

“PIOUS FRAUD.”

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THE term “pious fraud” often used by advanced thinkers when attacking traditional religious belief, is of course repudiated by those yet holding to traditional religion as entirely unjustified, as only springing from hatred and as being a mean way of attacking religion. But this term is also considered as too hard and strong a term and as an impolitic one by just such advanced thinkers as those using it.

Is the term “pious fraud” then unjustified? I think the term is fully justified in many cases, and will give a few striking examples from the Bible.

The second epistle of Peter in the New Testament pretends not only to have been written by Peter, the intimate disciple of Jesus, but it even says, referring to the story of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mount: “The voice: This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, we ourselves heard come out of heaven, when we were with him in the holy mount.” (Chap. i. 18.)

It has long been known that this epistle is entirely spurious. Even in the fourth century it was believed by some to be spurious, and these doubts have again and again turned up, till now no unprejudiced Biblical scholar accepts it as authentic.

The general belief in its authenticity, and for which it was taken up into the canon, was very probably due, besides the mention of the name of Simon Peter in the address to the readers, to the before cited words in that epistle, by which the writer fully asserts himself to have been an eye-witness of that miraculous event of the transfiguration related in the Gospels.

Sincere believers in Christianity thus argued: “Would a man have been such a liar as to call himself an eye-witness of that event if he had not been,—a man who wrote an epistle of such religious earnestness and spirituality?” Sincere believers in the truth of

Christianity instinctively felt that the writer of the epistle, if he had not been an eye-witness, would have been a liar. Rather than accept such an immoral act on the part of the author of the epistle, the writing was accepted as authentic in spite of its many contradictions.

It is a well-known fact now that the first centuries were full of such literary productions ascribed to immediate disciples of Jesus and others of his contemporaries, which have deceived people even to our own time, and the so-called second epistle of Peter is one of them.

That this epistle is still accepted as authentic by the majority of Christians is only due to its fortunate admission into the canon and the reason that it is a writing of earnest admonitions only, an epistolary writing, instead of a narrative. In a narration of incidents proofs for unauthenticity could have been found much more easily as any one knows is the case with regard to the apocryphal Gospels which are outside of the New Testament canon. But let us take another example. The book of Daniel in the Old Testament expressly claims to have been written by a certain Daniel living in the time of the Babylonian Exile. It is well known now, that this book was written almost 400 years later during the time of the Maccabees. This was even proven to be so by the neo-Platonist Porphyry as early as the third century, for which reason his books were later burned by order of the Emperor Theodosius, in order that his criticism of the book of Daniel should not become generally known. Since the beginning of the last century, however, the authenticity of the book has been given up more and more, and no unprejudiced Bible scholars accept it any longer. And yet that book has misled the most eminent men since it was written, because it exerted such an enormous influence in the formation of Christianity by being the first of the books of the Old Testament to give prominence to the idea of a kingdom coming from heaven through the appearance of the "Son of Man" in the clouds. We may almost say, Christianity is based upon this book alone. If it had not been for this book and the reverence in which it was held in the time of Jesus on account of its supposedly genuine prophecies, Jesus would very probably never have been moved to his career. We may say that Jesus in believing in the divine character of this book was deluded by it as many others have been since his time. Even such eminently acute minds as Isaac Newton were so misled by the apparently genuine prophecies of the book which predicted the most minute historical details four hundred years ahead, that he spent

much time on this book and considered his calculations based thereon of more value than any of his scientific discoveries. And what an amount of useless work was spent by other men on that book as well as on the book of Revelation which is based upon it! And all this was because the unknown author of that book played his part so well in fabricating fictitious prophecies without the least foundation of truth.

Another example: We all know that Deuteronomy came out about 650 B. C. in the reign of the Jewish king Josiah, (that is, the essential part of it), in order to influence King Josiah to begin that radical reform which made the temple in Jerusalem the only place of worship and abolished all other places of worship throughout the limits of the kingdom of Judah and those of the former kingdom of Israel. That book was given to King Josiah as a writing which had come down from Moses himself, who had forbidden any other place of worship but the one which Jehovah had chosen, and declared that all the evils had come upon the Hebrews because they had transgressed that command—Deuteronomy being filled with curses predicting in detail what ills would come as a consequence of disobeying this command of Jehovah through his servant Moses.

Until the time of the appearance of Deuteronomy even the most pious Hebrews and prophets had worshiped Jehovah without any scruples in other places outside Jerusalem. They never knew of any such command given by Moses, as to worship only in one place and no other. Now with one stroke a matter was introduced, which had never been known before. A book purporting to have been written by Moses was suddenly discovered and brought to light. If this wasn't pious fraud, what was it?

