

THE ETHICS OF CONFORMITY AND SUBSCRIPTION

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The Ethics of Conformity and Subscription by Henry Sidgwick

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HENRY SIDGWICK

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Cover *Sedley Taylor.*

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OF
CONFORMITY AND SUBSCRIPTION.

BY
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—◆—
"Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind."—ST. PAUL.
—◆—



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TO THE READER.

THE relation between the Free Christian Union and the writers whose essays may appear under its name, will readily be inferred from its fundamental principle, of spiritual fellowship with mental independence. Each writer may be presumed to approve of the design and basis of the Union; but the Union does not, conversely, assume responsibility for his individual judgments or reasonings. If its object were to recommend the opinions of a school, care would be taken to secure consistency of exposition and harmony of impression in its several productions. But, aiming as it does to release Christian Unity from the obligation of intellectual uniformity, it will rather welcome than reject the opportunity of presenting under various aspects the subjects with which its publications deal, and of helping the reader, by the influx of comparative lights, to more effective thought and arger sympathy.



"Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind."

THE ETHICS OF CONFORMITY AND SUBSCRIPTION.

I wish to discuss in this pamphlet the duty which the persons who form the progressive—or, to use a neutral term, the deviating—element in a religious community owe to the rest of that community; the extent to which, and the manner in which, they ought to give expression and effect to their opinions within the community; and the point at which the higher interests of truth force them to the disruption of old ties and cherished associations. I do not propose to treat the question as a theological one. Of course this would be a very natural mode of treatment; and in an age like the first age of Protestantism, when men still believed that there was some one form of organization and set of doctrines to which the Divine favour was attached, but were disagreed as to which these were, any other view of the question would seem idle. The inquiry, ther

could simply be, what degree of variation from the true standard involved deadly error. Even now, it may be held by some, that if a man has the misfortune to hold erroneous opinions, he ought to keep them to himself, and outwardly appear to believe what he does not believe, rather than aggravate his guilt by the open rejection of saving truth. Or, they may hold that such a man is so certain to do wrong, that it is not worth while discussing what he ought to do. Nay, men may even believe, in some vague way, that the favour of Heaven rests on a particular religious community, even though they may be unable to accept its distinctive theological opinions; or, rather, though they may have renounced most of its dogmas, but not the one dogma that asserts the peculiar salvatory efficacy of its discipline. To minds so constituted I shall not attempt to appeal, and it is the less necessary for me to do so, as the mind of England, in spite of much that has been said and written of late, is, after all, Protestant to the core; and holds, that the spiritual welfare of man is not bound up with any ecclesiastical organization or ceremonial system, but depends on a right state of the feelings, and a right attitude of the will, sustained by a right apprehension of the nature of God, and of His purposes and dealings with men.

And, on the whole, the recognition of the necessity of free inquiry, and of the possibility of conscientious difference of opinion, almost without limit, is so general, that most of my readers will be prepared to discuss the question on the neutral ground of ethics. The general

distinction between "essentials and non-essentials" is one that we cannot pass over in considering it, but no particular view of this distinction need influence the argument, which will simply assume that there is such a distinction, more or less definite, recognized in the theological thought of communities and individuals, but varying from community to community and from individual to individual.

It is necessary, however, to separate this question from another one, that in the minds of most men mixes with it and predominates over it. The blending is very natural, but at the same time it is the cause of the haze which hangs over the whole subject at present. It is very difficult for men, in all political and social discussions, to keep the ideal quite distinct from the actual, and not sometimes to prescribe present conduct on grounds which would only be valid if a distant and dubious change of circumstances were really certain and imminent. It is peculiarly difficult in discussing religious organizations, for these seem to depend, more directly than political, on the speculative belief of their members; and in theology it is harder than in politics, for an ardent believer, especially if his beliefs be self-chosen, and not inherited, not to think that the whole world is on the point of coming round to his opinions. And hence the religious persons who, by the divergence of their opinions from the orthodox standard of their church, have been practically led to consider the subject of this pamphlet, have often been firmly convinced that the limits of their church must necessarily be