

**ON SOME OF THE  
CHARACTERISTICS OF BELIEF:  
SCIENTIFIC AND RELIGIOUS.  
BEING THE HULSEAN LECTURES  
FOR 1869**

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On Some of the Characteristics of Belief: Scientific and Religious. Being the Hulsean Lectures for 1869 by J. Venn

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## INTRODUCTION.

THE following discourses are intended to illustrate, explain, and work out into some of their consequences, certain characteristics by which the attainment of religious belief is prominently distinguished from the attainment of belief upon most other subjects. These characteristics consist in the multiplicity of the sources from which the evidence for religious belief is derived, and the fact that our emotions contribute their share towards producing conviction.

These are facts which, it need hardly be remarked, have been perpetually noticed before, but I have never met with any attempt to show their full significance, or to work out the inferences which follow from the admission of their existence.

As there are several questions which will very likely be suggested, and which the necessary brevity of spoken discourses prevented me from discussing at the time, they may conveniently be anticipated here.

I have avoided, as far as was possible, commit-



ting myself to the doctrines of any particular philosophical school. The method of treatment here adopted is logical and not metaphysical, and on the field of logic, as a great authority has told us, people of the most opposite schools may meet and shake hands. Of course, however, there must be some extreme views with which one cannot but be in hopeless antagonism. For example, on the theological side, those who range towards the Mystic pole, and hold that we must have an immediate inspiration or revelation of religious truth, will naturally resent any attempt to connect our belief so closely as is here done with evidence. Again, on the philosophical side, those who assert that anything in the nature of a miracle is intrinsically impossible, or that from the nature of the human faculties we cannot conceive, or therefore to any effective purpose believe in, a God, will certainly reject the attempt to support a doctrine by many converging threads, when in their opinion not one of these threads is really attached to any such object as that which they are intended to support. But except in the comparatively rare cases in which any one's first principles thus put an insuperable bar even to the discussion of such questions as those which follow, it will be admitted that religious conviction is at any rate in great part a matter of evidence: if therefore the effective force of this evidence is found to be vari-

able, it seems a point of some importance to make out the explanation of such a fact.

It has just been remarked that belief is treated in the following pages as being founded solely upon evidence, with the implication that in the thoughtful and sound-minded it is rightfully so founded. This will probably prompt the enquiry, What then do you make of *faith*? surely it is hardly in accordance with the usage or the teaching of Scripture to make faith little more than an intellectual state, as it must be if it is founded solely upon evidence? The controversy whether faith belongs to the head or the heart is far too ancient and extensive to be lightly revived; I wish therefore to do no more than express my own view, and this simply for the sake of preventing misapprehension. Faith then, as I understand it, is belief and something more; the something more being a moral element, namely, confidence or love towards God and our Saviour. In so far as it consists of belief (and it is with this element only, let it be remembered, that we are here concerned) I cannot perceive that it differs in any material way from belief on any other topic whatever. Does the difference lie in the state of mind itself, or in the way in which belief is produced? Surely in itself the state of mind is one and the same however it may have been brought about. Without attempting to

offer a full definition, we may give a valid description by saying that belief is that state of mind in which we are prepared to act upon the truth of any proposition in question. If this account be admitted, the description will apply as well to belief in any scientific statement as to that in the articles of a Creed. Again, does the difference lie in the grounds of the belief? Not if we lay down the sufficiently general statement that the belief is caused, or should be caused, by evidence. I am quite aware that Bishop Pearson and others try to establish a difference in the nature of the evidence, saying that Christian belief is distinguished from other kinds of belief by the fact that it rests upon the testimony of God. But what is gained by such a distinction, beyond the occasional opportunity of charging our opponent with disbelieving what God has asserted? Surely no one denies that the testimony of our Creator is to be accepted without hesitation; the only matter for discussion is whether a doctrine does rest on that testimony or not. This would equally apply to those who deny the paramount authority of Scripture as to any others; with them the words of the Bible are not the immediate declaration of God, and they therefore do not undertake to deny what He has asserted.

I apprehend, therefore, that the belief element of faith does not essentially differ from any other