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OBERLIN PERFECTIONISM

I. THE MEN AND THE BEGINNINGS.

Oberlin College¹ had its origin in what seemed a wild dream that formed itself in 1832 in the mind of John J. Shipherd, home-missionary pastor of the little Presbyterian church in the village of Elyria, Ohio. As the scheme floated before his imagination, it was perhaps not very dissimilar to one of those communistic enterprises which were springing up throughout the country in the wake of the excitement aroused by Robert Owen. To that extent Shipherd may be accounted a brother spirit to John H. Noyes. But he had not the courage of conviction, to call it by no harsher name, which drove Noyes on in his reckless course. When he came to draw up the Oberlin "Covenant," he faltered. He provided only that "we will hold and manage our estates personally, but pledge as perfect a community of interest as though we held a community of property." By so narrow a margin Oberlin appears to have escaped becoming a decent Oneida Community: or rather, we should say, by so narrow a margin Oberlin appears to have escaped the early end which has befallen all communistic enterprises which wish to be decent; for communism and decency cannot exist together.²

Apart from this one point, the persistency of Shipherd's

¹ Compare: J. H. Fairchild, *Oberlin, Its Origin, Progress and Results*, 1871, and *Oberlin, the Colony and the College*, 1883; W. G. Ballantyne, *Oberlin Jubilee, 1833-1883*, 1884; D. L. Leonard, *The Story of Oberlin*, 1898.

² Cf. D. L. Leonard, *The Story of Oberlin*, 1898, pp. 87 ff. for some account of Shipherd's communistic leaning.

REVIEWS OF RECENT LITERATURE

APOLOGETICAL THEOLOGY

Van den Eeuwigen Vrede tusschen Wetenschap en Religie. Rede uitgesproken den 26en Maart 1920 ter herdenking van den 284en geboortedag der Utrechtsche Universiteit. Door den Rector Magnificus Dr. H. VISSCHER. Utrecht: Drukkerij Universitas. 1920. 8vo., pp. 23.

Professor Visscher's Rectorale Rede. Door Dr. H. W. VAN DER VAART SMIT. Overdruk van het "Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift," 1920. Baarn: Drukkerij Oranje Nassau, R. K. v. d. Berg, 1920, 8vo., pp. 9.

It is a somewhat exigent position in which a theologian finds himself, when, as Rector Magnificus of a great University, he faces "the four faculties" for the purpose of delivering to them his Rectoral Address. There are many points of view represented among his hearers; and some of them are quite intolerant of anything which he, as a theologian, may have to bring before them. In his Rectoral Address Professor Visscher has chosen the rôle of peace-maker. Looking out upon a hard-bested world, he bespeaks the coöperation of all in the pressing task of saving Western civilization from the dissolution with which he appears to think it threatened.

Professor Visscher seems fairly to groan within himself as he surveys the social unrest of the day. The times are out of joint. The whole world is suffering from a one-sidedness of development which has destroyed the spiritual equilibrium,—and is not harmonious growth the condition of social health? True, progress has hitherto been made, not on a straight line of advance, but as a ship tacks back and forth in its course. But the leg of *Diesseitigheid* on which the social ship in our Western world is now sailing seems to Professor Visscher an inordinately long one; and he trembles lest it should prove that the ship has lost its bearings and may never get back on the balancing tack of *Jenseitigheid*. Indeed, he does not wish it to do just this. The leg of *Jenseitigheid* is itself only a tack. He wishes the ship to cease all tacking and sail straight onward, in the teeth of whatever wind, directly to its goal.

Why should not science and religion, for example, live in harmony, each contributing its part to the spiritual health of mankind? Each has its own sphere, and each has only to keep its own place and the harmony is complete. And surely their harmonious co-working is a clamant duty of the times. "For the salvation of Western humanity there rests on science and religion the most pressing call to work in

harmony for the regeneration of civilization. Science has the task of subjecting nature to the sceptre of reason, in order thus to make it ancillary to the full development of human life. But because of its very nature, it is unable of itself to bring about this ripe result. The happiness of the peoples is not the product of it alone. Quite the contrary. It is social health alone that secures the happiness of the people. And it is religion, which sheds the light of eternity on human life, that is the wellspring of moral strength. Science and religion are the two spiritual powers which in harmonious co-operation can save the peoples of civilization. Or is it possible to save them? If the social movement continues to refuse to take the factor of religion up into itself, the destruction of our civilization is certain, and science, too, will go down in the common ruin."

