

PROTESTANTS AND THE PRINCIPLE OF
AUTHORITY IN RELIGION.

THE statement that the religion of most of us, of those especially whose faith has remained unchanged, is, to a great extent, hereditary, is, we suppose, somewhat of a truism. If so, it is, like most truisms, apt to be overlooked, and will most certainly bear repetition. In the case of Catholics the child passes, almost imperceptibly, from the authority of the parent—generally of the mother—to that of the priest, and finds the teachings learned in his earliest infancy confirmed by him whom he has been taught to recognize as entrusted with Divine authority. The bias of hereditary training being, moreover, far stronger than most of us imagine, this unbroken succession of authority tends, in the majority of persons, to a firm, if somewhat unreasoning, faith. That it is as well that it should be so, who can doubt? That such a faith approximates, very nearly, to that of the “little children” of whom our Lord bade us take example, is surely self-evident. A faith like this, even if assailed—as assailed it is almost sure to be—will be strong in the fact that there has never been any conflict of authority, never any contradiction between the lessons learned in infancy and those learned in later years.

That such a faith is, however, not altogether complete is also undeniable. We need, in order to be able to “give a reason for the hope that is in us,” to fulfil that other apostolic injunction, “Examine yourselves whether ye be in the Faith.” That is to say, that the mere fact that priest and parent have taught us exactly what our parents and theirs in turn and ever backwards have believed, does not, of itself, prove that teaching true. The “tradition” thus inherited may be, and doubtless is, a valuable witness to the sincerity of our belief, but is not necessarily an evidence of its truth.

All this, however, may be regarded as beyond the province of a layman, who can lay no claim whatever to any knowledge of theology. The point of principal importance in the present instance is the fact that the faith of Catholics being, as it must be, to a great extent hereditary, and deriving from that very circumstance a large measure of its hold upon the great mass of men and women, also gains a very material assistance from the absence of any conflict of authority, of any contradiction in its teachings. That which we learned at our mother’s knee, which we learned more

fully at our first communion, again, and yet again, as life drew on, must, and does, influence us by the mere fact that it is utterly and entirely consistent with itself. It is for this very reason that we know it to be true. Not for this reason only, but certainly for this among many others. This self-consistency, so manifest, so unquestionable, entirely satisfies that ultimate court of appeal—humanly speaking—the inward conviction of the individual. Beyond that, how is it possible for us to go? “If our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God.”

But it is this principle of authority in matters of religion as it concerns Protestants—that is, devout Protestants in good faith—that we have at present to deal with. Missions to non-Catholics, to those particularly known as “evangelicals,” have been prosecuted of late years with much zeal and fervor, and, doubtless, with a large measure of success. The Bull of our Holy Father Leo XIII., pronouncing Anglican orders null and void has for the present, at least, made the Anglican question of less immediate moment. Our would-be “Catholic” friends in that communion must be allowed a reasonable space of time in which to recover from their very natural soreness of disappointment. They expected the impossible, and have got nothing. It was, therefore, only fitting that at the last Catholic Truth Society’s conference in England, the question, “How to reach the Nonconformists,” should have received practically more attention than any other.

If among Nonconformists—our Anglican brethren style them “dissenters”—you include the small remnant of the once-powerful “evangelical” party in the Church of England—their sympathies being much more with the former than with those of their own communion who incline to “sacerdotalism”—we may, possibly, as being ourselves an ex-“evangelical,” be allowed to discuss, as briefly as may be, some aspects of this question with which we are familiar. It is, of course, perfectly true that the main facts of the relations between Catholics and Nonconformists have become generally known to those who have studied them, but it is also none the less true that, inasmuch as the experience of each individual convert must, of necessity, differ from that of every other, so that experience, though chiefly of interest to the person most concerned, may serve to throw some fresh ray of light on what still remains, and must continue a difficult problem. In other words, every one who has been either an “Evangelical” or a Nonconformist, before the grace of God led him or her into the true Church, may help to make the inner workings of the Protestant mind more clear to Catholics, who must needs know them in order to win them to the Faith.

Having simply stated the fact that, though now a Catholic, by

the grace of God, we were for many years a strict "Evangelical," and the further fact that of all our immediate relations, we are, so far, the only Catholic, let us deal, to the best of our poor ability, with the principle of authority in religion as it concerns devout Protestants.

