

REVIEWS

THEOLOGY AS AN EMPIRICAL SCIENCE. By D. C. Macintosh, Ph.D.
Allen and Unwin, Ltd. 1920. 12s. 6d. net.

The title of this book is one which will make it attractive to the many who are sincere practising Christians, but are distrustful of conventional theology and of any kind of metaphysics. They will open it, not to find out what Dr. Macintosh can tell them about God, but what guidance he can give them in their search for a scientific method in theology. It is from the point of view of such readers that this review will be written. We will ask whether it succeeds or fails as an essay in empirical method in theology, not whether it is of value as a philosophy of religion or as a devotional treatment of religious questions. By thus limiting the scope of our criticisms we may be led to condemn what from another point of view might be found valuable. A sufficient justification for this method of proceeding seems to be provided by the bold claim to empiricism made by the title, and by the fact that this question of bringing theology near to experience is one which is felt on many sides to be of the first importance.

Dr. Macintosh puts forward three problems as the crucial ones for a scientific theology. They are the following: "(1) Is there *religious perception*, or something in the religious realm corresponding to perception, viz., cognition of the Divine as revealed within the field of human experience? (2) Is it possible to formulate, on this basis of the data made available in religious experience, *theological laws*, or generalizations as to what the Divine Being does on the fulfilment of certain discoverable conditions? (3) Can *theological theory* be constructed in a scientific manner on the basis of these laws?" (p. 26).

A science must start with a formal definition, though that definition may develop as the science proceeds. Therefore Dr. Macintosh starts with a formal definition of God, as the ultimate Object of religious dependence, or the Source of religious deliverance. On the basis of knowledge of God through religious experience, the empirical theologian posits the existence of God, though he may have as yet very little knowledge as to what God is.

In a later chapter of the book Dr. Macintosh makes it clear that he starts with the subjective certainty of the existence of God which is given by religious experience. This is subsequently verified by the test of a more methodical empirical investigation. It is not quite clear what this means. Empirical investigation can only reach the experiences themselves, it cannot reach to the reality behind these experiences. We would prefer to say that the presupposition of

the existence of God is verified by the power of this postulate to rationalize wide ranges of experience. This is how a scientific presupposition is verified. The atomic theory of Dalton was postulated on the very slight basis of the laws connecting the volume of a gas with its pressure. That theory has been justified by its power of explaining an enormous range of facts completely unknown to its originator.

This is an important point. If we recognize that an empirical justification of our hypotheses can be obtained in this way, we are provided with an empirical method in theology which may be expected to be more fruitful of results than any narrowly inductive procedure.

The author seems to undervalue the difficulty of justifying his theism on the grounds of religious experience. He says: "There is no more reason, from the point of view of religious experience, to adopt an agnostic or subjectivist interpretation of the Object of religious experience than there is, from the point of view of sense-experience, to adopt an agnostic or subjectivist interpretation of the objects of sense-perception" (p. 32). But this does not do justice to the agnostic. There are obvious differences between the cases of religious experience and sense-perception. The latter is universal and independent of one's belief in the existence of its objects; the former is individual, and is in some measure dependent upon belief. Moreover, theology needs to postulate the existence of its object, in a way that is not necessary for physical science. A man may, on philosophical grounds, believe in the unreality of matter, and yet be a successful physicist or mechanic; he cannot worship a God in whose existence he does not believe.

We believe that the existence of God can be made a valid inference from religious experience, but the problem is not so simple as the passage quoted above would lead us to suppose. It would seem to be particularly desirable that a book claiming to be scientific should not be content with this treatment of a point of such importance.

For the formulation of its laws, science depends on the principle of the uniformity of nature; so the author would find for empirical theology a corresponding principle, which he calls the dependableness of God. "God can be depended upon to act consistently so that man may learn through observation and experiment what God does under different conditions" (p. 35).

It is important to notice exactly what this principle involves. The scientific principle of the uniformity of nature is nothing more than the statement that the phenomena of nature can be summed up in general laws. The principle of the dependableness of God as Dr. Macintosh states it is nothing more than the statement that the

facts of theology can be summed up in similar general laws. It is an affirmative answer to the second of the three problems proposed in the passage previously quoted. The only possible reason for now giving this answer is that Dr. Macintosh has been successful in summing up theology in general laws. This is attempted later in the book but not, we think, successfully.

The remainder of the discussion of the scientific method in theology is not of much importance. It is principally Mill's treatment of induction—a treatment not altogether adequate as an account of the method of physical science. Science has shown herself curiously inclined to develop by her own methods without bothering overmuch about the rules for her guidance laid down by theoretical logicians. The applicability of such methods when applied to theology must be judged by examining Dr. Macintosh's attempt to apply them. It is at least possible that, like physics, Theology develops most happily when left to the methods natural to her, and not when forced into the groove which is natural, let us say, to physical science.

