

SCIENTIFIC RE-STATEMENTS OF RELIGIOUS TRUTH.

BY HENRY W. CLARK,
CHARISMA, HARPENDEN, HERTS, ENGLAND.

It becomes necessary, every now and then, to reiterate and insist upon the fact that theology and science have each their own separate work to do, and that between the province of the two a clear boundary-line must be drawn. Sometimes it is science which is compelled, in its own interests, to warn off theology from its special ground; and theology has had to learn (indeed, the lesson may now be declared learnt with something like thoroughness) that it is not its place to pronounce a judgment upon the precise method by which the world came to be, or upon the exact relation between organic and inorganic, or upon other questions of a strictly scientific kind. Sometimes, however, it comes to the turn of theology to hold up a warning finger to science, to declare that while it will not claim any jurisdiction beyond its proper borders, yet within those borders it must be supreme. It would appear that the time for such a declaration is now come. To reconcile theology and science is at the present moment the aim of not a few; and one admits unreservedly that the aim is pursued by many in a spirit entirely laudable. But the thing may easily be pressed too far. Science, indeed, appears in some quarters to be growing so affectionately disposed towards theology as to be prepared for an entire absorbing of it—for such a dressing of theological ideas, as it were, in the robes of a scientific terminology that the distinctive shape and form of the theological ideas is somewhat in danger of being lost. Theology—so the conception appears to run—is really, when you

come to look into it, only science under another name. A "reconciliation" which goes so far is perhaps too complete. For theology to be "reconciled" with science by being swallowed up in it is a somewhat doubtful boon; and theology is entitled to claim that it must continue to have a distinctive and separate existence, employing its own language and dealing with its own realities in such ways as seem to it to be best. It is quite possible to acknowledge the value of many of the efforts just now being made to re-state religious truths in scientific terms, and yet to feel that the thing is in danger of being pushed to extremes. The scientific re-statements of religious truth, useful as they may be for certain apologetic purposes, must be declared wholly inadequate when offered as a sufficient exposition of the spiritual facts and processes with which religion is concerned; and yet their scientific ring is apt to give them the sound of a finality which they do not possess, and so to induce in the enquirer a mistaken content. One admits that science had a right to make its protest when theology attempted to exercise an unlawful dictatorship in the scientific realm; but one goes on to say that theology has an equal right to protest when science seeks to bring all religious truth within the limits of scientific categories and to exhaust it in scientific speech. It is needful—in vindication of the rights of theology no less than in vindication of the rights of science—that between the realm of science and that of theology there should be a clear drawing of boundary-lines.

1.

The method of "reconciliation" which has been alluded to consists, briefly, in translating theological ideas into scientific language. And the impression left (or at any rate the impression aimed at) by the translation is that the process indicated by the theological truth is

essentially a part of the same evolutionary process which science is concerned to establish and to expound, and that if theology will but complacently admit this as being *all* it means, every difficulty is smoothed away. Good, for example, is defined as "that which promotes development," and evil, conversely, as "that which retards and frustrates development." Sin has on similar lines been described as a "falling out of harmony with the law of the universe;" while the definition of sin as "selfishness," which also is not infrequently given, is based upon the same underlying conception of a harmonious progression of the whole, which is interfered with when individual preferences are permitted to seize the supreme place. God, under the scientific terminology, becomes the "Intelligence immanent in all the processes of nature;" duty means for man "to assist his fellows, develop his own higher self, to strive towards good (that is, by the definition already offered, towards that which promotes development) in every way open to his powers, and generally to seek to know the laws of Nature and to obey the will of God"; and, as a final instance, the kingdom of Heaven is summed up as representing "a harmonious condition in which the Divine will is perfectly obeyed, and as the highest state of existence, both individual and social, which we can conceive"—in other words, as development completely carried through. Nearly all the above phrases are, as many readers will recognize, taken from Sir Oliver Lodge; but these are quoted only because they happen to be the phrases lying nearest to hand; and, as a matter of fact, they do but reproduce ideas put forth by many other writers as adequately embodying theological and religious truths. To prevent misunderstanding at the outset, it should be said that such objection as is here taken to them lies not against their truth, but only against their adequacy; and that only when theology is asked to accept them as efficient and sufficient substitutes for its own way of putting

things does theology find it necessary to protest. The contention, in short, is that while the above phrases do give us a part of what religious truth contains, they by no means give the whole.

