

**CATHOLICISM AND
INDEPENDENCE:
BEING STUDIES IN
SPIRITUAL LIBERTY**

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Catholicism and Independence: Being Studies in Spiritual Liberty by M. D. Petre

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CATHOLICISM AND INDEPENDENCE

THE TEMPERAMENT OF DOUBT

WE sometimes ask ourselves whether the many diseases which become gradually known to medical science are, for the most part, new as to their existence, or merely as to their recognition. We should probably find, after due examination, that the answer to such a question would be a qualified one, and that while much is now scientifically known which was formerly named from its effects rather than from its cause, there are also many developments of disease due to the peculiar circumstances and conditions of our present life. We might, perhaps, find individual cases, in the distant past, closely resembling those of our modern prevalent diseases, but investigation would probably show that certain symptoms are more widely spread and

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common in one age, and others in another, and that there are forms of physical suffering corresponding with the particular mode of life of each century.

It is obvious that, unless medical science be quite lifeless, the ordinary laws of supply and demand must obtain here as elsewhere, and that both diagnosis and treatment must be developed in accordance with the actual physical condition of mankind. New symptoms must be observed and collated, new experiments must be made and new remedies tried, if any advance is to be made towards meeting the existing difficulties. It is true that we shall suffer during this process of evolution from the over-driven theories which arise in every field of thought and action, and that the most universally accepted remedy at some particular moment may not be the only one, or the best. Still, taking things all in all, we would most of us prefer, in case of sickness, to be treated by the leading physician of London or Paris, rather than by the equally great or greater intellect of Galen or Hippocrates; for not only has science advanced, but the physical constitution has likewise altered, in its process of adaptation to a more complex form of life.

Spiritual pathology is liable to at least as many variations and developments as its physical counterpart, and again we may ask, Are the symptoms new? or do we only know them better? Once more the answer will be a qualified one. We look to the pages of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and we find in them the expression of much which we may have experienced in our own souls, or witnessed in those of others.

Still when we regard, not individual cases, but the face of the religious world as a whole, we see that here also different ages have had their prevailing characteristics, that their strength and their weakness have not been the same, and that, according to the prevailing need, there have arisen special methods of investigation and treatment. It is true that we may find our temptations, our trials, our hopes and fears, depicted in the spiritual struggles of men long passed away from the theatre of life; but the particular blend is special to the age, the general features are peculiar to the time. And as a new disease that suddenly appeared, and seized on whole populations, would at once draw to itself all the attention of medical science, until some means of succour was discovered, so any prevalent symptom of spiritual weakness surely deserves the same interest, and

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claims the same open-minded study and diagnosis. We do not want to force influenza into some ancient category unless the place really fits it, and neither should we so act with a disease of the soul. We desire, on the contrary, to study its special characteristics, and to make use, in its treatment, not only of the experience of the past, but of all the light we can obtain in the present.

Now it is undeniable that a new symptom has been, for some time, rapidly spreading throughout the Christian world, and assuming an extent and importance which surely demand particular and careful investigation. The epidemic of doubt seizes on populations now where it only affected individuals in former ages, and assumes continually proportions of such magnitude as to give a special character to the religious constitution of our century.

The subject is such a wide one that it will be well at once to narrow the field of action by specifying, as distinctly as the nature of the question allows, the kind of doubt which is here under discussion. The word is used, in one sense, to depict our mental attitude towards certain theories, principles, facts, or fictions which we have never held, but are approaching for the sake of inquiry, or are simply relegating

to a half-way domain of opinion or uncertainty. Such doubt as this is rather that which precedes than that which follows on belief; it is not necessarily coupled with any sense of pain or loss; and the mind may be as calm in its questions and denials as in any other process of acquiring knowledge. It is not, therefore, with doubt such as this that we are occupied, but with that which consists in a disposition to question what we have hitherto believed.

And here again we must distinguish a doubt which is fully approved and accepted, which is received into the mind and seated in the place which faith had occupied, from that which is merely suggested, however vividly and forcibly—which batters at the door and burrows at the foundations, but which nevertheless keeps its character of invader, and is not yet admitted as conqueror or friend.

It is with this latter kind of doubt that we are here concerned. It arises in the soul where untroubled faith had hitherto existed, and brings with it an inevitable sense of suffering or loss. It is the sudden disappearance beneath the horizon of something which had been fully visible; it is the melting into shadow of something we had held as substance—we tighten our