Before looking at the "laws of empirical theology" it will be interesting to examine Dr. Macintosh's treatment of one particular theological problem. We may take as example the well-worn question of miracles with special reference to the miraculous birth of Our Lord.

In consideration of the unsatisfactory nature of the evidence for this event—its omission from the Pauline and Johannine literature, from Mark and the "Q" material of Matthew and Luke, etc.—and of the fact that there is no scientific evidence of parthenogenesis except among lowly organized animals, he concludes that we are warranted in "assuming the improbability of the Virgin Birth of Jesus, or of any other religious leader" (p. 54). Other miracles in the New Testament can also be accounted for in a fairly plausible way without departing from known laws. Those which cannot are rejected as legendary accretions.

All of this has been said before many times. It may be true that Jesus was born as other men are, and that the miracles recorded in the New Testament are mistaken reports of natural events. But these things do not follow from the author's position; they are not the results of treating theology as an empirical science. They are the product of two presuppositions which the author shares with most liberal theologians but which he does not state as presuppositions of his theology. These appear to be: (1) that miracles have never happened; (2) that the personality of Jesus differed only in degree from that of any other religious leader. While admitting that liberal theologians may be right on these points, we must also insist that they are not necessities of thought, they are not admitted by the vast

majority of Christians (including many of intellectual eminence); and therefore that to smuggle them in as if they were necessary presuppositions of any scientific theology is a proceeding against which we must protest.

Any discussion of these questions cannot be adequate without taking into consideration the fact that if the principle of the dependableness of God leads us to believe that under the same circumstances He will act in the same way, it is also highly probable that under different circumstances He will behave in different ways. If, as most Christians believe, the birth of Jesus was a unique event, the incarnation of God, then we can say nothing of the conditions under which it might be expected to take place. On the same assumption (of the divinity of Jesus) we would be quite powerless from data supplied by ordinary human life to make any inductions which we could be certain would apply to the life of God Incarnate. These considerations do not prove the truth of any particular miracle, or, indeed, of any miracle, but they do show the weakness of any *a priori* rejection of miracle or of the Virgin Birth on pseudo-scientific grounds.

The author's formulation of the "laws of empirical theology" will, naturally, be felt to be the most important part of the book. It is here that the reader will expect to find a theology with real content and universal validity. He will be disappointed. He will find no more than a statement of Dr. Macintosh's own religious opinions, showing no signs of that dependence on empirical data which is the essential characteristic of a law of empirical science.

These laws are as follows:

The laws of elemental volitional experiences—"On condition of the right religious adjustment with reference to desired truly moral states of the will (such as repentance, moral aspiration, and the moral elements in self-control, courage, victory over temptation, faithful service and patient endurance), God the Holy Spirit produces the specific moral results desired" (p. 148).

The theological law of regeneration—"On condition of the right religious adjustment with a view to being turned permanently from sin and to God and the Christian way of life, God the Holy Spirit works primarily in the will, and ultimately in the nature more generally, the definite and manifest beginning of a new and specifically Christian spiritual life" (p. 149).

The law of perseverance—"On condition of the persistence of the right religious adjustment, God the Holy Spirit maintains in the individual the new and essentially Christian life" (p. 149).

The law of the health of the Christian life—"On condition of a sufficiently whole-hearted cultivation of the right religious adjustment, God the Holy Spirit so brings our action and experience under

the Divine control that we are enabled to do what we ought to do, and to have, subject to the conditions of the environment and of our constitution and past history, the normal accompaniment of emotional and intellectual experience" (p. 149).

The law of the development of essentially Christian character—"On condition of continuance of the right religious adjustment, especially when it is so constant and whole-hearted as to lead to the permanent health and healthful activity of the Christian life, and when the individual has adequate information for right conduct, God the Holy Spirit produces in him the Christ-like or Christian character, with its habitual readiness and equipment for right action" (p. 150).

These are called the primary theological laws, because they are concerned with the volitional religious experiences which are the most immediate results of the right religious adjustment. There are also secondary theological laws which are so called because they are partly dependent on the above experiences.

They are the following:

The theological law of the feeling of repentance—"On condition of (1) volitional repentance and (2) a sufficiently steady and continued contemplation of the contrast between one's own past life and action on the one hand, and the ideal principle of life, such as receives particular expression in the historic Jesus, on the other, God the Holy Spirit produces (as the accompaniment of intensified volitional repentance) the feeling of sorrow for sin" (p. 150).

The theological law of the experience of Christian peace—"On condition of (1) the reconciliation or atonement with God which is involved in a truly Christian faith and (2) a steady contemplation of the fact that one is at peace with God, there is produced within the individual by God the Holy Spirit, within such limits as may be set by constitutional and other conditions, a feeling of peace" (p. 151).

