

# English modernists

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## ENGLISH MODERNISTS.\*)

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In a notice of a volume of Mr (not Dr, as I erroneously called him in that notice) Campbell's Sermons in the last number of this Review, I remarked that "Modernism", to give it a title which has lately become general, was a phrase which covered a good deal of ground, and comprised under one appellation a great discordance of view. It is one thing to criticize severely the so-called "development" of the Roman Church, which has been proceeding for some fourteen centuries upon wrong and artificial lines. It is another to attempt to remove the Christian religion from its ancient historical base, and to replace it upon the foundation of what is absurdly miscalled "modern scientific criticism", a kind of criticism the principles and application of which are alike undefined. The objections of Catholics—in the true sense of that much abused word—to what calls itself "the New Theology" is not that *some* of it is new, but that *all* of it is new. The Founder of Christianity summed up in a weighty apophthegm the eternal characteristics of all sound Christian thought when He declared that the "wise householder" was accustomed to bring out of his store "things new *and old*". The writer of this notice has been attracted to "Old" Catholicism because the Old Catholic body, since its formation, has remained more faithful to the maxim "quod semper", enunciated by Vincentius Lirinensis, than any other religious body that he knows. And so, while the Roman Church is experiencing a violent reaction which hardly realizes either the direction in which it is going, or its rate of progress, and other religious bodies, Protestant or Anglican, are deafened by confused utterances, and dizzied by

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\* *The New Theology*. By R. J. Campbell, M. A. Minister of the City Temple. London, Chapman & Hall, 1907.

the novelties to which they are introduced, the Old Catholic Churches remain calm and steadfast on their basis of the dogmatic decisions of the Undivided Church. It seems to the writer impossible that modern religious thought can much longer fail to recognize the dignity and stability of this attitude, and he trusts that many will find it a rallying point amid the confusions and distractions of the hour.

Mr Campbell's now notorious volume is an extraordinary *mélange* of truth and error. If not exactly "inebriated by the exuberance of his own verbosity", to use the once famous words of a great English statesman, he is at least entangled and confounded by the plausible though misleading phrases which he himself, as well as other men, have coined. His plea for a "re-statement of the essential truth of the Christian religion *in terms of the modern mind*", betrays the confusion of ideas under which he labours. A statement of "the essential truth of the Christian religion" in terms that are entirely "modern" involves the replacement of original Christianity by a modern substitute. If the first teachers of Christianity were misinformed as to the facts of their Master's Life, and as to the doctrines which He taught, it is quite impossible that after an interval of nearly 1900 years we can replace them once more on a foundation which has been lost. A religion which has either been misunderstood from the beginning by its very earliest preachers, or which has never taken the trouble to preserve its historical credentials, can never commend itself to sound thinkers and reasoners. If we possess the actual teaching of Jesus Christ, we shall of course be able, by sound criticism, to measure our present deflections from it, if any such there be. But if not, we can never be absolutely certain what is, and what is not the genuine doctrine of Christ. That the leaven of the Christian Revelation, in its task of pervading human thought and conduct, was for ages more or less lost to sight, and that it might be expected to come to the surface once more at last, is a proposition few would be hardy enough to dispute. But the supposition involves the original existence of the leaven in its pure and unadulterated condition, or it would not be possible to recognize it when it once more became visible. When Mr Campbell assails "sixteenth century Protestantism" and its "conventional statements", and

declares that Roman Catholic doctrine, on some points, presents a "much better statement of the truth", there is nothing intrinsically unreasonable in his contention. It is quite possible that the "leaven", when coming up to the surface in later times, continued to be mixed up with incongruous elements. There has doubtless been a Protestant as well as a Roman scholasticism, and each set of dogmas ought to be carefully compared with the original teaching of Christ's own authorized messengers before it is accepted. So far we can go with Mr Campbell. But we are compelled to part company with him when he begins to tell us what St John or St Paul must have taught, rather than what they did teach, and when, on purely subjective grounds, he rejects some of their utterances while he accepts others. A man who has no clear grasp of first principles, is sure to betray the fact when he essays to reason on them. And this book is consequently full of inconsistencies. "If", the author says (p. 77), "by the Deity of Jesus is meant that He possessed the all-controlling consciousness of the universe, then assuredly He was not the Deity, for He did not possess that consciousness". Here Mr Campbell betrays his entire unfitness to deal with the high mysteries on which he enters with so light a heart. Had he studied ever so slightly the controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries, he would have seen that he was entirely ignorant of the Catholic doctrine of the Perfect Godhead and the perfect Manhood of Christ. He talks of "thinking of the archetypal Divine Man" "in terms of Jesus" (p. 89). A very slight study of ancient theology would show him that his confusions of things essentially distinct were exposed some 1500 years ago. The Evangelist St John, and the Apostles of Christ tell us nothing of an "archetypal Divine Man". But they do tell us that the "Divine Word", or the "Divine Son", assumed our humanity, and made it one with Himself. Again (p. 108), Mr Campbell tells us that Jesus was not the only "Son of God incarnate". "If", he adds, "He came from the further side of the gulf and we only from the hither; if we are humanity with out Divinity, and He Divinity that has only assumed humanity, perfect fellowship between Him and ourselves is impossible". Here we need not appeal even to the divines of the fourth century. Every intelligent reader of the Fourth Gospel and the Epistles will be able to

