had given the answer Nicodemus records, it could not be considered satisfactory, for where are those who "have the power of judgment," and, being "governed by truth, form right judgment?" Assuredly not the Christians of the day, the majority of whom are not allowed to have any judgment—who make it their special boast that they have annihilated it, and who are ridiculed by the enlightened minority of Protestants who glory in the light of the Blessed Book to which *they* have free access, and in the inspired pages of which they discover that truth which a brilliant intellect like that of the earnest, humble Herbert Spencer fails to discern. "The timid sectarian" writes he "secretly fears that all things may one day be explained; has a dread of science, thus evincing the profoundest of all infidelity—the fear lest the truth be told."

An ardent Roman Catholic once said to the writer, who was commenting upon the antiquity of the world with an intelligent infidel, "I hate the very name of science." A few moments later, when the new translation of the Bible was mentioned, a Protestant relative indignantly exclaimed, "Don't talk to me about new translations; the old one did very well for our grandfathers and grandmothers; *they* found their way to heaven through it, and why cannot we? People will go on explaining and explaining until there will be nothing left."

Here we have two illustrations of the sincere and consistent dread of inquiry experienced by religious people; it must therefore be conceded that religious truth is not likely to be either discovered or embraced by religious people.

The religious element is hostile to doubt, rational inquiry is at variance with child-like faith, private

judgment is incompatible with Christian humility, and superstitious veneration for antiquity precludes all generous appreciation of modern attempts to arrive at truth. Religious people *dare* not enjoy the *irreligious* works of Spencer, Lyell or Lecky, lest they should lose their "peace of mind;" they frequently have a secret misgiving, but are afraid to go further lest it should ripen into open doubt. A lady to whom the writer lent some of Channing's works, returned them immediately saying "I feel very comfortable *now* and should not like to be shaken." She, of course, did not agree with Carlyle that happiness depends mainly upon the state of the liver; she felt uncomfortable while reading Channing, and therefore brought back the books as detrimental to the interests of her soul. The stirring up of a stagnant pool is so disagreeable an undertaking that we can hardly censure those who shrink from it, even if an wholesome truth should, owing to their squeamishness, be for ever lost. There is an old saying to the effect that "truth *will* prevail," but before that happy time arrive Pilate's question must be answered, "What *is* truth?" The world is growing very old and error seems triumphant. The growth of excellence we know to be slow, the progress of truth seems slower still. Truth in creeds, truth in trade, truth in medicine, truth in society *will* perhaps prevail, but "the night is far spent" and the day so longed for seems not "at hand." Multitudes of earnest, thoughtful men to whom it would be a great solace to realise something definite before they go hence and are no more seen, are passing away with their cravings after truth baulked, baffled and sometimes blunted altogether. Life and its adjuncts present the same insoluble mystery as ever, and whether we side with religion or with science, with special creation or with evolution, we find ourselves as far from any satisfactory conclusion as before.

The Rev. Professor Eadie tells us in his *Biblical Cyclopædia* that in the first chapter of Genesis "a child may learn more in an hour than all the philosophers in the world learned without it in thousands of years."

Grown-up people are not so fortunate. Some of them, indeed, would persuade us that they can settle everything to their own satisfaction by an appeal to the Pentateuch; but we have ample grounds for doubting their sincerity.

People never speak so guardedly, never seem so ill at ease, and therefore never appear to such little advantage, as when they are required to give a direct answer to any question concerning the Bible and the interpretation thereof. They seem to mistrust the motive which prompted the question, and therefore a candid answer is well-nigh unattainable. A reason may be found. "In the devoutest faith," writes Spencer, "there is an innermost core of scepticism, and it is this scepticism which causes that dread of inquiry displayed by Religion when brought face to face with Science."

To be obliged to admit such an assertion is painful and humiliating; but it is abundantly clear that those most hostile to the injunction "Prove all things" are the religious, and the more religious they are the more they shrink from scrutinising their creed, lest their faith in it should falter. Timid, cramped, ignoble minds are always to be despised; but those who shrink from honest inquiry upon *religious* grounds seem of all men most contemptible. Victims of a dishonest system, they have been brought up to confident faith with truth. Whatever their particular sect believes, is the very truth—all other sects are in error; *their* belief is *faith*, other's belief is supersti-

tion. All the members of the various sects agree that by the special and exclusive blessing of God *they* have received the gift of faith, so that to them the ways of Providence are clear as crystal, and the pages of the Blessed Book a safe and easy guide to glory. *They* could answer Pilate's question to their own if not to his satisfaction. *Their opinion* is the truth. They enjoy the comfortable conviction that they are the children of the light, and the whole world outside Bethel or Ebenezer "lieth in darkness." Basking in the supposed rays of what they call God's grace, they occupy an impregnable position from which no "wordy science" can move them—living witnesses to the truth of Prior's lines—

"From ignorance our comfort flows,
The only wretched are the wise!"

People who have arrived at the summit of that ignorance which conduces to bliss can well afford to pity those who are patiently toiling along the lonely paths of science in search of what the religious world would far rather not know—Truth: Those whose obvious duty it is to devote their whole energy to the pursuit of truth, and who ought to set the first example of obedience to the Apostle's precept, "Prove all things," are not only the last to engage in so magnanimous an undertaking, but the first to censure and to shrink from those who do.

