

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND TRANSITION

IN the course of our survey we have maintained the position that Protestantism truly laid the foundations of the theory of the Rule of Faith. As regards the ultimate source of Christian knowledge it was justified in holding, as against Rationalism, that it is derived from a self-disclosure of God which differed in respect of the manner of communication, and also of its richer and more efficacious content, from the general revelation made through nature and history. As regards the repository of the Christian revelation it rightly held, as against Romanism, that the one trustworthy channel by which it has been transmitted to us is the collection of the sacred books of canonical Scripture. As regards the means of interpreting the content of the Christian revelation, it properly repudiated the idea that the truth which it contains is to be measured and regulated by an ecclesiastical or rationalistic standard, and properly affirmed that it falls to be interpreted by believing thought working upon the records in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand it cannot be said that the rival theories which have emerged in the history of the Church have been wholly misleading. They have their relative justification in that each emphasises an element of truth for which some place has to be found in a complete theory of the source

and norm of Christian knowledge. It has also become apparent in the course of the discussion that Protestant theology can no longer profess that it fully enunciates its own theory when it declares that the Bible is the supreme rule of faith and practice, and that it requires in addition to formulate and work with a definition of the essential content of revelation which it extracts from the Bible.

I

There is none of the classic theories which, erroneous as it may be in its entirety, does not emphasise a truth which has been overlooked or neglected in some of the developments of Protestantism. The fundamental antithesis to the Christian mode of thought is exhibited by Rationalism; but there is a sense in which all theology must ultimately be rational—since it must rest on grounds which are capable of being stated and defended, and further, the faith on which so much responsibility must be laid in interpreting and appropriating the Christian revelation is none other than reason suffused by higher influences, and operating under peculiar conditions. It has also been contended—in opposition to a timorous Lutheranism which, though magnifying faith, has not faith enough to see God revealed in His universe—that human reflection on the works of creation and providence has supplied truths that deserve and require to be combined with the specially authenticated knowledge of the Christian system into a more comprehensive whole.

The elaborated Roman Catholic theory affirms historical positions which are untenable; and in particular it makes on behalf of the Roman Church, and

of its official head, a claim of infallible authority which is inherently improbable, and which has no substantial support in Scripture or in primitive usage. At the same time Rome teaches more truth on this subject than is involved in its emphatic affirmation of the reality of revelation, and in its reverent appreciation—manifestly increasing in the modern environment—of the written word as a channel of revelation. On Protestant principles we are bound to attach very great importance to the general and sustained testimony of the Christian society. For if Christian truth be recognised and apprehended under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it is evident that there is no evidence so trustworthy concerning the actual testimony of the Holy Spirit as the witness borne by the Christian Church throughout its history. To a representative organ of truly catholic piety and belief the first Protestants, to judge from some of their utterances, would have been willing to bow; and a large body of modern Protestants would be willing to use the test of a genuine catholicity as a note of the Christian truth which has the corroboration of the Spirit of truth.

The School of the Spirit has contributed nothing which substantiates the claim that material additions have been made, by way of private revelations, to the knowledge of God and of divine things which came through the Christian revelation. But at one point it had a firmer grasp on Protestant principle than the second and the immediately succeeding generations of Protestantism. The tendency of the later Protestantism was to empty of its meaning the doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit, and to construe the Christian dispensation as a deistic economy which God had initiated by the gift of a sacred volume, but which thereafter He had left to itself and to the ministry of the Book.

It was therefore no small service which was rendered in protesting that the same Spirit that worked in the Apostles works ever in the Church, not only as the Lord and Giver of life, but as the light of all minds that know the truth, and as their aid in the administration of the principles of the Gospel. For this school, erroneously as it expressed its observation, had a more correct apprehension than orthodox Protestantism of the genius of the Christian religion. It realised that Christianity is a system of doctrinal principles and ethical maxims rather than a stereotyped body of dogmatic and moral theology—that the close of the Christian revelation accordingly was the beginning of a prolonged process of arduous thinking; and the legitimacy of the task which it professed to deal with by supplementary revelation must be recognised in the form that theology is a progressive science, and especially that the elaboration of the Christian Ethic is as yet barely a half-finished task.

The School of Feeling was doomed to futility in its attempt to derive theology exclusively from a subjective source. Feeling, when it seeks to utter itself, speaks by a stammering tongue; and even when the richer and more definite datum of Christian experience is fastened on, there is room for wide difference of opinion as to its precise content and significance. What Schleiermacher was impressed by in Christian experience was in truth an important fact—it was the same fact which impressed Calvin when he studied the content of the believing mind and heart, and was aware of a joyful feeling of assurance that a divine work of reconciliation and regeneration had been wrought, and that it had been wrought by the instrument of the Word of God. The difference was that

while Calvin rightly interpreted the feeling as a finger-post pointing to the mine of revealed truth, the subjective school in its typical representatives has looked upon it as being itself the spiritual mine. It would, however, be unjust to see in the principle of Schleiermacher nothing more than a recognition and a misuse of the fact of religious feeling. His method was an achievement which has led to an enrichment of theology through the more thorough investigation of the content of religious experience. In addition, it has sobered and strengthened theology by the conviction which it has diffused in far wider circles than those which own his leadership—viz. that theology must keep more closely to experience in the handling of doctrine. It has been realised that it is the function of experience to witness, not merely to the divine origin of Scripture, but to the matter of the Christian revelation, and that it is characteristic of the indubitably authentic matter of the Christian revelation that it is attested and verified in experience.¹ It has been argued in these pages that it is the duty of theology to utilise all available knowledge of God and of divine things, from whatever source it may be derived; but this is not inconsistent with the position that whatever is adopted in the theological system as bearing the hall-mark of revealed truth is authenticated by the fact that in Christian experience it evokes an instinctive response of assent to, or is necessary to accomplish some important part of, the work of our religion. It may be credible,