It is under the impression of so great a need, and with so high a purpose in view, that Professor Visscher undertakes the discussion of the relations of science and religion. He is at bottom pleading for the right of religion to a part in the social development of the day. This plea, however, takes the form of an attempt to show that science, properly conceived and properly presented, cannot possibly invade the field of religion, nor religion the field of science. Thus the discussion becomes formally a discussion of the relations of science and religion; and much is very richly and much is very wisely said of the relations of these two spiritual forces to one another as they have actually wrought in the life of mankind. The discussion suffers somewhat, however, from a vacillation in the use of the terms, which it would be no doubt difficult to avoid in any case with terms so loose and general—too loose and general to lend themselves to exact discriminations. It is so managed moreover that it seems at times on the point of becoming a discussion of the relations between knowledge and faith, if not between intellect and feeling. It is too obvious to require argument, however, that we cannot out of hand identify, on the one hand, intellect, knowledge and science, and, on the other, emotion, faith and religion. Both science and religion are products of the human spirit and the human spirit does not function thus in sections. It is, however, the attempt to bring into comparison precisely these two things, "science and religion," that works the most mischief. We might bring, say, research and religion into relation, or "science" in some narrowed sense, and theology; but "science" in the narrowed sense in which Professor Visscher understands that term and "religion" in the purely subjective sense which Professor Visscher strangely puts upon "religion," move in such different spheres that they are unrelatable—there is no *tertium comparationis* between things so disparate. You might as well talk of instituting relations between the planet Neptune and the League of Nations.

We have noted that Professor Visscher narrows the conception of "science" for the purpose of his discussion. By it he means merely physical science. But physical science is far from being all the science

there is. There is, for example, as we have suggested, theology. Theology is as truly a science as physical science; it is as truly a product of the intellect; it deals as truly with facts; it is as truly a knowledge. It is theology, the science, not religion, the life, which should be set in comparison with physical science. The thrusting of "religion," so understood, into its place has the effect of depriving it of—or at least of obscuring—its fact-content. Of "religion" it may be possible to say—what could not be said of theology—that it is only a manner—perhaps only an emotional manner—of looking at facts with which as facts "science" alone has to do, so that "science" and "religion" cannot possibly come into conflict. It is "science" alone which determines facts while it is the sole function of "religion" to suffuse these facts, given to it by "science," with a glow of transcendental emotion. It is a melancholy page which Professor Visscher writes under the influence of this point of view, when he attempts to illustrate it by examples. Had he drawn his examples from natural religion his mistake might have been less glaring. But he draws his examples from revealed religion. The effect is that he seems to require Christianity to surrender to natural science—for it is of "natural science" alone that he speaks—all question of facts, while it confines itself to a "valuation of them in relation with God." This appears to abolish all supernaturalism from the fact-basis and fact-content of Christianity. For the "science" to which is assigned the determination of the facts which will be allowed actually to have occurred, is defined not only as a science which cannot know anything of God—for whom it has no organ—but a science which can take cognizance of nothing which does not proceed mechanically.

The actual examples considered are drawn from the creation of the world, miracles, answers to prayer, the resurrection of Christ. Of the creation of the world we are simply told that science which knows nothing of origins and confines itself to the phenomena lying before it, has nothing to do with it. We gather, however, that neither has Revelation. It is a mistake to read the creation narrative as a statement of fact: it merely gives expression to the purely religious valuation (*waardering*) of the cosmos. For the rest, we prefer to transcribe Professor Visscher's own words. "Lessing," he says, "declared that 'miracle is faith's most darling child.' And are not science and miracle in conflict? In point of fact science recognizes no miracle. But that does not yet bring it into conflict with religion. Because the chemist subjects bread to exact analysis,—does that prevent the pious man from receiving his food from God's hand? Necessity teaches man to pray and to the petitioner the deliverance comes as an answer to his prayer. Does this forbid a scientific explanation of the occurrence? But let us come to the most critical matter of all. The Crucified One is proclaimed as risen from the grave. Is there any place for resurrection in exact science? Whenever it shall be brought before it as a phenomenon. Not before. And then it will have to investigate it as a physiological problem. But it is precisely here that the difference

comes clearly to view. In the world-order of religion, life and death are not conceived as physiological processes, but are religious-ethical values (*waarden*). The resurrection is for religion an element in the great regenerative process which, by God's creative act, is producing out of this world-order a new heaven and a new earth."