Probably the method may be traced back to the well-known "Natural Law in the Spiritual World" of Professor Drummond; for although it be now applied on somewhat different lines, the underlying principle of Drummond's "reconciliation" and that of to-day's scientific-religious harmoniser are essentially one. The title of Drummond's book is itself suggestive in this connection; for the principle beneath this reconciling method really amounts to this—making regulative, for purposes of system-construction, *the law by which anything works rather than the thing itself*. Or, to put it another way, *process* rather than *essence* is the all-important consideration; and this way of putting it carries us back to what was said just now as to the impression which current reconciliations aim at leaving upon the mind. The desired impression was said to be this—an impression that the process indicated by a theological truth is essentially a part of that same evolutionary process which science is concerned to establish and expound. It is not so much with the essential realities spoken of in a theological formula, as with the processes whereby they are governed or which they govern, that all these re-statements are engaged. With Drummond, indeed, the essential reality—the thing itself—never emerged into thought at all, since the particular object he had in view rendered any such emergence unnecessary, not to say undesirable. Wishing simply to identify a process in the natural world with a process in the spiritual, and to justify the latter by means of the identification, Drummond had simply (as in the case of his treatment of Biogenesis) to take any Biblical or theological formula descriptive of the process and to show that its terms and those descriptive of the natural process could be

transposed. In the indicated instance of Biogenesis, it was merely the likeness of process implied in the truth (or supposed truth, for its validity makes no difference for our present purpose) that natural life was only derivable from pre-existing life, and the other truth that spiritual life was derivable only from the Christ who already possessed it, that caught his eye. What "life" in either realm actually meant—whether in the two realms the word did not really mean things so different that any comparison between them and the laws governing them was impossible—whether, though the law of the *process* might be the same, there was any real affinity between the two starting-points of the process or between the two goals—with these things Drummond was not concerned. For his purposes, the processes were mentally detached from the material, so to call it, in which they inhered, and were viewed almost as hanging in mid-air. It was not, of course, that Drummond deliberately ignored any essential factors of his case; it was simply in terms of *process* that the problem originally appeared; and he was not called upon—whatever the worth of the work actually performed may have been—to look beyond. The current translations of theological truth into scientific terms cannot quite so absolutely ignore the reality of things, inasmuch as the problem now is to take the description of certain realities which theology has already given and revise it; but they go as near to doing so as is consistent with the object they have in view. The problem now starts from *cosmic* law, rather than from the isolated and particular laws with which Drummond dealt—for strictly speaking, Drummond's theme was natural *fact* in the spiritual world rather than natural *law*; and the aim is now to show how religious conceptions can be related therewith. Beneath the processes of cosmic law theological facts have to find a place, so that, finding that place, they may be saved. That is now the problem. The theological facts,

therefore, must themselves be conceived under the aspect of process, and under such an aspect of process as will make them at home in the process with which science deals. Hence the frequent recurrence, in re-statements of the kind under consideration, of such terms as "development" and its kindred words. With Drummond, the given factors of the problem consisted of two *processes*: with the later "reconciliations," the given factors of the problem consist of a process (the cosmic process) on the one hand and certain religious realities (God, duty, goodness &c.) on the other. It is still, however, the *process* that is to be regulative: the conception to be formed of the realities must be one that reduces them to elements in that process; and the language in which they are ultimately described must express, not what they are in themselves, but what they are in the general scheme which the process works out. *Process*, rather than *essence*, is, as was said, the all-important thing. Whatever theology, following its own methods and speaking its own tongue, may have said concerning the realities which are its subject-matter, the "reconciliations" ignore. At any rate, they claim the right of judging it by a standard of their own. The independent conclusions of theology must be prepared to execute a movement to the rear; for the revised formularies are not so much to support them as to take their place. The scientific re-statements, while unwilling to surrender the realities, while professing, indeed, to save them for human faith, care, not for their essence, but only for their relation to cosmic law. A work of reduction and elimination is consequently carried through upon the standard religious conceptions until a residuum is reached which seems to make that relation clear. And it is no superfluous thing to take note of this; for from this fact certain consequences follow which theology, in forming its estimate of the help which the scientific re-statements may be able to give, cannot afford to ignore.