"The priest's lips should keep knowledge," according to Malachi; but if the priests are in possession of any knowledge, we would rather hear them imparting it. Unfortunately for the dignity of their calling, it not unfrequently happens that the laity can instruct the clergy, who, after having been reluctantly enlightened by some bold truth-seeker, determine to "keep" the knowledge they have acquired, for "if everything is to be explained away there will be nothing left"—they might add "for us to live upon."

Truth may certainly be explained, but error only may be explained *away*. At the present time truth seems looked upon as a dangerous excrescence. People do not like it. They are accustomed to error, encouraged in error, well instructed in error, *satisfied* with error, and, considering the extreme difficulty of ascertaining the truth, and the laceration of mind which severance from long-cherished tenets involves, it may admit of a doubt whether after all it be not folly to make "the common people" wise! *Un-*common people, who can bear the bracing breeze of truth and who (unlike the majority) value it above gold and precious stones, will go on to the end, struggling manfully with difficulties external and internal, mournfully but heroically giving up for honesty's sake what is no longer tenable, better satisfied to have "nothing left" than something that will not bear scrutiny.

But as there are others whose peace of mind and moral rectitude would be seriously disturbed by the withdrawal of the Pentateuch, and whose notions of duty are inseparably connected with the frequent perusal of four anonymous Gospels, it would be at once cruel and injudicious to deprive them of what contributes to their welfare, be it true or false.

Nothing, we are told, save the fear of Purgatory, will deter the Irish navvy from the commission of the most atrocious crimes; it is therefore expedient to keep up in his mind what to another is a childish delusion.

However, there are other errors besides religious errors.

Were Pilate to appeal to the medical world for an answer to his question, he would indeed obtain

replies numerous and contradictory enough to perplex him, and to justify the Frenchman's assertion, "There is nothing certain except doubt."

A beautiful and edifying uniformity of opinion concerning diseases of the soul and their remedies prevails among the spiritual physicians of the Roman Church.

Contrition, Confession and Satisfaction are the specifics. Prayer, Fasting and Alms the sedatives. Disciplines, Hair-shirts and Bracelets the stimulants. These remedies, like the source from which they spring, are infallible, and their effect certain though occult. But let us turn to the poor body. Go to fifty physicians, state your symptoms and ask what is the matter with you. You will in all probability get forty-five different opinions and fifty different prescriptions.

So recently as 1857, Dr. Watson wrote "Next to blood-letting as a remedy, and of vastly superior value, upon the whole, to purgation, is *Mercury*; this mineral is really a *very powerful* agent in controlling inflammation." Fourteen years later the same Dr. Watson writes "This estimate of the special properties of Mercury can no longer be maintained—they expressed, I believe, at the time when they were used, the general opinion of the profession. They were too absolute. The error arose from too hasty generalisation. The hope so earnestly cherished that Mercury might prove beneficial in common inflammation has been disappointed."

In an early edition of 'Principles and Practice of Physic' he writes: "In order to check inflammation, you must, above all, *bleed early*." In the last edition of the same work, we read: "What of general bleed-

ing as a remedy for inflammation? It is in this matter, I am bound to admit, that great mistakes have formerly been made, that a potent agency has been misdirected. Venesection may lessen the quantity dispensed to the area of inflammation, but the amount thus extracted must be so large as to affect injuriously for a time, or even permanently, the whole of the frame." How would the medical world answer Pilate's question! The 'Principles and Practice' appeared as recently as 1871, and it urges us to the uncomfortable conclusion that after centuries of study and observation the medical men are still groping in the dark, and that in their most interesting profession there is as yet no standard of truth. Lamentable instances are daily occurring of the extraordinary and inconceivable mistakes made, not only by physicians, but even by surgeons. Many of us can point to members of our own family who have fallen victims to medical errors—errors, too, which seem irreconcilable with the practical nature of the profession—errors which have wofully shaken our faith in the faculty, and have brought us to the borders of that dreary region of doubt from which we are not likely to return until Pilate's question have received a conclusive answer.

"Without faith it is impossible to please God," and "he that doubteth is damned." Sad and solemn words, calculated to terrify sensitive souls into feigning a belief they inwardly reject, and causing them to abstain, "for the good of the cause," from uttering a word which might suggest the shadow of a doubt to another. We would gladly hail any clear definition of that faith without which it is impossible to please God! If it mean, as many would assure us, unhesitating assent to a collection of books and entire submission to a body of men, there are many who, for truth's sake, must give up faith, even should eternal damnation await them.

Dr. Watson found out, and generously admitted, that he had made mistakes, that what he thought were wholesome truths were deadly errors. Let us hope that the doctors of divinity may have "grace" to discover some of *their* mistakes, and honestly to confess before men that they are as incompetent to answer Pilate's question as any intelligent Hindoo or Mahomedan. In all probability pure truth and undefiled bears as little resemblance to the current creeds of theology as does "pure religion and undefiled" to the pious fraud and sectarian differences which are at once the scorn and derision of "the unconverted."

Paul, fully persuaded of the speedy end of all things, and addressing an enthusiastic, expectant, and deluded assembly, might boldly say that faith, hope, and charity were flourishing; but the hired clergy of the Church by law established could tell him that *now* abideth doubt, disappointment, apathy, these three; but the greatest of these is apathy.