Their religion—it has many by-names, but it is, to all intents and purposes, one and the same in what they love to call "fundamentals"—is, to a greater extent, if possible, than that of Catholics, a matter of inheritance. How else account for their true devoutness combined with an intense hatred of all that savors of "Popery," to take no other instance? Were it not for the strength of hereditary bias how many would remain Protestants in an age of disintegration such as this is? It is, as a simple matter of fact, the force of habit, of training, which enables men and women who must otherwise, one would think, yield of very necessity to the assaults made upon their faith from all sides, to remain true to the lessons learned in their early years. That is to say, that the principle of authority in religion, so far as it influences Protestants, is dependent for its very existence upon the force of hereditary training. In other words, the religious authority of Protestants is, as to its origin, parental authority.

Herein consist both its strength and its weakness. Its strength, inasmuch as the force of habit is immeasurably greater than we are inclined to concede; also, for the reason that parental training, aided by parental example, and acting on the mutual affection of parents and children, tends, as it must naturally tend, to strengthen the force of habit. With many persons, in the case of women especially, the fact of living in constant association with a pious mother, or, after her death, in constant, loving memory of her, of itself makes that mother's creed something sacred, something which it would be an insult to her, an insult to God Himself, to question or to doubt. How can that be erroneous which she believes and practices, the faith in which she lived and died? Would it not pain her, even in Paradise—the thought is illogical, unreasoning, if you will, but very natural, even if half-unconscious—were we to forsake the faith that to her was all in all? This is, I admit, but a faint shadowing of the reality; but it is, I maintain, a true description, so far as it goes, of a fact of daily experience; of a fact, moreover, which constitutes not, by any means, the least bitter part of that sacrifice which every convert makes.

But, herein, also consists its weakness. Setting aside the responsibility which it lays upon the parent—in which Catholics, of course, have a very full share; setting aside, also, the dangers arising from any personal inconsistencies, which, of itself, constitutes the gravest part of parental responsibility, for Catholic as

well as for Protestant—there arises, in the case of the latter, a menace to this authority from which that of the former is happily free, the danger, I mean, of contradiction between what is taught by the parent—both by word and example—and what is learned in later life. The child, in each case, is told, "This *is* the truth of Gód;" but, as an ultimate issue, the Protestant parent—were the question asked in words, as it must be, at times, in thought—"How do you *know* that is truth?" must, necessarily, answer in some such phrase as this, "Because I am convinced that it is so." Beyond that appeal to personal conviction, to personal spiritual experience, what other answer can there be? The weakness, therefore, lies in this, first, that should either the experience of the child, which invariably precedes conviction, or the conviction itself, which is the outcome of a long series of uniform experiences, fail for any reason (of which there may be many) to correspond to that of the parent, there ensues, as an inevitable consequence, a weakening of the authority of religion itself (as taught), that authority having been hitherto identified with that of the parent.

This does not, however, by any means constitute the sole weakness of the Protestant principle of authority, dependent, as it must be, on the authority of the original individual teacher. Difference of temperament alone may cause that want of correspondence between the spiritual experiences (and consequent conviction) of the child and those of the parent, but such a divergence may be, and has been, overcome by the working of a stronger, or purer, or more concentrated will on one less trained, less certain of itself. The failure to see things spiritual in the same light as the parent, may be, will doubtless be, regarded as an evidence of an "unconverted" state; the emotions aroused by affectionate entreaties, by the prayers and tears of a fond mother, will be mistaken for the wished-for convictions, and all will be peace again for a while.

The weakness, therefore, chiefly consists in the *possibility* of a conflict of authority. That of the first teacher—the parent—is accepted during childhood, not only as a necessity, but as a matter of course, with simple, unquestioning faith. That of the next teacher, schoolmaster, minister, as the case may be, will be accepted at the outset very much in the same way; coinciding, as it most probably will, with that of the parent, the teacher being of the parent's choosing. But as the years go on there must, sooner or later, come a time when the boy—the girl is less exposed to the danger, but it exists even for her—must choose his own teacher in things spiritual. Should his temperament closely resemble that of the parent who trained him, that is, should a special maternal or paternal phase of hereditary bias be unusually strong in him, he will in all probability choose one whose teachings conform, in

“fundamentals” at least, with those with which he has always been familiar. This familiarity in such a case would naturally have made those teachings dear to him for their own sake, as well as for the sake of her from whom he first learned them. If not, if there has been that want of correspondence of which I have spoken, a gulf bridged over by illusory feelings and emotions, then no familiarity can make such teachings more than simply tolerable, at best, for fear of paining the parent whom he loves.

