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# LIBERAL PROTESTANTISM:

*WHAT IS IT?*

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### WHAT IS IT ?

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THE world has heard a good deal of late years about Liberal Catholicism ; to-day Liberal Protestantism is the watchword of a party who take the same position in regard to orthodox Protestantism that *Alt* or Liberal Catholics have assumed towards the tenets of the Roman Catholic Church.

Both appear to us to stand in a similarly anomalous relation to the parent Faith, while desiring to remain in bondage to it they mutually eschew and decry its chief and leading doctrines ; these new divisions of the old armies profess the same end, viz., "to mediate between Christendom and Science, to bring the truth of both into unison, to unveil the errors of both."

With the Liberal Catholics the enemy to all progress in the dangerous and damnable paths of scientific knowledge is the Pope, who, with his Syllabus and Vatican decrees, like the fabled Cerberus of old, guards the fatal tree of knowledge ; while with the Liberal Protestants it is the dogmas and doctrines embodied in the "Thirty-nine Articles," the codification, in fact, of the Protestant Faith, which bars to them the Church of their forefathers, and which they desire to open with a new key. In Switzerland and in France Liberal Protestantism takes the same ground. In the organ of that party, the *Libre Recherche*, we read, "The Church, to endure, must found itself on the unassailable truths of Science rather than on the illusory ones of Holy Writ." In

both countries the party has sustained a severe loss in the death of its chiefs, Monsieur Athanase Coquerel and Pastor Heinrich Lang, who held the pulpit of the famous old St. Peter's, at Zurich. It was the University of Zurich which, forty years ago, signalised itself in the ranks of liberal theology, by offering its Theological chair to Professor David Friederich Strauss, who had then startled the orthodox world by publishing his 'Life of Jesus.' But the populace, headed by their clergy, raised such an outcry against the coming of this "heretic and unbeliever," that Dr. Strauss never occupied the post tendered to him by the Great Council of Zurich, and it is a curious fact that the heirs of that generation who barred him out have for years crowded the church of St. Peter's, to listen to the teaching of Pastor Lang, whose "heresy and unbelief" is of a much deeper dye than that of Strauss. His Liberal Christianity went no further than "that you may be a Christian without believing all the words and relations of the Bible;" he only aimed at giving a more rational reading of the Biblical history of creation and of the life and works of the founder of Christianity, whereby his enemies declared "he converted the Divine Revelation into a book of old fables." What would they have said of his successor at Zurich, this chief of Liberal Protestantism, whose recent death is so much lamented, and whose theology was of so liberal a type that he has been accused by Protestant and Catholic alike with having "no creed, no gospel, and almost no God?" Orthodoxy recognises nothing of Historical Protestantism, much less Christianity, either liberal or otherwise, in the late Pastor's teaching, and his faith was branded as "a miserable nonentity," neither flesh, fowl, nor good red herring. Dr. Lang's latest work was an answer to the challenge, "Is Liberal Protestantism a religion?" and as this is a very interesting question for us in connection



with English Liberal Protestantism, we propose to explore the tenets and examine by the light of its credentials this new religion, which is to "mediate between Christendom and Science, to bring into unison the truth of both, and to unveil the errors of both."

From the Pastor's book we learn that Liberal Protestantism has both "a Creed and a Gospel," that it is not wanting in any of those characteristics that belong to a "living religion;" every religion, he maintains, requires three elements, "rational dogma, obligatory morality, and an enlightened and sacramental worship;" also, its chief ingredient must be "metaphysical," which Dr. Lang explains as "Faith in something we cannot see, a firm conviction of the real nature of the Power that creates and works in the visible phenomena of the world."