2.

For the only description of religious facts and realities which, on the method indicated, the scientific re-statements are ready to give, really leaves the most important things unsaid, and involves such a generalizing away of the facts and realities that the greater part of their value is lost. That which can be said about religious truth in terms of the general world-process is so little that the unsaid remains by far the larger thing. This at least is what theology, in face of the endeavors of science to re-formulate theological truth, is bound to maintain, unless theology is prepared to admit that it has up till now been insisting upon things which are after all not of primary importance, and that its leading ideas (not merely its leading words) are not deserving of the honor they have hitherto received. The "reconciling" statements become so general and so abstract that they lose nearly all significance from the distinctively theological point of view; and theology is saved, not because it is vindicated, but simply because the things it holds most dear are ignored. Whether or not such a salvation be worth having is a point which theology must face and decide.

For example, if we turn to the conception of sin as given in scientific terms, and describe sin as "that which retards and frustrates development" or as a "falling out of harmony with the law of the universe," are we left in possession of an idea of sin which theology can recognise as adequate, or even as including the really essential points? Surely not. Theology is compelled at once to raise further questions. In regard to the first definition, it must ask, *Development of what and to what?* And in regard to the second, it must ask, *what is the law of the universe in the case of human life and character?* And when any answer at all is given to these enquiries, it can only be in phrases over which words like "God,"

“soul,” “holiness,” are scattered as thickly as stars are scattered across the sky. Take the “development” conception of sin. It is development of the soul—development of the soul in holiness—development of the soul in holiness like to God’s—it is this development, and this alone, that theology is concerned with as being retarded or frustrated by sin: the mere general term “development” is too unshaped a stone for theology to employ, without further grinding and polishing, in the putting up its house; and yet, so soon as the general term is filled up with more particular ideas, the scientific definition has *ipso facto* been left far behind. Or take the definition of sin which makes it consist in a want of harmony with the law of the universe. As has been said, the question rises immediately, What *is* the law of the universe in the case of human life and character? And once again, wholly fresh sets of terms have to be imported in order to give anything like an adequate reply. That human life fulfills itself and its law only by entering into right relations with God, that failure to fulfill the law means wilful refusal on the part of human life to adjust itself to a whole set of influences brought to bear upon it with a view of producing those right relations, that the motive-powers which could correct the failure are of an altogether special kind such as faith and love—these are the things which theology is concerned to say. Unless they be said, the conception of sin is too vague and incomplete to be of any value from the theological point of view. Yet in the saying of these things, the reconciler’s formula has once again been out-distanced; and his proffered definition has been shown to be but the first word of a sentence requiring many other words before a full stop can be set down. In brief, the scientific definitions of theological ideas are not real definitions at all. They do but preserve the *minimum* of theological idea; they find, it might be said, the common factor of theology and science; but they do no more.