The theological law of Christian joy—"On condition of (1) success in the Christian life and in Christian work for others through the right religious adjustment, and (2) a contemplation of this success, especially in the lives of others, God the Holy Spirit produces the experience of Christian joy" (p. 151).

The theological law of Christian love—"On condition of right thought and action toward God and man, God the Holy Spirit produces in us ('sheds abroad in our hearts') the feeling of unselfish love toward God and man" (p. 152).

There are also other secondary theological laws which we will not give in detail. These are the *intellectual* laws of the experiences of "Divine guidance" and of "assurance"; and the *physiological* laws, such as that of mental healing.

There remain still the *social* laws. These are of two kinds: *ecclesiastical* and *general*.

The former resemble the laws already given, only differing in the substitution of the church for the individual—" meaning by ' church ' the community unified on the basis of vital religious experience shared in common " (p. 155).

The laws of the Divine guidance of the Church and of the assurance of being a true Church are sufficiently important to be worth quoting in full. The former is: " On condition of such a cultivation of the right religious adjustment in the church-meeting that the individual members are brought by the Holy Spirit into a Christian state of willingness to do what is eternally right and for the greatest good of mankind, they will in this way have been brought by the Divine Spirit, other conditions being equal, into the best possible frame of mind for coming to a correct decision as to what they ought to do " (p. 155). The law of ecclesiastical assurance is that " when a Church, through persisting as a Church in the right religious adjustment, is brought by the Holy Spirit into the normal Christian condition of health and efficiency, it will tend to be sufficiently assured that it is essentially Christian in character, or, in other words, that it is one of the true churches of God, or of Jesus Christ " (p. 156).

The general laws are those formulating the data of the " leavening influence " of the " kingdom of God " in the world. These Dr. Macintosh does not attempt to formulate, but he is hopeful that something in that direction may be possible.

It would be difficult, I think, for the most ardent admirer of the scientific method to feel that this list of laws carries us very far. They seem to be merely psychological laws with the addition of two elements which are not supplied empirically: the fact that the sole determining condition of the operation is an adjustment of the person concerned, and that the operator is God the Holy Spirit. The first of these elements would seem to be in glaring contradiction to much empirical evidence. Deep and lasting religious experience is often accompanied by no obvious favourable adjustment of the subject (as, for example, in conversions); and, on empirical grounds, there would seem to be no reason to refuse to admit the rite as a determining condition.

The derivation of the laws of the religious community from the laws of the individual, with no other change than the substitution of the word " church " for " individual," would, moreover, seem to be open to very grave objection. Even if it were valid this substitution could not be admitted without proof, for it begs one of the most important practical questions for empirical theology—the question of the church. Its validity, however, would seem to be more than questionable, for few things are more clear from history than that

the religious community has occupied, with respect to revelation, a totally different position from the individual. It is, of course, arguable that all Churches have tended to have a less valuable experience than the individual, but it seems more consistent with facts to suppose that the experience of the body is nearer the truth than that of individuals. In any case it seems certain that the laws in the two cases are not the same.

The third part of the book is called "theological theory." Here Dr. Macintosh discusses such questions as: "The Relation of God to the Universe," "The Metaphysical Attributes of God," and "The Problem of Evil." Like the rest of the book, these chapters are as thoughtful and sincere as must be any work written by a man of Dr. Macintosh's philosophical ability. As an attempt at an empirical theology, however, they seem to be extremely unsatisfactory. While always referring to his conception of scientific method in theology, the author does not depend on its data or laws to any greater extent than any other writer on the philosophy of religion. The real value of much of this discussion is due to Dr. Macintosh's piety and insight, not to his loyalty to the empirical method.

The impression left by this book is of the sterility of the empirical method as Dr. Macintosh understands it. Is this sterility a necessary result of the application of empiricism to theology? There seems to be no reason for supposing that it is. An entirely different method of approaching the problem is possible, that adopted, for instance, by Mr. Will. Spens in his *Belief and Practice*. Instead of trying to build up a new theology from first principles, we may begin by asking whether there is not a theology which has from the first (like the body of scientific knowledge) been built up in closest contact with experience. Such a theology is to be found in traditional Christianity. We cannot accept it in full, any more than we can accept the body of scientific knowledge possessed by the scientists of even a hundred years ago. It must be corrected by our own wider experience. We find part of it expressed in terms of inadequate conceptions supplied by an antiquated metaphysic. Nevertheless, it provides us with a starting-point, rich with the fruits of a wider experience than can be known to any system that we originate for ourselves, a starting-point from which we may reasonably hope to construct an empirical theology that is truly scientific.

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ERASMUS AND LUTHER: THEIR ATTITUDE TO TOLERATION. By the Rev. R. H. Murray, Litt.D. London: S.P.C.K. 1920. 25s. net.

One of the outstanding weaknesses of the Church at present is her lack of good ecclesiastical historians; and for that reason, no