Despite the reassuring tone of its closing words, the reader may be pardoned if he receives from this paragraph a very unpleasant impression. There is an appearance at least that the actual occurrence of strictly miraculous events in the foundation of Christianity is denied. Miracles and providential answers to prayer seem to be brought into the same category. The one, as the other, appear to be conceived at best as the product of the concursive action of God; at worst, as only a subjective way of looking at facts wholly "natural" alike in their nature and in the mode of their production. And what shall we say of the manner in which the resurrection of Christ is dealt with? "Science," we are told, can have nothing to do with it until it is presented to it as a "phenomenon." Is it not precisely as a phenomenon that it lies in the sight of all men—an occurrence in space and time verified by the senses? And has not even the "physiological problem" been adequately determined? Has it not been established on unexceptionable observation that the resurrection body, like that which was laid in the grave, was a body of flesh and bones? When now it is immediately added that life and death are not conceived in the religious world-order as physiological processes, but as religious-ethical values, can we escape a distressed feeling that religion—precisely the Christian religion—is in danger of being politely bowed out of the world of fact? Precisely what characterizes Christianity, however, among the religions, is that it is a "historical religion," that is, a religion whose facts are its doctrines; which does not consist in a "tone of feeling," a way of looking at things—as for example the perception of a Father's hand in all the chances and changes of life,—but has to tell of a series of great redemptive acts in which God the Lord has actually intervened in the complex of nature and the stream of history in a definitely supernatural manner. If these facts are denied as actual occurrences in time and space, Christianity is denied; if they are neglected, Christianity is neglected. Christianity is dismissed from the world of reality, and evaporated into a sentiment,—“an iridescent dream.”

We have no wish to be read as asserting that Professor Viisscher intends to deny, or is ready to neglect, the series of great redemptive acts of definitely supernatural character, which are constitutive of Christianity. We are only pointing out that an impression to that effect is inevitably created by the sharp contrast in which he places science as the only organ of objective reality and religion as moving in a purely subjective sphere. Whatever may be said of religion as a general world-phenomenon, native to the spirit of man, that religion which is Christianity is inseparably bound up with its "facts," and

stands or falls with their objective reality. Any science which leaves no place for these facts, as such, is not neutral but antagonistic to Christianity; and between that science and this religion there must be not eternal peace but eternal war. Professor Visscher apparently supposes that he escapes this result by so defining science as to exclude facts of supernatural origin from its ken. Facts of supernatural origin, however, are not different in nature from other facts. There is no reason to suppose that the chemical composition of the wine made at Cana or the physical properties of the loaves and fishes with which our Lord fed the multitudes—or of his resurrection body, for that matter—differed from those of “natural” wine and bread and bodies. If facts like these have actually occurred in time and space, they necessarily come under the scrutiny of that science whose function is to give an account of phenomena. Professor Visscher seems, however, to have made a mode of escape for himself,—by confining the function of science to pure description. He tells us, it is true, that the knowledge for which this science seeks is a knowledge of relations, and he even declares with some formality that “its object can be nothing else than the world, as it presents itself as a system of relations to the knowing subject.” When we say relations, however, we have already said metaphysics; and if among the relations determined there is included not merely that of antecedence and consequence, but of cause, we are already embarked on an inquiry which cannot stop short of origins. Professor Visscher tells us, however, not only that everything which exists behind phenomena lies beyond the sphere of his science, but that this science must repel the conception of a supernatural, mystical, non-mechanical factor and confine itself to the world in which “everything proceeds mechanically.” If he really means us to understand the science with which he deals after this fashion,—as strictly limited to the world of mechanical causation, of which it undertakes nothing more than a descriptive account,—it may not be impossible to contend that its failure to take cognizance of the supernatural facts constitutive of Christianity in no way dismisses them from objective reality. It may be the result merely of the limitations of a purely descriptive science which does not take cognizance, even descriptively, of the whole field of objective reality, but only of that portion of this field which is governed by mechanical necessity. In this case it might be true enough that “all the results of this exact science are consistent with religion,” because the world of religion “is a different and a wider world than the system of relations which exact science,” so conceived, “builds up with immense labor.” An eternal peace may well be declared between the two, bought not at the cost of religion—the fact-content of Christianity—but at the cost of science.