Certainly it cannot be claimed that the idea given in the scientific definition and the idea given in the theological statement are merely varying methods of saying the same thing, so that the two may be practically interchanged without any addition or loss of significance being perceived, whichever way the interchange be worked; for, as we have seen, science provides a mere outline into which theology—unless it is prepared to surrender its claim to all it has held essential up till now—must paint many details before it can sign the picture as approved. Yet, if the scientific statements were adequate, if they involved a real “reconciliation” of theology and science, such an interchange would assuredly be a possible thing. How far from being interchangeable the two formulæ—the theological and the scientific—really are, becomes clear immediately if we seek to work the process of thought *upwards* from science to theology instead of *downwards*, as the “reconciliations” work it, from theology to science. The reconciler, having the theological formularies present to his mind, is able to construct in scientific terms a statement which shall avoid any contradiction of them—which shall indeed embody a part of their content—and then to say triumphantly that his revised statement was implicit in the theological statement from which he set out. But it would be quite impossible, supposing the theological formulæ to be for the moment non-existent, to create them out of the scientific statements by any process of exposition or amplification. It is easy to descend from the conception of sin as a disturbance of the relations between God and man to the conception of sin as “that which retards or frustrates human development,” and all the while to preserve a sense of the continuity of the way; but you cannot ascend from the second conception to the first—there is no road by which you can go. In other words, while the scientific statement may be implicit in the theological, the theological is certainly not, in its fulness,

implicit in the scientific; and any real interchangeableness of the two there consequently cannot be. And theology, at any rate, cannot be content to accept, as a satisfactory substitute for its own utterance, expressions and formularies which—true as they may be up to a point—quite fail to carry the reader's mind, by their own impulse, up to the conceptions which theology holds the most vital of all. To return to the point previously made—it has to be said that the scientific re-statements of theological ideas are so general as to lose practically all religious value. They become valuable only when theology, resuming its abrogated functions, adds to them something under which they cease to be scientific statements, properly so called, at all.

3.

Nor must it be supposed that this vagueness—this avoidance of the points on which theology lays the greatest stress—is a merely accidental thing, and a thing which some revision of the “reconciling” method might banish. It is inherent in any method of “reconciliation” that deserves the name. A really scientific re-statement of religion (assuming for the moment that it is possible) must of course be built up out of strictly scientific material. Yet any method of re-statement which limits itself to scientific material—to conceptions and expressions bearing the *imprimatur* of science—is quite unable to start from, or to arrive at, a definite assertion concerning a world of spiritual realities and spiritual forces with which man has to relate himself and which act definitely upon man. It is evident that if there is to be in the new formula nothing that adds an “extra” idea to the ideas of science, the new formula cannot, in fidelity to the principles on which it is professedly constructed, make any use of terms implying the pressure of an infinite and spiritual personality upon the personality of

man. For, while science may supply facts whereon an inference of the existence of such a Personality can be based, the inference itself is extra-scientific. However far the reach of scientific formulæ may be stretched, this is outside their utmost range. Science may generalize in respect of the laws governing the phenomena with which it deals, and may so arrive at its conception of cosmic law; but as to the ground or origin of that cosmic law—as to anything outside cosmic law—science can, in the nature of things, have nothing to say. The world beyond phenomena is not within the scope of science at all—which is really to say that science cannot, *qua* science, have any doctrine of God. When the re-statement of religion is undertaken from the side of science, therefore, there can be no deliberate affirmation of a God acting “at sundry times and in divers manners” upon man: the re-statement may occasionally be compelled, in order to keep sufficient grip upon anything religious to carry itself through, to look in that direction, but it will only be with a parenthetical and half-furtive glance; and it is certainly not upon any such affirmation, laid down as the foundation, that the whole superstructure will be reared. In fact, the only sense in which science, *qua* science, could legitimately use the term “religion” is in the sense of adjustment to that cosmic law which sets the outmost bound to the scientific vision—and a religion such as that could hardly lead to “theology” in any real interpretation of the word. It is quite true, of course, that the “reconciling” method does not by any means deny that God has acted and is still acting through ministries of direct appeal and influence upon the souls of men. To make any such denial would at once render the whole method nugatory by annihilating one of the parties to the reconciliation proposed. But the method is usually indeterminate upon the point. The special form of words it commonly employs for its enunciations is, in many instances, such as could be em-