But the choice, be it for good or for ill, must be made, and he who can honestly choose the path wherein his parents walked with God is surely to be accounted happy. But there is no strong probability, amounting almost, if not altogether, to a moral certainty, that he will do so. He does not pass, like the Catholic child, from the teachings of his mother to those of the priest, to find that both speak the same language, that the living, visible authority of the Church to which both mother and priest appeal is ever one, invariable and divine. The teacher whom he may choose, or whom circumstances stronger than ourselves, that mock our wisest plans, may choose for him will either teach him the same lessons that his mother taught him or cause him to unlearn them slowly but surely. It depends on so many things, trifles we are apt to call them, accident, temperament, want of filial affection; Protestants give the causes many different names, and judge those harshly by whom they are influenced, but there is, after all, only one cause, the inherent weakness of the Protestant principle of authority.

Thereafter, the choice once made, who may foretell the issue? In this, at last, we reach the chief danger that menaces this principle of authority, namely, that such a conflict must, of its very nature, and does, as a matter of fact, lead to a denial of all authority in religion. If the first teacher chosen contradicts, in certain well-defined points, the lessons inculcated by the parent, it follows by an unavoidable sequence that, should these new teachings fail to correspond to the boy's experiences and to the conviction which springs from them—his only tribunal of ultimate appeal—for any of the various reasons that led to the same results in earlier life, there must ensue a refusal, more pronounced this time, since there is little or no affection involved, and the influence of inherited tendencies (which always retain *some* influence as regards his relations to his parents) is wanting, to accept the teachings themselves. That is to say, that if he follows out his course to a logical conclusion, which but few of us do, he will pass from teacher to teacher until he ends either in utter unbelief or in the fold of the Catholic Church.

In this very weakness, then, of the Protestant principle of

authority, and in the consequences which that weakness involves, consists—could we but persuade them to see it—the clearest possible intimation of the duty of Protestants in respect of the Catholic Church. Authority there must surely be, inasmuch as they cannot deny that every parent has authority to teach his child what he himself believes, at least until the child (boy or girl) reaches an age at which he or she is supposed to be capable of choice. If there is none after that, what is he to choose? Why, indeed, should he choose at all? Moreover, if there is no authority except that of the parent—limited to a certain definite period of the child's life—what proof is there even of this authority? But, if parental authority does not actually exist, and is, in a certain very definite sense, divine, there must surely be *some* authority to correspond to it, to which we are equally bound to submit. If so, where is it to be sought for, and how is it to be known?

Parental authority, however, being, as stated, divine in a very real though limited sense, must also, on that very account, be—in so far as it is divine—infallible as well. And this for the very obvious reason that any authority that claims our allegiance must at least believe in itself. A doubtful authority is a self-contradiction. The parent who instructs a child in the principles of a faith about which he or she is uncertain, is surely guilty of a heinous moral fraud. There may be, and need be, no actual claim, no definite consciousness of personal infallibility; there must be a consciousness of moral certainty—"Ye shall *know* the truth"—otherwise the disciple will be quick to detect—for children's minds are keener than we realize—the half-expressed note of *uncertainty*, an uncertainty of which we ourselves may be scarcely conscious, which we should, probably, deny strenuously were we brought face to face with it.

It amounts in fact to this, that the conviction which is the fruit of a long series of consistent experiences is, of its very nature, equivalent to that implicit confidence with which a true Catholic accepts an infallible decision of the Pope. Moreover, the unquestioning faith with which a child believes the teachings of a parent is surely a proof not only that the authority on which those teachings rest is divine—of which there is no doubt—but is, as we said just now, in a very real sense infallible. Not only so, but if the child is to submit to that authority not merely of constraint, but by conviction; is to accept its teachings not simply because he must, but because he really believes them, he must accept them on this ground alone, "This must be true, because my mother says so."