compare Mr Campbell's feeble hold on first principles with the doctrine of the Divine Indwelling taught by all the early preachers of the Gospel. "Perfect fellowship with Christ", we shall find, is not promised to any of us until sin is entirely trodden under foot within us. In the very next page, however, Mr Campbell approaches so near the fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith as to contradict, almost in terms, the ill-considered remarks which have been quoted.

We cannot afford space to note other utterances, equally ill considered, which are scattered through the volume. We will proceed to note one or two of the still more numerous unproved assertions to be found therein, remarking by the way that a very large part of the case of the modern critic consists of such unproved assertions. In p. 9 the author asks "what sensible man really believes" "certain dogmatic beliefs about the Fall, the scriptural basis of revelation, the blood atonement, the meaning of salvation, the punishment of sin, heaven and hell". If he is referring to opinions on these points which are held by individuals, but which the Catholic Church has never officially sanctioned, he ought to have stated clearly to what "dogmatic beliefs" he was referring. But if, as the rest of the volume seems to shew, he was desirous of sweeping away, root and branch, belief in the facts on which our religion depends, he ought, before making such an assertion, to have waited till he had proved his points. Every defender of revealed religion is familiar with the unworthy expedient to which its antagonists so often resort, of declaring that "no sensible man" now believes in its distinctive doctrines. In p. 14 he tells us that the "New Theology", i. e., Mr Campbell's opinions, is "the Gospel of the kingdom of God". A less self-satisfied divine would have restricted this latter phrase to the message of Jesus Christ, as put forth by its authorized exponents. The expression can hardly be decently applied to a *réchauffée* of some of the characteristics of that Gospel put forth nineteen hundred years after its appearance. Then we are told (p. 97) that "most reputable theologians" have "given up" belief in the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ. To stigmatize in this way those who not agree with you as persons who are not "reputable" is a common, but one may perhaps be allowed to say not a very "reputable", device of the modern theologian. Did

space permit, a considerably larger number of these contemptuous references to those who are steadfast to the beliefs of nearly 2000 years might be quoted. Beside these controversial arts of the "Modernist" of—may we be permitted to retort?—the less "reputable" class, we may note one or two astounding assertions. There is in "the Genesis myth of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden... no Christ, no Cross, no future judgement, no vicarious atonement" (p. 55). And this in spite of Gen. III, 15! Of the doctrine of the Fall, described as the "tendency to look upon the world as the ruins of a Divine plan marred by man's perversity and self will", we are told that "it is time that we got rid of it, for it has a blighting, deadening influence upon hopeful endeavour for the good of the race." "Why", we are asked, should the "consequences" of the Fall "continue through countless generations?" "The notion is incredible", we are informed, and the string of assertions here found concludes with "sufficient has been said to demonstrate the fact that the doctrine of the Fall is an absurdity from the point of view both of ethical consistency and common sense" (pp. 58-60). Of Mr Campbell's notions of "demonstration" the reader will already have formed an idea. His infallibility on this momentous subject is greater than that of whole generations of Popes. He utterly fails to see the obvious facts (1) that the *first* lapse—and a first lapse there must have been—from the laws prescribed for man *was* the Fall, (2) that the consequences of this lapse *have*, as a matter of fact, continued to this very day, and (3) that they were as distinctly the results of the first lapse as was the wild rush into space of Lexell's comet of its too close proximity to Jupiter and his satellites. So much for "common sense" and scientific "demonstration". Where "ethical consistency" is violated by the statement that the first sin must needs be the precursor of a long series of others, until some remedial process comes into play, Mr Campbell does not condescend to tell us. It is another of the truths we are required to believe on his own sole authority. He further forgets to shew where the "blighting, deadening influence" of a doctrine which has been believed for thousands of years is found displayed in the history of the Christian Church. There is at least some evidence to the contrary in that very history. We next proceed to Mr Campbell's