This *glaube* or belief in something one cannot see "is one of the distinguishing elements of true religion," and he adds, "The faith once delivered to the Saints now lies in ruins, a broken statue of a God at the feet of the men of this generation; that no such belief as that of the Gods of Olympus, or of the Jews in the 'Only One,' is now possible," and he answers the lament of the day for its broken idols by bidding the world "not put its faith in God the Father," but in a Being distinct from the world as the "Eternal from the changeable," the "thought from the brain," the "Spirit from the matter." This "God Conception," according to Dr. Lang, is "to divide the religion of the future from orthodoxy and miracles on the one hand, and from unbelief on the other." It is hardly necessary to point out the advance here made in forty years upon the liberal Christianity of Strauss, which was so savagely rejected by the Zurichers of that day; and he prophesied wisely when he uttered these words regarding the inimical clergy who headed the tumult against him:—"Let them be as angry as

they like, and let them abuse me as much as they please, they, or their successors, will at last as surely be obliged to accommodate themselves, and come round to our new method, just as any new inventions in the department of mechanical business must at last be adopted by those who at first objected to the inconvenient innovation." In the person of Pastor Lang, they not only came round to the "new method," but have advanced so far ahead of their august pioneer, that to us they have left both the rational and the logical behind; and we here throw down the gauntlet to Liberal Protestantism, whether under the championship of such an eloquent transcendentalist as the late Dr. Lang, or under its chiefs in France and England. We challenge the rights of this "old foe with a new face," to bridge the chasm "between orthodoxy and unbelief;" challenge its claim on rational and logical minds, to be accepted as "true religion apart from traditional beliefs;" challenge its power to work the proposed miracle of "bringing into unison Christendom and Science." The God of Liberal Protestantism, like that of the Bible, differs only from the images of wood and stone of early idolators in that it is a mental instead of a mechanical creation. There is very little advance from the Being "who walked, talked, and even eat" with sons of men, to the God "through whom and at whose bidding evil is here," or that "real Power that creates and works in the visible phenomena of the world," and reveals to us, according to Dr. Lang, "obligatory laws, including reverence towards God, confidence in Him, and obedience to His commands."

It is precisely this momentous knowledge of the "real Power that creates and works in the visible phenomena of this world," which we hold has never come to bewildered man either from orthodox or unorthodox religion; and if it be a necessary element of "true religion" to declare belief in something we

cannot see and know nothing about, how has this "religion of the future" anything in common with relentless and uncompromising science? Science that does not say "Believe," but bids its disciples probe, look, examine; such a thing is, not because a book or a master says so, but such a thing is because I have seen it, because I have proved and verified it. What has Christianity based on dreams and revelations in common with this pitiless gauger of facts?

Having deserted the old grounds of Historical Protestantism, we propose to show that Liberal Protestantism has neither a creed nor a gospel in the acknowledged sense, and that it is rightly charged with "stealing a worship and sacraments for which it has no esteem, and to which it attaches no primitive meaning." Pastor Lang says, in answer to these charges, that "he retained the traditional form of Protestant worship because it is the shell of a moral and religious kernel of abiding truth: singing, praying, and preaching are the fundamental ingredients of a public worship." But what is the abiding truth symbolised? and why is public worship to be maintained when the object of that worship is transformed from the "Being who hears and answers prayer" to the cloudy conception which has as little of the anthropomorphic God as the Eternal has of the changeable—thought has of the brain—Spirit has of matter?

In an article in the *Libre Recherche*, the organ of French Liberal Protestantism, we read: "The dogma of Revelation is for humanity a perpetual apple of discord and antagonism, an incurable source of hatred and religious wars." But if this "dogma of Revelation" or belief in it is foregone, where is Christianity and where is Protestantism?