Whether this limited conception of science, as seeking only a descriptive account of mechanical reality, can be maintained is another

question. Certainly, in any case, the science with which Professor Visscher proclaims religion to be eternally at peace, has never, whether in the limitations which he puts upon it, or in the perfection which he ascribes to its deliverances, existed on sea or land. He is not unaware of course of the subjective side of science; but he appears to neglect it in the prosecution of his discussion, and to identify the science of which he speaks with the objective system of realities itself, which he apparently imagines to be perfectly reflected in the human intellect. Thus he seems to think of science as the pure product of the pure intellect of a pure humanity working purely. We shall get no such science as that until the world of reality is reflected in the consciousness of the perfected humanity of the completed palingenesis. The science and religion of perfected humanity will of course be in harmony. What we have in the meantime, however, is only the distorted reflection of reality in warped intellects, dimmed by imperfections and clouded by prepossessions. Could we listen directly to the teaching of that "beautiful Maiden bearing the torch of enlightenment," to whom Professor Visscher introduces us, we should of course yield to it instant and complete obedience. But this "calm-eyed Science" is not to be encountered in the Market-place, and is not to be met with in the Rialto. She speaks to us only in the voices of her servants, and each of them has his own—well, say personal equation. After all is said, the voices of the scientists are not the voice of Science. And no inability which religion—the Christian religion—may show to live in peace with the one can argue disharmony with the other. No more here than elsewhere can millennial conditions be anticipated. There is no conflict between Science and Religion: they are not only, as Professor Visscher declares, two expressions of our spiritual life, but two revelations of God. But conflict between science and religion will continue so long as we toil and moil in the present distress; they are only expressions of our spiritual life, and in these days of our tribulation our spiritual life is faulty in all its expressions. It is only when that which is perfect is come, that here too imperfection shall put on perfection.

There is no help for it, then: science and religion must just strive together until both the one and the other lie perfect in the minds of the perfected. Principally, there is no conflict between them: actually, the conflict is without cessation. There is no menace in this struggle. What would be ominous would be if the struggle should cease, especially if it should cease through either one or the other losing heart or selling its soul for a patched-up peace. We take it that the gist of Professor Visscher's address is to call on religion to recognize science's right to exist, to call on science to recognize religion's right to exist. If we may so read it, we shall all heartily echo the call. Of course neither will wait for the permission of the other to exist. Whether we accord them permission or not, both exist side by side, not only in the social organism, but in every man's own soul. The problem is

their adjustment to one another. In the soul of the individual and in the community of mankind alike, the adjustment can be attained only through conflict. As they wrestle together each is more and more purified and perfected; each grows ever stronger. Now the one may seem to get the advantage; now the other. But through the struggle both push steadily onward. The advance is a zig-zag progress, but it is ever advance. At the end lies the goal; the goal, not of one but of both; then the struggle ceases because both emerge from it perfect. Science too is a builder in the Kingdom of God, and along with religion advances its coming. No less truly than religion itself, it is a Son of God, and works as He has taught it how.

It is not surprising that the ambiguities of Professor Visscher's treatment of his theme have caused distress to those who have been accustomed to look to him for guidance and support. Acute expression is given to this distress in the remarks on the address by Dr. van der Vaart Smit. As he reads it, it dismisses from Christianity the whole element of direct supernaturalism. We cannot deny that there is far too much color of justification for such an interpretation of it. It is true, moreover, that Professor Visscher seems to impose on himself with the phrase "exact science," that he conceives too narrowly of science as purely "materialistic-mechanistic," that he has forgotten theology in his absorption with "religion." Still we hope that the intended meaning of the address is not that which Dr. Smit finds in it. Professor Karl Heim contributed to the *Studies on Systematic Theology* presented a year or two ago to Theodor von Haering, on his seventieth birthday, a very interesting sketch of the history of the doctrine of "The Double Truth." In it he tells the story of a young instructor in the University of Paris, in 1247, John Brescain by name, who, holding a professorship alike in the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Theology, thought it right to teach Averroism in the one, with its denial of individual immortality and the resurrection, and Christianity in the other, with its affirmation of both. His case proved not to be singular: a whole party developed itself at the University of Paris, which declared that such things were true *secundum fidem catholicam* but not *secundum philosophiam*,—as if, says the Episcopal Rescript, *sunt duae contrariae veritates*. We are not insinuating that Professor Visscher holds to the doctrine of "the double truth," or lives under its shadow; but we think that the state of mind in the University of Paris in the thirteenth century may afford us a not unsuggestive parallel to such a complete disassociation of science and religion as Professor Visscher seems to wish to carry through.

Princeton.

BENJAMIN B. WARFIELD.

Do the Dead Still Live? or The Testimony of Science Respecting a Future Life. New Foundations for Man's Great Hope. With Introduction by Bishop Samuel Fallows. By DAVID HEAGLE, PH.D., D.D., Author of "The Tabernacle in the Wilderness," "That