

TRUTH *vs.* ILLUSION.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE present age is a time of reaction and our intellectual life seems to be readjusting itself to new conditions. On the one side there are iconoclasts who would break down the old, ruin the churches, denounce the old erroneous confessions of faith as superstitions, and start our intellectual life over again. On the other side there are fanatics who would cling to the old, put a ban on modernism, fetter science, brand liberalism as irreligious and indulge in praising submission to blind belief as the highest ideal of morality. Between these two extremes are large masses who try to regain their equilibrium and attempt a reconciliation with the opposite principles by selecting what most appeals to them and harmonizing the result as well as they can.

Among the tendencies of the present age which may be considered as failures are the philosophies of pragmatism and all kindred aspirations. A subjectivism has taken hold of those who try to be liberal and yet feel that they cannot give up the support which the old ideas have given them. In their quandary as to what to accept as true among a confusion of contradictory principles, they attack the objectivity of truth itself, they place instinct above reason, sentiment above logic, vision above exact computation and prophetic enthusiasm above science.

We are fully convinced of the importance of the part played by imagination in science and scientific discovery. We know the power of poetry and the significance of art and literature in human development. We appreciate the prophet and have many instances in history of the debt mankind owes to him. Instinct is a mighty lever, and in prescientific ages it moved mountains where the scientist, if he had existed, would have been incapable of affecting any change because he would have found no echo in the minds of the people for a clearly spoken truth. He would have remained un-

understood. In a former exposition on this subject,¹ we called attention to a drastic incident in history where superstition gained a victory in battle, when the crusaders besieging Antioch were attacked and countersieged by an enormous army of Saracens under Kerbogha, superior both in numbers and equipment, and merely by a fraud, fully believed in by many, the starving Christian army gained an almost superhuman strength of fanaticism and liberated itself from this hopeless plight. I refer to the so-called discovery of the holy lance through Peter Bartholomew.

Such things have happened again and again, and superstition has frequently supplied mankind with a marvelous power which impresses even the impartial historian of a later age and was frequently and freely interpreted at the time as a special intercession of God. This is all very true and must be granted, and superstition has often done wonders in the right cause and in the promotion of progress. But for all that, we must not forget that error remains error and that error is always injurious. Says Schiller:

"Let but an error be hid
In the stone of foundation—the builder
Buildeth with confidence on;
Never the error is found."

Illusions can be condoned, but they should not be gloried in. Illusions are not truth; at best they but contain truth. They may be allegories and may drive home a truth that at the time is unintelligible to the ignorant masses. Such truths in disguise, such allegories, such symbols of unintelligible verities are found in religious myths, in the mythology of Christianity as well as of the pagans, and, in a higher stage of human development, in religious dogmas also. That the divine power which controls the destiny of the world is pictured as a great monarch or even as a father, as a person of authority in human fashion, is an allegory which literally understood is not true, but not even the atheist, if he ever recognizes that there is a power in and above ourselves which makes for righteousness, will be prepared to deny that if taken as an allegory it is true; and the historian will confirm that in history the God-idea has been a most important factor in the elevation of the human race. But it is obvious that in this and any other similar instance, it was the truth in the allegory, in the myth, in the dogma, in the symbol, which proved helpful and not the error. The rejection of the error which referred to the outer garb of the truth but at the same time

¹ See the article "Christian Science and the Reason of Its Strength" in *The Monist*, Vol. XVII, pp. 203-205.

killed the truth dressed up in it, proved injurious and so there are instances where for good reasons the destruction of illusions, let us even add of superstitions, have had fatal consequences which seemed to point out the usefulness of error.

Our friend and contributor, Mr. F. W. Orde Ward, presents us in the present number with a eulogy of error, under the title "The Gospel of Illusion," and in recognizing the service performed by illusion under certain conditions he cannot but believe that at the bottom of illusion there must be some great reality, some beyond-truth, some over-truth, and this he thinks is the highest with which man's mind is confronted, it is God.

We appreciate the part which illusion has played in the world and need not repeat that in spite of it we recognize the supremacy of the truth ideal. On the other hand we recognize also that truth and the seeking after truth is not all there is to the human soul. Sentiments have their right, and the artistic, the emotional, the religious, the poetically mystical, the ethically aspirational aspects are important factors in our spiritual existence. But the noetical, the scientific, the critical, the exact and logical methods comprise the balance wheel indispensable in the economy of the human mind as a supreme regulator, and whenever the seeking after truth is prevented from having its way all the other aspirations, be they ever so fervid or powerful or well-intentioned, will become dangerous and may bring wrack and ruin in their wake.

While truth, our search for truth and the attainment of truth, is the regulator of our entire soul-life, we must not say that the attainment of truth is an end in itself. It is simply the instrument of our mental growth, the means by which we adjust ourselves to the powers that be, to God. It is the standard by which the stature of our soul can be measured, and the comprehension of which matures us and exercises a wholesome influence on us to lead us in the right path and prevent us from going astray. But the main purpose is not merely the attainment of truth, but the attunement of our souls to truth so as to set our sentiments into harmony with the All of existence, with the constitution of the universe, with the order of the world,—with God; and the attitude of harmony is the end and aim of our entire intellectuality. Its result is what Paul calls the peace that passeth understanding.

I need not enter here into details to show that even if superstitions contain truths they have at the same time always been perilous factors in religion. The dualistic conception of the soul has been harmless in many respects, but when it was taken seriously

and when the dualistic conception of mental effects by mere mental means produced the superstition of the possibility of doing mischief to others by invoking the powers of evil, it brought forth the belief in witchcraft. The result was tragic, and its immediate consequence was seen in the persecution of witches and the establishment of the Inquisition. All the horrors of that age are the plain results of an error, of a superstition, of an illusion, which in other respects had proved beneficial.

The modern subjectivism with its denial of the objectivity of truth and with its attempt to build up a new truth-conception which would be more pliable and less exacting, which would ease our scientific conscience and give ample room for our sentimental wants, appears very harmless in itself and it may even be helpful in many cases, but we see in it a rock ahead which must be avoided. In the serious well-intended and religiously fervid defense of illusion presented by the Rev. Orde Ward, we have an instance of this tendency which will serve to many as a mere excuse for not facing a problem demanding an unusual concentration of thought and would require us to dig deeper for a solution of the problem.

Let us not despair. Where we see contrasts, which for all we can say at present appear to be irreconcilable contradictions and would encourage a belief in the objective significance of errors and illusions, let us hold fast to the belief that truth is above all, and let our God not be a God of illusion but the God of truth.