Another example: The Fourth Gospel of the New Testament purports to be a writing of John, a disciple of Jesus, and his most intimate one. Although it does not say this expressly, it is written in such an ingenious way, that any reader receives the impression that that Gospel has come from the most intimate personal connections with Jesus. This book, on account of its seemingly greater spirituality than the other Gospels (though in fact it is very materialistic as witness the resurrection of Lazarus, already in a state of decomposition) and on account of the very mysterious and mystical air surrounding it, has played its part so well, that it has charmed all but the most cool and impartial critics. Only these have seen through its unhistorical garb, and the so-called Gospel of John is more and more accepted as a most ingenious fiction on

the person of Jesus with perhaps very little historical fact underlying it.

Now' what are we to call such writings, as I have mentioned and which every unprejudiced man now knows to be unauthentic?

Can we say, that the pretention of being written by men like Moses and Daniel, centuries ahead and prophesying things to happen many centuries later, or pretending to be eye-witnesses, as the author of 2 Peter and the Fourth Gospel, is only an innocent device, which the author has used to express his thoughts and is of no importance at all? Can we say, that those unknown writers had to use some external machinery or frame by means of which and in which to set forth their ideas? Are we to think that the authors of these books thought that the garb of their books was of no importance at all but only the religious and moral ideas uttered in them? Surely not.

It was not for this reason alone, i. e., to have a suitable frame in which to set their ideas as novelists and poets do, that they chose their special garb, but they knew very well that just the pretence of being genuine prophecies relating events from eye-witnesses, would have a most convincing influence upon the reader; that in fact this seeming genuineness so ingeniously worked out, would be the most important thing to the reader.

And if this is so, what else can we call this proceeding but pious fraud? I at least do not know of any other term which would describe it more correctly and strikingly.

Most believers in these books believe in them because they sincerely consider them as authentic as they appear to be, and because their minds have not been critically trained. But as soon as they discover their unauthenticity and are convinced of it after thorough study, their former sincere belief will change into the very natural attitude of righteous anger, because of having been deluded by only apparent truth and that not only of an insignificant kind but of a kind from which, as long as it seemed to be fact, the most far-reaching and most important inferences were to be drawn.

If, then, the term "pious fraud" is used by advanced thinkers, let us be careful how we condemn them: let us consider that it is the righteous anger of honest, upright and truth-loving minds which leads them to use this expression.

I truly believe, that if the Jewish religion and the Christian also, had not made use of such devices, as I have shown by the examples selected, they would have been of the greatest benefit to the cause of true religion, and would have prevented much of that

bitter controversy between religious tradition and the progress of science.

If there ought to be the most scrupulous conscientiousness anywhere, it is in the field of religion. There more than anywhere else "honesty is the best policy." According to my opinion religious mystification is most to be condemned. To teach religion which pretends to be true, with equivocal means is dangerous. The great majority of Christians believe in the Bible not in the first place on account of the religious and moral truths in it, but on account of the seemingly divine inspiration found in it. An uncritical mind for instance does not know that the whole Hebrew history as represented in the Old Testament as having taken place under the special divine guidance of God, and entirely different from the natural development of any other people, as well as the host of prophecies found in the Old Testament which later were fulfilled, were only a makeup of the Jewish priests after the Exile. I am here referring especially to those many prophecies occurring in the historical books, the Pentateuch, etc., for instance the prediction of the Macedonian empire already in the time of Moses. (Num. xxiv. 24.)

If the origin of these historical books, as the science of Biblical criticism teaches it, would be known to the great majority of Christians, there would be nothing but the unanimous outcry of "pious fraud," and this outcry would be fully justified as things are.

We must admit that the ancient Jewish mind, though deeply religious, lacked an essential of the true religious spirit. Else it would have recoiled from using equivocal means in teaching religious truths. One of the essential things of true religion is scrupulous truthfulness, to teach truth in a straightforward way.

The ancient Jewish mind does not seem to have had the least scruple about manufacturing fictitious prophecies and history. And it was equally so with the early Christian writers. Fiction in the cause of religion, pretending to be true history and fact, seemed to them perfectly justifiable. This trait is also reflected to a smaller degree in another way in the New Testament. It is well known that the New Testament writings are filled to the brim with the most unhistorical and unnatural twistings of passages of the Old Testament to suit any idea that is intended to be expressed. This rabbinical art, which to us now is nothing but pure sophistry, was not even disdained by Jesus. The saying of God to Moses: "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," is cited by him as a proof for personal immortality, although any one knows that nothing of the kind is implied in that passage. But to the times of Jesus and the first

Christian centuries such things seemed perfectly natural and right. The modern mind has evolved to the point of a greater scrupulousness in regard to straightforward methods of teaching religious truth, and this without doubt is due to the influence of science upon religion, for science seeks nothing but pure and naked truth and permits not the least prevarication.

The term "pious fraud" is an outflow of this modern, more truthful and scrupulous spirit. This spirit does not use the term indiscriminately for any myth or legend of ancient times, which has developed gradually and naturally, but it uses it only, when intentionally a false garb has been used for the furtherance of religious purposes, by which consequences have followed which have proved dangerous for the cause of truth.