doctrine of sin. With S<sup>t</sup> Augustine and other writers of past days, he believes it to have no concrete existence. It is a negative, not a positive idea, and consists in the "privation of good" (p. 43). On this point M<sup>r</sup> Campbell indulges in an amount of flighty dogmatism which is extraordinary, even in him. In p. 160 sqq he insists that sin is simply seeking God, though in the wrong way. "It is a quest for God, though a blundering one". The "drunkard", the "*roué*", the "man who gives up his life to selfish gratification", is "seeking God and thinking that he would find Him by destroying something that God has made beautiful and fair". Here the utterances of our author become "confusion worse confounded". Surely to "seek God", even in a blundering way, would be something better than a mere *privatio boni*. But M<sup>r</sup> Campbell himself turns suddenly round in the midst of his rethoric, admits that it is "almost blasphemy"—and here we are fully in accord with him—to say what he has been saying. The sinner is at once engaged in a "quest for God", "destroying something that God has made beautiful and fair", and making a "woeful blunder" (why "woeful" unless it is the cause of "woe"?). After this he proceeds to say that he has never "denied the reality of sin". What! not when he has denied its existence? He positively revels in self-contradiction here. In p. 43 it is "a negative, not a positive term". In p. 151 he tells us that it is "the opposite of love"? In p. 163 it has become "the murder spirit in human experience". In p. 164 it is "selfishness and nothing else". He goes on to call it a "terrible damning lie" (*ibid.*) and describes it as "stifling religion to-day". And yet (p. 43) it is no more than "the shadow were the light ought to be", a "vacuum", as a friend of his once called the devil, to the "no small bewilderment", as M<sup>r</sup> Campbell naïvely admits, of "a group of listeners". But then it is the *métier* of the New Theology to astound and bewilder folk by a hail of inconsistent but well-sounding phrases. We must leave M<sup>r</sup> Campbell to explain how a thing which has no actual existence can at the same time be the "terrible", the "damning" thing he has elsewhere declared it to be.

On what is called "the Atonement" M<sup>r</sup> Campbell is a little more satisfactory, though he jumbles up the teaching of Scripture and the later theories of theologians, Protestant and

other, in his usual confused fashion. He talks of the "present day orthodox doctrine of the Atonement", whatever that may be. He seems perfectly unaware of the fact that the Catholic Church is committed to no theory of Atonement, but simply to the fact, to which all the writers of the New Testament bear witness, that Christ offered Himself to His Father as a "propitiation", a "sacrifice for sin", and a "ransom for many". He deals with the Apostles of his Lord and Master—sent forth by Him to proclaim the tidings He had brought to all mankind—in the same patronizing and inconsistent fashion in which he deals with every topic which comes before him. "Paul's theology is ingenious but not convincing... in fact, the juridical and the ethical elements" in it "stand in irreconcilable contrast" (p. 193). What a pity poor "Paul" had not the advantage of a clear headed "Modernist" of the Campbell type beside him to admonish him of his futilities! "Paul's" Mentor has also settled the vexed question of the authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews, which has troubled a host of greater men from Dionysius of Alexandria downwards. Its writer (p. 194) is "an Alexandrian Jew". "Probably", says Mr Campbell. But every one familiar with English "Modernists" knows that "probably", in their mouths, is equivalent to "certainly"<sup>1)</sup>. The theory of the "Alexandrian Jew" on Christ's sacrifice is "quite different to Paul's" (p. 195), though it is similar to that taken in the "Johannine writings", for both "are dominated by Alexandrian modes of thinking".

Enough, it may be hoped, has now been said to shew the readers of the *Revue internationale de Théologie* how hopelessly the English "Modernist" of the day is dominated by fine phrases, the real meaning of which he has never taken the trouble to penetrate, and how recklessly he dogmatizes on points of the utmost difficulty without having examined into the questions on which he is so ready to pronounce. Our author knows something of Protestant "orthodox" (so called) theology, and has some faint idea of what Rome does and does not teach. But the history of doctrine in the Catholic Church is a closed book to him. He knows neither what that Church has decided nor what it has refused to decide, nor the reasons for either.

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<sup>1)</sup> See p. 56, 131, 242.