An unsatisfactory position, if you will, yet it is, after all, practically that of every very young Catholic child as well. The parent

is infallible first, and then the Church; for the Protestants, the parent is infallible—to all intents and purposes—after that . . . ? There is the weakness of their case, could they only see it. But it remains true, nevertheless, that the child believes *solely* on the authority of the parent. If he or she can continue so to believe until experience has developed into conviction, that conviction constitutes “good faith,” and the moral certainty of it is equivalent, *while it endures*, to that of the Catholics. If, however, from any of the causes specified there results that absence of conviction, of which so much has been said, there is no longer “good faith” on the part of those who, from *whatever* motive, remain content with a mere formal or habitual allegiance to their original creed. “He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.”

Since, therefore, in order to gain the attention of “Evangelicals” and Nonconformists, that we may win them, if possible, to “the truth as it is in Jesus,” we must endeavor, as far as we can, to enter into their feelings, we have ventured to insist, even at the risk of repetition, on this point of authority as not only *divine*—if it has any claim on our allegiance—but also, in effect, infallible, in the sense of being founded on a moral certainty. Further, that since every devout Protestant has, at one time or other, accepted this parental authority as divine and infallible—though not, so to say, “in set terms”—we may surely ask them what other authority is to replace it, supposing that it should fail for any cause? Nay, even supposing it to continue all through their later life (in memory or in fact), that from conviction, from deliberate choice, they have accepted the parent’s creed, may we not fairly ask them, “On whose authority?” If the answer be, “On that of my father’s or my mother’s life,” the next query is, obviously, “On whose authority did they accept it?” which reduces the whole series of beliefs to a matter of tradition, confirmed, by individual conviction. But of the two the tradition comes first and is, in fact, the starting point, if not the cause, of that succession of consistent, and, probably, general, experiences which result in individual conviction. If so, if the foundations of the Protestant principle of authority be actually tradition and conviction, wherein does it differ from that of Catholics?

As to its essence, wherein but in this that the authority to which Catholics submit is not only divine and infallible, but one, immutable and eternal, “the same yesterday and to-day,” of which even its bitterest enemies admit that “Rome never changes;” that its claims to our allegiance are confirmed by the invariable experiences and the unalterable convictions of countless millions during nineteen centuries, by an unbroken chain of tradition; finally, by the fact, so often insisted on, that for a Catholic there is no fear of

any possible contradiction between the teachings of our parents and those of the Church. Whereas, for the Protestant, although the original authority in religious matters is accepted with an unquestioning faith, that authority must either be replaced by another—accepted, if at all in any *real* sense—in the same way, or must remain the sole foundation of the faith of the individual. In this latter case the acceptance depends either on the personal conviction of the disciple or on that of the teacher, practically on the concordance between the two; a concordance which, from its very “accidental” nature, offers no security of permanence. There remains, however, this fact, namely, that any *real* authority must be, to all intents and purposes, Divine and infallible. In other words, the genuine acceptance of any authority to which our convictions lead us to submit must involve a moral certainty that its teachings are “the truth.”

The objection may here be made that no Protestant has ever claimed individual or corporate infallibility; that, on the contrary, the assertion (the *fact*) that the Church is infallible is one of the chief difficulties that Protestants have to overcome. To which we answer, that if the preceding argument has any force, the Protestant principle of authority in matters of faith involves of its very essence—if it be not a myth, or an arrant hypocrisy, which God forbid—a moral certainty founded on conviction, which conviction (let me repeat it) is the growth of a long series of consistent experiences. Further, that such authority, accepted with the unquestioning faith (is not *all* true faith of this nature?) which a moral certainty inspires, is to all intents and purposes infallible, otherwise there is either no genuine submission to it or an utter want of logical consistency, either self-deception or hypocrisy.

Is the objection disposed of? We may be told that but few of us pursue the moral certainty upon which our faith must rest, otherwise it is delusion, superstition and not faith at all, to its ultimate source. That if this be true in the case of Catholics, which proves what we have said about the “hereditary” nature of the faith of most of us, still more is it true in the case of Protestants, who, if consistent, should be either Catholics or agnostics. Admitted; nevertheless, we maintain that the moral certainty which, is the outcome of the conviction of a Protestant *in good faith*, is for him as real (*while it endures*) as that with which a Catholic, *also in good faith*, accepts the teachings of the infallible Church of God.