Mr. Oxenham, known as one of the famous "Oxford Perverts," writing from the orthodox Catholic point of view, thus treats of "Eternal Punishment" and

“Universalism:”—“Revelation may be accepted or rejected, but you cannot pick and choose, and take as much or as little as you like; a tinkered Christianity which is much in fashion in these days, has as little claim on the judgment of reason as on the obedience of faith; to reject one point is implicitly to reject the rest.” With this dictum we perfectly agree, and “that in rejecting its cardinal points—the ‘supernatural birth of Christ,’ the ‘atonement,’ and the ‘resurrection’—the entire structure of Christian doctrine is disorganised;” which, as Mr. Oxenham remarks, is “not an aggregation of atoms but a coherent whole.” The doctrine of “Universalism” *versus* “Eternal Perdition,” “the hope that good will be the final goal of ill, at last, far off, at last to all,” is a strong point with Liberal Protestantism, but however admirable their views are on this point—views in which of course we share,—they should remember that “this universal belief in eternal punishment of sixty generations of Christians is based, they have ever been firmly persuaded, on the express declaration of Christ himself.” Not only does Liberal Protestantism pull down this coping-stone of its orthodox creed, but the key-stone of the arch, “the Trinity,” is with it a dead letter. The “God conception” of Dr. Lang no more includes “God the Son” and “God the Holy Ghost” than does that of his neighbours in France and England.

The schism in the *Eglise réformée* in France, of long standing, has lately come to a head, and we read that the “Liberals,” or “extreme Left,” have by their negations virtually left the Church, that the title *Eglise réformée* no longer applies to that school headed by Monsieur Athanase Coquerel. One of the chiefs of this party, reviewing a “Synod” of the Church, held in 1848, remarks, “at this period the liberal tendency of the reformed church had not grasped the logical consequences of its principles; its utmost

boldness consisted in rejecting some dogmas such as the 'Trinity,' 'Predestination,' 'Original Sin,' and 'Eternal Punishment;' it had not fully entered on the rigorous scientific method of modern times." But in the name of logic, common sense and honesty, what was there left to reject that has a shadow of either Christianity or Protestantism? The illustrious Monsieur Guizot, who headed the orthodox section, wrote in regard to the strife, "In the actual state of Protestantism, orthodox Protestants ought not to make precise and formal confession of faith the rule absolute of their Church." Monsieur Guizot was most anxious to preserve outward unity, and another member on the same side declared that "it was the unanimous wish of the Synod that the Protestant Christian Church should not perish, and the existing schism was likely to bring about the death of Protestantism."

A Church that had even the boldness to throw overboard the "Trinity," "Predestination," "Original Sin," and "Eternal Punishment," whether it be the *Eglise réformée* of France or England, is dead in the Protestant Christian sense, has brought about for itself the death of Protestantism, has no longer any right to the "shibboleth" of a name which it hopes will distinguish it from that philosophic section of the world of modern thought which "has grasped the logical consequences of its principles," which has "the courage of its opinions," and, loving truth better than *systems*, having cast out "the idols born of mental prepossessions," upholds no religious system, but, questioning that emotional glow concerning the "Divine and Spiritual" which declares "it knows God," with a deeper and truer sense of the mysterious and unknown, utters this confession of faith:—

"When I attempt to give the power which I see manifested in the Universe an objective form, personal or otherwise, it slips away from me, declining all intellectual manipulation; I dare not call it a

mind, I refuse even to call it a cause ; its mystery overshadows me, but it remains a mystery ; the objective frames that my neighbours try to make it fit simply distort and desecrate it."

We have another indictment against Liberal Protestantism, namely, that it is further a misnomer for the schools either at home or abroad, which having nothing in common with traditional Christianity, have no plea for retaining the name of that body of Christians who in 1529 at the Diet of Spiers assumed it, when entering a solemn "protest" against the corrupt practices of that other section of Christians since known as Roman Catholics. All Christians, be it noted, were once members of the Primitive Catholic Church of Christ. But the Protestants of 1529 were not the first to protest for the rights of conscience ; in the 13th century in Languedoc, the sunny land of the free-hearted Troubadours, arose a note of defiance to clerical assumption and tyranny. Toulouse became the head-quarters of this so-called heresy which ended only in that most dreadful of religious massacres, the wars of the Albigenses.