ployed by those to whom theology, in the ordinary sense, is an exploded thing. Although the "re-statements" do not deny the action of God upon man, and although those who make them are often known as believers in such action (or at least as wistfully wanting to believe in it) yet the re-statements themselves might be used as confessions of faith by many on whose lips the denial would be found. The method of scientific reconciliation, in short, does not categorically base itself upon a definite belief in a God who has, through processes with which the order of Nature has nothing whatever to do, sought to find His way to the heart of man. And if, as was said just now, this method of reconciliation not only *does* not, but according to its own principle *cannot*, so base itself, the inference must be that in any attempt at such a reconciliation there is actual inconsistency involved. A scientific re-statement of religion is bound, by its very nature, to be vague and general upon the very things which are for theology the chief concern.

4.

In the end, therefore, theology must claim the right of dealing with its own material in its own way. It must use its own speech, heedless as to whether or no an exact scientific equivalent can be found, or rather, conscious that such an equivalent there cannot be. If this procedure cannot be defended—if there be nothing more in the ideas of theology than the ideas of science have already given—if the categories and formulæ of science are sufficient to explain and prescribe the moral and spiritual programmes and self-adjustments of man—then theology is a superfluity, and had better go. It is precisely in the fact that there is, outside of and beyond the world with which science deals, another world constituted out of that which eye cannot see and hand cannot handle, from which magnetic and persuasive and redeem-

ing influences have been proceeding forth upon the human soul since the dawn of history until now—it is precisely in that fact that theology finds its *raison d'être*; and only when that fact is fully recognized can there be any place for theology in a legitimate scheme of thought. Were a real “reconciliation” of science and religion possible, it would only prove that religion as ordinarily understood has no real validity. Indeed, what is needed is not a “reconciliation” of science and theology, but rather a clear drawing of the boundary-lines between the two. Let theology admit that it has in past days spoken with oracular voice on matters whereon it should have been silent—for the fact is so. Let science, abstaining from throwing stones inasmuch as it has mistakes of its own to regret, confess that upon the spiritual ultimates of the universe it is not its function to pronounce a verdict—for again the fact is so. And let each set itself, in all independence, without jealousy, but also without bonds except such bond as will always exist between two seekers after truth in different fields, to its own appointed task. That *method* must always be scientific is of course beyond dispute. (Incidentally it may be said that many thinkers confuse two distinct propositions—the proposition that method, even in non-scientific subjects, must be itself scientific, and the proposition that all subject-matter of legitimate investigation lies within the boundaries of science properly so termed). The same rigorous tests, the same stringent examination, the same careful stepping from fact to inference, the same refusal to accept any article of belief which cannot vindicate its rights—all these things will rule theology as it strains after its findings, just as surely as they rule science in its quest. But identical method, applied to different material, will not yield identical products, any more than will all addition sums, similar in process as they necessarily are, yield totals with every figure alike. It is the difference of *material*

in the two spheres—the scientific and the theological—that precludes an identity of categories, when it comes to be a question of summing up results; and the effort to translate religious truth into scientific language is like an effort, let us say, at describing virtue in mathematical terms. Let the line be drawn clear, and science and theology avoid trespassing upon each other's rightful estate.

With the desire for unity of world-view, which is perhaps one of the underlying impulses beneath the "reconciling" method, all sympathy must of course be felt. But this desire can surely be satisfied in other ways than by striving to produce interchangeable totals at the foot of all the reckonings of thought. It is not by making the findings of theology equivalent to those of science, but by showing how the two sets of findings contribute something to the comprehension of a universal idea in which both are embraced—how they harmonize, not because they say the same thing, but because the word of each one is in its turn needed to utter the *whole* of things—that true unity is reached. Science and theology are truly one when both are set against the background of an eternal plan and purpose whose self-fulfillment began with the making of that universe which science explores, and whose self-fulfillment will be consummated in the consummation of those relations between man and God with which for their exposition and correction theology deals. They are truly one, not because they are merely different dialects of one language, but because it is the function of each to describe some particular section of that long process—be the section past, or now current, or still to come—leading up to the "one, far-off, divine event, to which the whole creation moves."