

OBSERVATIONS ON RELIGIOUS DISSENT

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649259076

Observations on religious dissent by Renn Dickson Hampden

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

RENN DICKSON HAMPDEN

**OBSERVATIONS ON
RELIGIOUS DISSENT**

OBSERVATIONS
ON
RELIGIOUS DISSENT.

BY

RENN DICKSON HAMPDEN, D.D.
PRINCIPAL OF ST. MARY HALL,
PROFESSOR OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,
AND LATE FELLOW OF ORIEL COLLEGE.

OXFORD,

PRINTED BY S. COLLINGWOOD, PRINTER TO THE UNIVERSITY,
FOR THE AUTHOR.

SOLD BY J. H. PARKER, OXFORD:
AND BY J. G. AND F. RIVINGTON, LONDON.

MDCCCKKKIV.

496.

AT a time when the state of parties and professions among Christians is attracting extraordinary attention, it appears peculiarly necessary, to inquire into the nature of those differences by which we are separated into distinct communions. Shall we be ever "rending piecemeal the coat of Christ without seam"—excluding and condemning each other in the name of Christ—and not pause to reflect, whence this strife originates, and how far we are justified in our mutual exclusiveness by that revelation which we all hold in common?

It has been well observed by an ancient Father, "that he would become the wisest Christian, who had carefully examined into the sects of Jewish and Christian profession." But to act on the spirit of this remark, it is evidently necessary, not only that we should study the origin of sects historically, but that we should search into the principle itself of dissent—the root of that various profession which the Christian world exhibits.

In the prosecution of such an inquiry, the natural course of proceeding is, to review the bearing which conclusions or inferences of doctrine from the text of Scripture, have on the development of religious truth. This point does not appear to

have been attended to at all hitherto in any discussions of the subject of Christian dissent. And yet the principle here referred to, clearly involves in it the whole question of our separation into parties or distinct communions; and according to the determination of it, our treatment of communions differing from ourselves must essentially depend. For what is dissent in Religion, but difference of opinions arising out of the different conclusions drawn by different minds out of the same given elements of Scripture? The great question between discordant sects is, as to the proper reasonings to be drawn from the text of Scripture; each party contending for its own interpretation as the truth revealed. Surely then it ought to be a preliminary matter of consideration by all parties, whether such conclusions from Scripture—such constructions of texts—have in themselves, independently of their relative evidence in comparison with one another, any proper authentic validity as revealed religious truths. This is an inquiry not to be peremptorily dismissed, or to be assumed as already settled by the practice of Christians. In the Roman Catholic Church indeed, the question is formally decided in the affirmative, by the authority assigned to Tradition in conjunction with Scripture: for Tradition is nothing more than expositions of the text of Scripture, reasoned out by the Church and embodied in a code of doctrine. It remains however open to Protestants, to examine the principle itself from which Tradition has taken its rise. It is not enough that we disclaim it in the re-

sult to which it has led Roman Catholics. It is necessary that we should retrace our steps to the point of departure from Scripture, and freely examine whether the first step has been legitimately taken. It will appear, I think, that all who acknowledge the divine authority of Scripture are much more unanimous in reality than they profess themselves to be, in what they fundamentally believe; that they differ, in fact, more in what is matter of human opinion and speculation than in their acceptance of divine truth.

I request therefore a calm attention to the following observations, which I offer in a sincere conviction of their truth and importance; and which, if regarded in the same light by others, would, I feel confident, tend to abate the feverish excitement now very generally felt on questions arising out of the existence of religious dissent. If it should appear, that men in reality differ less in religious belief and conduct, than their formularies of doctrine would lead us to suppose—that it is chiefly the introduction of human opinion into the matter of Revelation that occasions a difference of professions—then is there great cause of alienation and asperity removed; and we may come to the discussion of questions connected with dissent, with the indulgence due to erring judgments. For if all opinion, as such, is involuntary in its nature, it is only a fallacy, to invest dissent in religion with the awe of the objects about which it is conversant. The awe of the sacred objects indeed im-

poses a fearful responsibility on every one in forming his own opinions; but it is no reason that others should depart from those principles by which they would judge him in other subjects. They may guard against his supposed errors with more caution and accuracy, on account of their importance; but they must not wield against him the terrors of the invisible world.

Let me then state the case as it is between the several communions of professing Christians; how far we all agree, and where our differences commence.

In the first place, what is it that we, who are members of the Church of England, are so zealous to maintain? We shall readily answer; It is the pure truth of God as revealed in the Scriptures. Our "hearts' desire" is, that not only ourselves, but every son of Adam may be "saved,"—may be "made wise unto salvation." If again we inquire of those of other communions, what is the burthen of their profession, shall we not receive the like answer? Candour and charity at least must make us think so of others, however alien from our own communion. Let it be assumed, then, that all who take on themselves the sacred name of Christ, have the cause of Christ at heart equally—that all are equally disposed to maintain the truth as it is in Christ—that all, making due allowance for human infirmity and sinfulness, may be truly said to "love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity."

What then is the origin of all that variety of re-

ligious profession with which the world is distracted? Now in the general and vague way, it is easy to answer to this inquiry, that the passions of men, the wayward inclinations of human nature, occasion all this distraction. If believers were now like that little flock, when all were of one heart and one mind, there would be but one communion. But now that the visible Church has embraced a vast portion of the world, the corruption of the mass has infected the leaven put into it, and the sounds of harmony are turned into discord. We must go, however, beyond this superficial view of the case. This is the truth, but it is not the whole truth. The world, as it is, has presented an arena for the conflict—it has not supplied the nerves and the weapons with which the conflict has been carried on.

The real causes of separation are to be found in that confusion of theological and moral truth with religion, which is evidenced in the profession of different sects. Opinions on religious matters are regarded as identical with the objects of faith; and all the zeal which belongs to dissentients in the latter, is transferred to the guiltless differences of fallible judgments. Whilst we agree in the canon of Scripture—in the very words for the most part, if not without exception, from which we learn what are the objects of faith—we suffer disunion to spread among us, through the various interpretations suggested by our own views and reasonings on the admitted facts of Scripture. We introduce theories of the Divine being and attributes—theories of human

nature and of the universe—principles drawn from the various branches of human philosophy—into the body itself of revealed wisdom. And we then proceed to contend for these unrevealed representations of the wisdom of God, as if it were that very wisdom as it stands forth confessed in his own living oracles. “The wisdom that is from above” is at once “pure” and “gentle.” Surely it has no resemblance to that dogmatical and sententious wisdom which theological controversy has created.

But, it will be said; ‘are no conclusions from the sacred records to be drawn by human reason? And what then becomes of that rule of theological interpretation, that nothing is to be received as an article of the faith, but what may be “read” in Scripture, or “may be proved thereby?” The latter part of this rule, it will be urged, is thus rendered a dead letter. If nothing can be argued from Scripture, and by argument established as a truth of revelation, why is any thing referred to as capable of *proof* from Scripture? All articles of religion are thus cut off, and we are reduced to the simple expedient of expressing divine truth in divine words.’

I shall meet this objection in the first instance, and then proceed to establish the principle for which I contend—namely, that no conclusions of human reasoning, however correctly deduced, however logically sound, are properly religious truths—are such as strictly and necessarily belong to the scheme of human salvation through Christ. If I can establish this point, it will be seen, in the consequences to be