It was then that Pope Innocent III., the head of the Christian Church, gave forth command, "ravage every field, slay every human being, strike and spare not ;" and the Abbé Citeau lamented "that he had only been able to cut the throats of 20,000 of his fellow Christians ;" and this, adds the historian, "was all for the truth as it is in Jesus." But what has Liberal Protestantism in common with these early reformers or Protestants of the 13th or 15th century, who certainly most emphatically accepted and believed in Biblical and traditional Christianity ? What would the martyrs and heroes of the "Albigensean" and "Waldensean" Church have said to this utterance of Liberal Protestantism ? "Let us cease to make the Bible the universal absolute oracle, cease to elevate broken beliefs to the height of divine revelations ;



believe me it is only in frankly accepting the acknowledged discoveries of science, in taking them for its starting post of teaching, that the Church will found itself not on shifting sand but on an immovable rock; from that time she will acquire that respected authority which she has in vain sought in the illusory principles of inspiration of Scripture and Scriptural origin of dogma." What would those people who made the Bible, and the Bible alone, the sheet anchor of their faith have said to their successors of to-day, who declare "that the Church to be respected must be founded on science and not on the Word of God?" How would Beza, Melancthon, Calvin, and the redoubtable chief of Protestantism, Luther, have regarded their heirs in the struggle against sacerdotalism who with one hand depose the Bible and with the other cast out the Messiah?

These stern uncompromising defenders of the faith had only one object in view, namely, to place Jesus Christ instead of the Pope at the head of the Christian Church. A member of French Liberal Protestantism says: "The great miracle to which all others are but accessories, is the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and the redeeming sacrifice of the Cross sanctioned by the miracle of his corporeal resurrection. Admit these and you are Christians, deny them, and you enter the ranks of philosophy and free thought."

This consistent, rational, and logical view of Christianity we commend generally to the study of Liberal Protestantism. It seems, however, that it is possible to Liberal Protestants, while rejecting the miracle of the "corporeal resurrection of Jesus Christ," the only basis for the dogma of immortality, still to hold fast to a life beyond the grave. With them "the hope of immortality is a result of human organisation at its origin, and of God's general government of the world by natural sequence." We are not sure what "the result of human organisation" means in refer-

ence to immortality, unless that the love of life being natural and intuitive, it necessarily follows we shall live for ever ; though, if this were so, "immortality" would not follow the law of "natural selection," and "depend on how the creature is constituted by nature, trained by circumstances and surroundings, and is possessed of certain aspirations, desires, and affections ;" nor be special "to those who are possessed of spiritual faculties involving a consciousness of a world unseen, with unlimited capacities for intellectual and moral progress, and of intense affection for relatives and friends which can only be satisfied with a continuance in heaven and throughout eternity."

According to this view immortality will be restricted to the *select few* ; the danger of such arguments is seen in the following sentence, which sums up the writer's *reasons* for "the hope that is in him."

"The love of God, devotion to his will, studious and painful regard for personal holiness, involving great self-denial, the love we bear to our families and friends, all these give promise of a future which cannot well be withheld without compromising the justice and sympathy of God. It will redeem man from despair, it will rescue God's honour from reproach." Now, unless Liberal Protestantism accepts "that apple of discord, Revelation," what is known of God's justice, sympathy, honour ? These are all gratuitous assumptions, and to arraign this "unknown Power" at the bar of man's justice seems to us nothing less than blasphemy against a "Mightier than ourselves."

