

**THE "DAMNATORY CLAUSES" OF
THE ATHANASIAN CREED
RATIONALLY EXPLAINED IN A
LETTER TO THE RIGHT HON. W.E.
GLADSTONE, M.P.**

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The "Damnatory Clauses" of the Athanasian Creed rationally explained in a letter to the Right Hon. W.E. Gladstone, M.P. by Malcolm Maccoll

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MALCOLM MACCOLL

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THE
"DAMNATORY CLAUSES"
OF THE
ATHANASIAN CREED

RATIONALLY EXPLAINED

IN A LETTER
TO
THE RIGHT HON. W. E. GLADSTONE, M.P.

BY THE
REV. MALCOLM MACCOLL, M.A.
RECTOR OF ST. GEORGE, BOTOLPH LANE, WITH ST. BOTOLPH BY BILLINGSGATE

RIVINGTONS
London, Oxford, and Cambridge
1872

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JAN 12 1985

DEAR MR. GLADSTONE,

The real points at issue in the controversy on the Athanasian Creed have been so overlaid with irrelevant matter that it is not easy for the public at large to understand the exact position of the question. No doubt the debate in the Lower House of Convocation is well calculated to clear away a cloud of misapprehensions and errors on the subject. But the meagre reports of the debate that have been published in the secular press are worse than useless for that purpose, and the one or two Church papers which have given full reports are read by a comparatively select portion of the community. Something is still needed to place the question in its true bearings before the public mind, and the lull that is likely to follow the recent somewhat stormy discussion seems to offer a favourable opportunity to anyone who will venture to make the attempt. A great deal has been done already in this way by Mr. Brewer; but his two able Essays are confined chiefly, though not entirely, to the historical aspect of the question, and are addressed rather to the learned than to the popular mind. There is still room for a popular exposition of the true import of the Creed—popular at least so far as this, that nothing more

than a very moderate education is required to follow the argument.

I trust that some one more competent than myself will apply his mind to the subject. In the meantime I offer the following pages as a humble contribution to so desirable an undertaking, and I have asked your kind permission to address them to you for two reasons: first, because the retention of the Athanasian Creed in the public service of the Church is alleged to be especially a layman's grievance; and secondly, because the question has an important political side to it in which statesmen can hardly fail to be interested. For it is now clear beyond all possibility of doubt, that a successful attempt either to mutilate the Creed or to degrade it from the position which it now occupies in the Prayer Book would have the effect of causing such a rent in the Church of England as would make the triumph of the Liberation Society a question of time, and of a very short time too. About thirty years ago Dr. Newman, in a letter to the late lamented Mr. Archer Butler, expressed his conviction that "our Church *could do anything*,* humanly speaking, if it knew its own strength, and if its members were at peace with each other." These words are true to-day. It is not the schemes of the Liberation Society which we have to fear, but the intestine strife which

* The italics are not mine.

reigns within our own borders; and no small part of this strife arises, I believe, from our mutual misunderstanding of each other. "Half the controversies in the world," says the same writer,* "are verbal ones, and could they be brought to a plain issue they would be brought to a prompt termination. Parties engaged in them would then perceive either that in substance they agreed together, or that their difference was one of first principles. This is the great object to be aimed at in the present age, though confessedly a very arduous one. We need not dispute, we need not prove, —we need but to define. At all events let us, if we can, do this first of all, and then see who are left for us to dispute with, what is left for us to prove. Controversy, at least in this age, does not lie between the hosts of heaven, Michael and his angels on the one side, and the powers of evil on the other; but it is a sort of night battle, where each fights for himself, and friend and foe stand together. When men understand what each other means, they see, for the most part, that controversy is either superfluous or hopeless."

It is impossible to read the Athanasian Creed debate in Convocation without recognizing the truth so felicitously expressed by Dr. Newman in this passage. It is, indeed, "a sort of night battle" where friends and foes are often mingled, and in which the combatants are

* 'University Sermons,' p. 192.

evidently either agreed in substance, or reason from premisses which are in their nature irreconcilable. The first thing that must be done, therefore, is to rid the question of all issues which are plainly irrelevant.

Conspicuous amongst these is the authorship of the Athanasian Creed, which has been pushed to the front in recent discussions on the subject, but which has really nothing to do with the question. "The single practical question," as the Bishop of St. David's truly observed,* "is this: whether we are or are not to continue the use of the Athanasian Creed in the public services of the Church; and I hold that with regard to this it is almost absurdly irrelevant to dwell on the authorship of the Creed. For my own part, I would say that if I were as firmly convinced that every syllable came from the pen of St. Athanasius as I am persuaded of the contrary, that would not in the slightest degree affect my objection to the continued use of the Creed in the services of the Church."† On the other hand, those who uphold the present position of the Creed would not be the least affected by the discovery that every word was composed centuries after St. Athanasius had slept with his fathers.‡ They

* See 'Guardian,' February 14, p. 208.

† Speech in Convocation. See 'Guardian' of February 14, 1872.

‡ What, by the way, is the Dean of Westminster's authority for asserting ('The Athanasian Creed,' p. 83) that "the Creed was received and enforced when it was believed to be 'the Creed of

regard the authorship of the Creed as a question of considerable literary interest, but of no practical importance whatever. So that if Mr. Ffoulkes's argument were as conclusive as it is manifestly and egregiously inconclusive, the Athanasian Creed would still rest on the prescriptive authority of Christendom for upwards of a thousand years.

Equally irrelevant with the authorship of the Athanasian Creed, as it appears to me, is the question of testing the accuracy of its text by the evidence of ancient manuscripts. In the case of Holy Scripture the testimony of ancient manuscripts is all-important, for the Church is but "the keeper of Holy Writ," and even an Œcumenical Council would have no authority to retain in the inspired Canon any passage that was clearly proved to be an interpolation. But the case of a Creed is altogether different. If the original manuscript of the Athanasian Creed were discovered, and were found to differ widely from the received text, it would not at all follow that the Creed ought to be amended into harmony with the manuscript. The Church accepts or rejects a disputed verse in the Bible on the ground of its being or not being an integral part of the original record; that consideration, and that only, suffices to decide the matter. But the

St. Athanasius'?" Is there any evidence to show that the compilers of the Prayer Book enjoined the use of the Athanasian Creed because they believed it to have been composed by St. Athanasius?