¹ 'If religious truths be accepted merely on the authority of the Bible, they are not accepted by us as in themselves either really true or religious. To be apprehended and realised by us as properly religious truths we must have a living insight into their nature and significance, and a veritable spiritual experience of their influence on our hearts and lives.'—Flint, *Agnosticism*, 1903, p. 492.

as was also argued, that there are elements in the revelation whose only guarantee is that they are vouched for by Christ, while His authority is vouched for by all the forces which build up the Christian certitude. But it may at least be generally affirmed that the family likeness of the authentic elements of revelation consists in the fact that individually, as well as in their combination, they make a self-evidencing appeal to the mind which is saturated by Christian experience.

II

It has been stated, in the second place, that a statement of the Protestant position in regard to religious authority, if it is to be candid, thorough and useful, must embrace a definition of the essential content of revelation or of the Christian religion. Candour requires such an addition, because it appears as matter of historical fact that for Protestantism the actual norm of doctrine has never been the Scriptures in their entirety, but has ever been a scheme of saving truth extracted from Scripture. For Protestantism no less than for Roman Catholicism Scripture was a *norma normata*—the difference being that the latter avowedly derived the *norma normans* from ecclesiastical tradition, while the former employed a divinely guided tact to discover it in Scripture. It is evident that circumstances have so changed since the sixteenth century that, while in that day it was information to all whom it concerned to declare that the Bible is the supreme standard, a similar declaration to-day is rather of the nature of an evasion. In the older period it was possible to hope and believe that if the Bible was acknowledged as the Rule of Faith there would be substantial agreement on

the part of competent thinkers as to the contents of the system of the Gospel. This is no longer possible. It has been made clear in three centuries of Protestant history that a large number of Churches and schools can agree to profess the supreme authority of Scripture, while yet they can unfold its contents in doctrinal systems representing almost every shade of conflict and dissonance. It is therefore now a legitimate, and even a necessary demand, that every system of theology should give an account of the conception of Christianity which governs its dogmatic use of Scripture.

The task, accordingly, to which our inquiry has led up is the attempt to define the nature, and to set forth the theoretical content, of the Christian religion. In essaying this task we fix our attention on the fact that Christianity is primarily a religion, and it is from this point of view that we have to question the Scriptural records as to its essential nature. As a religion it is an engine which has been introduced into the world to do a particular spiritual work, and it throws light upon its genius to consider it in its context as one of the religions of the world—aiming at the same general end as the other faiths which have laid a spell upon the human mind, but also wholly transcending them by the grandeur of its promises, and the effectiveness of its provisions. The Christian religion, again, has been at work in the world for centuries, sometimes doing that work with impressive thoroughness, sometimes with very meagre and disappointing results, yet always in a form in which the fundamental type was recognisable, and in which something was accomplished that was not unworthy of the intention. As a fact the great divisions of organised Christendom, and also the schools of Christian theology

which have made any deep mark on the intellectual life of Christendom, have exhibited a much larger measure of agreement than has been recognised in theological polemics alike as to the aim, the presuppositions and the provisions of the Christian religion. In the following pages we shall have frequent opportunity to note that the main features of the Christian religion, as set forth in the original sources, are reproduced in the main divisions of Christendom to an extent that constitutes a real consensus of opinion and reveals a permanence of religious type. At the same time, in the historical development there have undeniably emerged modifications of Christianity which exhibit important and deep-seated differences; and it will be necessary to define the kind and degree of those differences, and to estimate their significance whether as a legitimate development of, or a morbid departure from, the type of Christianity which is attested in Scripture in its essential purpose and provisions, and which can also be divined as struggling for clear expression throughout the course of its chequered history.¹

In the second division of these lectures we shall endeavour to define the essential nature of the Christian religion with special reference to the intellectual content which it involves, and which is inseparable from its

¹ While for Protestant thinking the Scriptures are the classic source for the knowledge of the Christian religion, we may also hope to understand its nature better by studying it in history and at work. I am indebted to Professor Foster for a quotation from Troeltsch which admirably expresses this supplementary point of view:—

‘The essence of Christianity is a spiritual unity developing itself in the manifoldness of Christian history, a unity of which the majority is unconscious, and which is first to be apprehended by a historical abstraction. . . . Its discovery requires the employment of historical abstraction, the art of divination which takes in the whole at a glance, and at the same time the exactness and fulness of the methodically elaborated facts.’—*The Finality of the Christian Religion*, 1906, p. 301.

equipment for doing its special work in the world. Thereafter we shall try to fix the precise nature of the modifications of Christianity which emerged in the school of patristic Orthodoxy, in Roman Catholicism and in Protestantism, and to estimate their value in relation to the original and authentic type of Christianity. In the concluding chapters we shall apply the same criterion to certain leading types of modern theology.