Surely Lucretius, the famous philosopher who made the subject of death and immortality his great study, had in view some such arguments as the foregoing, when he says : "The gate of death therefore is not shut against the mind and soul, and even if the substance of the mind and the powers of the soul after they have been separated from our body still



retain their faculties, it is nothing to us who subsist only as conjointly constituted by an arrangement and union of body and soul. Nor if time should collect our material atoms after death and restore them again as they are now placed, and the light of life be given back to us, would it yet at all concern us that this were done when the recollection of our existence has once been interrupted?" And regarding "the love we bear our families and friends, which gives *promise* of a future reunion," hear Lucretius. "For men now say your pleasant home shall no more receive you, nor your excellent wife, nor shall your dear children run to snatch kisses; unhappily one adverse day has taken from you, unfortunate man, all the numerous blessings of life;" "in such remarks they do not add this," "nor now, moreover, does any regret for these things remain with you." Which *truth*, if men would well consider in their thoughts and adhere to it in their words, they would "relieve themselves from much anxiety and fear of mind." According to Lucretius, "the matter of which thou art made is wanted by nature, that succeeding generations may grow from it; all which, however, when they have passed their appointed term of life, will follow thee; and so have other generations before these fallen into destruction, and other generations, not less certainly than thyself, shall fall. Thus shall one thing never cease to rise from another, and thus is life given to none in possession, but to all only for use." And thus, we may add, is there "eternal resurrection from the dead."

Liberal Protestantism boasts that not only is it a religion, but "the religion of the future," which is to "bridge the chasm between orthodoxy and unbelief; true religion as distinguished from false, namely, that which unites the soul to God." This God who by one section is described as "the tendency that makes for righteousness," by another, as not only "Father,

but Mother," and by Dr. Lang as "that something distinct from the world as 'the thought from the brain.'" We agree with a writer in the *Libre Recherche*, who says, "The more we seek to define the precise idea of 'religion,' passing in review all that has been decorated with that title, the more we seem to approach the Tower of Babel at the moment of confusion of tongues. The hideous touches the sublime, and the grotesque mixes with the tragic; if we examine this question by the light of the facts experience offers us, under cover of this fine word we shall find ourselves greatly embarrassed to reply." The author of the *Cours d'Histoire*, Monsieur Guizot, asks: "At what does religion aim, of whatever sort it be? It pretends to govern the human will and human passions, and in order to accomplish this task religion must make itself acceptable to liberty. Religion has too often mistaken her rôle, has considered liberty as an obstacle, not as a means, and has by this error nearly always ranged itself on the side of power and despotism against human liberty, looking upon it as an adversary to vanquish rather than as something precious to guarantee." Monsieur Leblois also asks: "To what does true religion tend? to the happiness of mankind? She should render individuals, families, nations happy; it is the light that should shine for them, the power that should stimulate them to fulfil their mission in the short passage between life and death. All religions that do not fulfil these conditions for man are a danger."

This Liberal Protestant, like Monsieur Guizot, has his ideal religion, and warns his readers "not to confound it with the traditional dogmatic system, nor condemn in the name of religion what is entirely contrary to it." And yet we are told by Dr. Lang that every religion requires three elements, one of which is "rational dogma."

We do not quarrel with Liberal Protestantism for

this programme—"Point de dogme, point de Calvinism, point de confession de foi," or for propounding "as alone necessary two principles, neither the Deity of Christ nor original sin, nor expiatory sacrifice, only l'amour de Dieu et l'amour des hommes." But having divested the ancient faith of all its pillars, having eliminated from Christianity its fundamental doctrines, we do quarrel with it that, while maintaining these two principles "as columns of the *universal Temple*," it also declares them "the foundation-stones of Christianity." "The love of God and the love of men" are the foundation principles of Humanitarianism, not Christianity, unless it be the Christianity of Liberal Protestants!

It is all very well to manipulate a creed to suit one's ideas of what it ought to be, but we must again quote the orthodox Catholic, Mr. Oxenham. "No portion of Christian revelation stands alone or can be ignored, still less denied, without the denial reacting on other truths intended to be retained."

Deny "Eternal Punishment," and where is the Atonement? Deny the "Resurrection," and where is the authority for "Immortality?" Deny the second person of the "Trinity," and where is the first or the third?

We opened this paper with a problem which, having failed to solve, we leave for our readers—What is Liberal Protestantism?—and record our opinion that, eschewing all Biblical and Christian dogma and doctrine, it has "neither a religion, a creed, nor a gospel."