One is sorry for him, because he has now and then a glimmering of light on the subject with which he deals. But he loses our respect when—as he so constantly does—he substitutes assertion for argument, windy rhetoric for exact thought and rigid demonstration; when he flings to the winds original authorities for the facts of the Christian revelation, as well as the fundamental doctrines of the faith, and substitutes for them the sounding phrases and fast-and-loose assertions of the hour. Let us, by all means, endeavour to get at the meaning of Holy Scripture. Let us endeavour, by study, by full and free discussion, to draw out the truths which still lie hidden therein. But let us at least approach our task in a modest, a humble, a reverent spirit—the spirit of men who know that they are face to face with great mysteries, and that they need above all things to be taught by God. We shall learn nothing by random assertions, nor by ostentatious patronage of men “the latchet of whose shoes we are not worthy to unloose”. The title-deeds of our faith have been in the hands of the Church from the very first. If we arrogate to ourselves a superiority to them, we shall end by knowing nothing at all.

J. J. LIAS.

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Mr Mills’<sup>1)</sup> book is a reprint, with a few additions and alterations, of some papers which appeared in the *Churchman* magazine for 1906. Their object is described by the author as an endeavour to tell people “how much the New Testament requires them to believe”. This recurrence to first principles is a most necessary task at present, when so many people, clerical and lay, seem “all abroad” on the point; and it is well, clearly, and briefly accomplished by Mr Mills. In it he discusses the theories of Professor Gardner in England, Professor Harnack in Germany, and M. Auguste Sabatier in France. He then describes the position of the Abbé Loisy, who “as against Sabatier, holds that there was a definite revelation made by Christ; and as against Harnack, that that revelation includes much more than the German scholar admits”. But he

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<sup>1)</sup> *Fundamental Christianity*. An Essay on the Essentials of the Christian Faith. By Barton R. V. Mills, M. A. (Assistant Chaplain of the Savoy). London, Masters & Co., 1907 (91 p.).

does not fail to point out that the position taken up by the Abbé Loisy leaves much to be desired; that his defence of Romanism is equally valid for Calvinism, or in fact any other development, or, as it is now fashionable to call it, "evolution", of the Christian revelation; and that it is doubtful how far the would be defender of the Roman Church holds the Christian faith himself—how far, in championing criticism, he is practically surrendering the Christian scheme.

The second chapter contains an analysis of the "characteristics of early Apostolic teaching", and shews that it consisted not in laying down doctrinal formulæ, but in the statement of facts. Then follows an able analysis of St Paul's theological teaching, of the objects of the Synoptic Gospels and the Epistle to the Hebrews, and an examination of the final intervention of St John with his account of the esoteric teaching of the Lord. Personally, I should be disposed, as papers which have appeared in this Review have shewn, to go a good deal farther in reference to St John's object in publishing his Gospel than either Mr Mills or the Abbé Loisy. I should regard it not merely as written "to refute the current heresies by a statement of the true doctrine concerning the Person of Christ", but as *placing on record the teaching of Jesus Christ concerning Himself and His relation to His disciples*, which had hitherto been an unwritten tradition in the Church, but to the existence of which the writings of St James, St Peter and St Paul bear witness, as forming the basis of all the inner spiritual teaching of the disciples of Christ.

Mr Mills then proceeds to his conclusion. In all these writings he finds "five fundamental facts", the Virgin Birth of Jesus, His Death on the Cross, His Resurrection, His Ascension, and the Gift of the Spirit to the disciples; three essential doctrines, the Atonement by Christ's Death, the Incarnation (which I wish he had further described as the source from which flows Salvation by Christ's Life); and the doctrine of the Trinity (though I should have preferred to see it treated more as a fundamental and necessary practical fact, and less as a dogmatic formula); and a form of worship, in which three ordinances stand prominently out, Baptism, Laying on of Hands, and Holy Communion. The questions of Church membership, the essentials of the Christian ministry, obedience to

authority, and schism (whether “in the Body”, or “out of the Body”, Mr Mills apparently “cannot tell”) are discussed in a tolerant and reasonable spirit. And the conclusion consists of a very few words on the well-known adage *In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus charitas*.

I would briefly affirm my conviction that there is more reasonableness and helpfulness on the difficulties of the present age in Mr Mills’ ninety-one pages than in ten thousand or more theological treatises on the “reconciliation of Scripture with science” which continue to pour in such cataracts from the press, and which are chiefly noticeable for their feeble grasp of Scripture and scientific principles alike, and for “darkening counsel by words without knowledge” — drifting about as boats are wont to do on the ocean, when they have neither rudder nor compass.

J. J. LIAS.

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