Let us give an instance of what we mean by moral certainty, an instance, by the way, drawn from our own experience. We know a man, now growing old, who has been a devout and consistent “Evangelical” all his life. To him “Popery,” with all that savors of it, is as false as “Protestantism” is to us. Of his own faith he

has absolutely no doubt, probably he never has had. The experiences of a lifetime have confirmed that conviction with which, when he came to the age of choosing, he accepted as "*the truth of God*" the faith that his mother taught him, and which, till then, he had accepted, on her authority, as implicitly as a devout Catholic accepts the teachings of the Church. By inheritance, by temperament, by training, by a life-long series of consistent experiences, his conviction has grown fixed and unalterable, unless by a miracle, that what he believes he has been taught by the Holy Spirit of God Himself. Were he in very deed conscious of personal infallibility, he could not be more morally certain that he is "right" than he is now.

The position of such a man is surely as easily to be understood as it is, apparently, unassailable. Asked such a question as this: "Suppose that you and I were to choose some verse of Scripture whereon we differ, and that if each of us were to kneel down and ask the guidance of the Holy Spirit, with equal sincerity, should we then necessarily agree?" he would answer, "Any man who *really* asks such guidance *must* be taught the truth." To the further question, "Suppose we still differed, what then?" We know not how he would reply, unless it were to say more emphatically, "He *must* be taught the truth." Which is equivalent to "He *must* agree with me, because I *know* that I am right." Humbly, be it noted, and without a suspicion of spiritual pride, without saying, in so many words, "*You* are wrong, because *I* am right," but it amounts to that. He would be the last to claim infallibility, the first to condemn the claim of the Catholic Church, but *he is morally certain of the infallible guidance of the Holy Spirit.*

That is practically the Protestant principle of authority in matters of faith. It is not *called* authority except in the case of parents, nor recognized as infallible in the sense which we attach to the word. But the parent's authority over the child is an authority God-given, the parent's teaching must be accepted without question, therefore it is, to all intents and purposes, divine and infallible. When the child comes to choose he or she must choose to believe as the parent believes, *or* some other faith. In the first case, the choice will be decided by conviction, plus temperament, plus filial affection, plus tradition. In the second case temperament will undoubtedly be the dominant factor—certain forms of faith, such as Methodism, Broad Churchism, Ritualism, having their peculiar attractions for certain classes of minds—aided by what we call "accidental circumstances." But in either case the faith chosen must rest upon a moral certainty, otherwise it is not faith in any true sense.

When, therefore, we seek to understand our Protestant breth-

ren, as we must do if we are ever to win them to the truth as we *know* it, we find that they are men and women "of like passions with ourselves;" that their faith, in all its varieties, rests for each individual upon conviction and tradition, is, for each individual, a moral certainty. As the only Catholic member of a devout, consistent Protestant family, we venture to assert, subject, of course, to correction by those who have a wider experience, that a possible point of agreement is to be found in this fact, namely, that there *is* a principle of authority in religious matters common, in a limited but very real sense, to Catholics and to Protestants, an authority which rests upon tradition and conviction, and which results in a moral certainty, which Catholics and Protestants, inasmuch as they submit to it in those things which concern our eternal welfare, evidently recognize as divine. If divine it must be true, if divine and true it cannot deceive us; therefore it is infallible. But if morally certain, divine, true and infallible, must it not also be one and the same for all men? How comes it, then, that although apparently the *same* authority is binding on Catholics and Protestants alike, the result is an evident and fundamental difference? Where does the flaw lie?

Is not the answer sufficiently plain? On the one hand, a uniform, unbroken tradition of nineteen centuries confirmed to the point of moral certainty (the proof, in one sense, of infallibility) of countless millions who have proved the sincerity of their convictions by their lives and by their deaths. On the other, a multiplicity of mutually-contradictory traditions, dating back three centuries at most, confirmed by the convictions of those who adhere to them by personal choice or from force of habit. On the one hand, an authority not only recognized as *one*, divine, true and infallible, but proved to be so by the consistent experiences of unnumbered generations. On the other, an authority tacitly acknowledged as divine, a moral certainty of (individual) infallible guidance. The one authority admits of no doubt, fears no possibility of self-contradiction, *knows* itself to be divine, and therefore claims to teach men infallibly. The other, obeyed only because chosen, only so long as it suits us; which does, in fact, speak with different voice to different men. Could we but persuade our brethren that there is indeed but *one* authority, that of the *one* "Church of God," that as there is one Lord, so there is only *one* faith, divine, true, infallible, would they not hasten to join with us so that there might at last be "one Fold" under the "One Shepherd."

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MONTREAL.