PRIESTCRAFT; OR, CHURCH VERSUS BIBLE

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By F. ROBERTSON

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PRIESTCRAFT;

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CHURCH *VERSUS* BIBLE.

AMIDST all the discussion and argument raised by the writings of that celebrated mathematician, there was no feature in the whole mass of correspondence and public declamation more strikingly prominent than the *impotent vituperation* of what may be called the Orthodox party against Bishop Colenso.

Their argument (if bitter invective can be said, by courtesy, and in virtue of its being launched on *the right side*, to amount to argument) divided itself into the following:—

1*st*, That Bishop Colenso only reasserted what had often been said before, and that his assertions had all been amply disproved long ago, as any child might know.

2*d*, That he was a great brute for scattering doubts broadcast in the Church, when he was paid to keep

them quiet; and, "What did he mean by taking away the people's religion?" "What could he offer as a substitute?"

These were the views privately given by eminent churchmen after Colenso's works had been long before the public, and when therefore they, from their position, were bound to have consulted, and formed mature opinions on the subject.

I do not refer to the so-called *refutations* of Colenso *in print*, because any one who reads them can form his own opinion, and will probably, as a thinking man, come to the conclusion that if, for instance, the numbers of the children of Israel questioned by Colenso are not representative numbers whose meanings have been lost through defective tradition, but mean actually the arithmetical numbers that left Egypt, and led enough flocks and herds to kill passovers, &c. during forty years, in what was then, and is now, a wilderness of sand, wherein there is not a blade of grass to be seen, much less pasture for such a number, Moses must have forgotten to remind the children of Israel of the greatest of all the miracles which took place during their journey, when he summed up all that God had done for them, or else that he made a mistake in the numbers recorded. The first of which suppositions is of course the more extraordinary, and the second fatal to credit or not, according to each man's conception of the value of accuracy, and the absolute or relative nature of inspiration.

But the general tone taken by those who defended orthodoxy was such as to raise doubt more than anything Bishop Colenso could say; not doubt of the truth of the Bible, but doubt of the doctrines *they* deduced, and the interpretation *they* put upon the Bible. Their contemptuous assertion that "any schoolboy could have

answered Colenso's difficulties," is out of place, and carries no weight; for any one can see that Colenso is not a fool, though he has dared to think for himself; and it would have been preferable and more convincing to have answered his doubts than merely to state that they could be answered. Besides which, it is as hard to believe the convictions to be sincere of men who dare not give a reason for the faith that is in them, but who bite and kick, and scream out "Heresy!" the moment they are questioned, as it is to believe that the bluster of a bully is a greater sign of bravery than quiet confidence.

In order to hold orthodox opinions on the doctrines of the Church, they teach that one must approach what he is taught is the highest and noblest religion on the earth in a state of mind which would be a disgrace to a Hottentot—a state of abject prostration, refusing to search the Scriptures, and see if what he is taught is really so, declining, with touching humility and praiseworthy self-abasement, to raise his unworthy eyes to look what (not the Bible, but) "Mother Church," tells him, fairly in the face: he is not to use his reason, because that is heresy, but he is to take it for granted that the doctrines are all right, even if plainly unworthy or contradictory, for the simple reason that it is very wrong indeed to think otherwise. He is to ask no questions, look nothing fairly in the face which at first sight suggests a doubt; because, "if once you begin to doubt and cavil there is no end to it:" he is not to consider whether what is attributed to the God of Reason and Order by the orthodox party be really what the Bible teaches, or be reasonable and good, or unjust and capricious. Far be it from him to do anything so monstrous as to try the doctrine, or try the spirit of it, whether it be from God, before he receives it; that would be overweening self-confidence: no, he is merely to take

all that he is told for granted, not venturing to question it. And he is further to persuade himself that this is what is meant by receiving "the kingdom of God as a little child," though nothing is more characteristic of children than surprise and inquiry, nothing more opposite than a spirit of false humility, and obsequiously complimenting religion by accepting and taking for granted anything and everything that men present under the name of doctrine.

The whole contention about Colenso, and particularly the impotent abuse of the orthodox party, has drawn the attention of many to doctrines which are said by the Church to be of vital importance, but which appear to be not *necessarily* deducible from, or contained in, the Bible. It is far better to scatter doubts and have them answered publicly now, than to leave them to smoulder on, destroying a man's spiritual life here, and haunting him on his deathbed: it is no use *then* telling him it is very wrong indeed to doubt what "Holy Mother Church has always at all times and in all places," &c. &c. He will want something which depends clearly and intelligibly on the Bible, and commends itself to his life and reason—not something that takes twelve hundred pages of astute argument to prove to be really the teaching of the Bible; nor, again, what a Church, consisting of some good and many bad men, all liable to error and sin, have agreed to teach as doctrine.

The following suggestions are accordingly put forward in the strong conviction that what is really true need not fear inquiry, or even assault, and that what is untrue is better separated; and that doubts which will occur to any thinking man who turns to religion with his heart and mind, and makes it a matter of life, not a matter of speculative inquiry or of self-satisfied patronage, would

be better answered than cried shame upon, if any one can and will answer them. As the subject will only admit of direct question or assertion, that form will be adopted in the following remarks; remembering that the object is not to lay down a doctrine, or even a contradiction of doctrine, but, if possible, to provoke a good defence of the truth, and to show its strength by either assault or proof.

The arguments are not those of a subtle theologian, as is manifest, but are such as might occur to any sincere and thinking man who reads his Bible, though some of them are drawn from distinguished writers.

First, Although the Church teaches that except a man believe rightly the doctrine of the Trinity he cannot be saved, but without doubt he shall perish everlastingly; yet it is impossible to make out from the Church-teaching whether she really means one or three. The moment you speak of one she shows you three; the moment you say three she assures you there is only One. And no one teacher in the Church dares to explain what he means, or even what he thinks or conceives in his own mind, when he talks of three persons forming one God; all he can do is to quote a text, because he is not sure that he thinks rightly on the subject: so he dares not put it into his own words, even to make what he thinks on the subject intelligible to his own child. All he can say is, "It is a mystery, and in such matters we must submit our reason to faith—the simple, childlike faith—that it is so; that is quite enough for us." In other words, we must shut our eyes, stop our ears, and assert incessantly the words of a certain formula.

Does he really consider that a man's salvation rests on his jingling certain words without even attaching an idea