

## Messenger and Visitor

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### Religious Teaching and Ecclesiastical Authority.

A good deal of attention has been attracted of late to Professor St. George Mivart, the well known English scientist and popular writer, and his relations to the Roman Catholic church. Professor Mivart's family is Catholic, he was himself, in earlier life, a devoted member of the Roman church, and in some of his writings had sought to persuade his readers to accept the church's doctrines. Of late years, however, there has been a growing antagonism between Dr. Mivart's views on certain subjects and Roman Catholic teaching, so that some of his writings had been placed on the Index Expurgatorius at Rome, though he had still remained, at least nominally, within the pale of the church. But Dr. Mivart, it appears, had come to feel that the situation involved, was for himself one of a somewhat compromising character, and he accordingly wrote articles, recently published in "The Fortnightly" and "The Nineteenth Century" reviews; which had the effect—as was perhaps his intention—of causing decisive ecclesiastical action to be taken in his case. The views which Professor Mivart has put forth in these articles, in reference to Biblical criticism and certain doctrines of the faith, are distinctly at variance with the teachings of the Roman Catholic church. These heretical utterances received prompt attention from Cardinal Vaughn, the head of the Roman Catholic church in England, who failing, after strenuous and repeated endeavors to secure from Professor Mivart a renunciation of his "heresies," and a declaration of submission of his judgment to that of the church, as the supreme and infallible guardian of the Christian faith, proceeded to issue a circular to his clergy, inhibiting Professor Mivart from approaching the sacraments, and the priests from administering them to him. The point then at which the break between Mr. Mivart and his church occurs, is in reference to the right of private judgment. He does not apparently deny the claim of the church to be a divinely ordained institution, but he claims the right to investigate, to think and to draw conclusions for himself. And he denies the right of the church to deprive him of results so acquired, when his reason approves them as true. To deny at the command of the church, what his reason tells him to be true, would be, he holds, to prove false to an authority more imperative than that of the church.

Dr. Mivart's rejection of Roman Catholic authority does not, it appears, imply any leaning in the direction of Protestantism, unless his affirmation of the right of private judgment be in itself such an implication, for the points at which he takes issue with Roman Catholic teaching, are for the most part points in which there is a pretty general consensus of belief among Protestants. There is probably no Protestant body that would be willing to endorse Mr. Mivart's opinions upon most of the points in which he differs with Roman Catholic doctrine, or to accept him in any general way as an exponent of its faith. On the other hand, there is perhaps no Protestant body that would go so far as to exclude one from their fellowship, simply for holding the views which Professor Mivart has recently maintained in opposition to the teaching of his church.

The New York Outlook sees a striking parallel between the case of Professor Mivart and that of Professor McGiffert. "The issue presented by the correspondence between Mr. Mivart and Cardinal Vaughn," the Outlook says, "is precisely the same

as that presented to the Presbyterian church by the issue joined between Professor McGiffert and his accusers—with this important difference: Cardinal Vaughn, in claiming the supremacy of the church's authority over the reason, undoubtedly is in concurrence with the traditions of the Roman church, while Dr. McGiffert's accusers, in making the same claim, are acting in direct antagonism to the traditions of the Presbyterian church."

We cannot quite see that the issue in the two cases is the same, for there is an important distinction between the action taken by Cardinal Vaughn in the Mivart case, and the action proposed in the McGiffert case. The former is practical excommunication, and the withholding of grace held to be necessary to salvation. The latter is a proposal to exclude from ministerial office and functions, and thus to discredit as an authoritative expounder of the church's doctrine a man whose personal convictions and teachings are, or are alleged to be, in opposition to the standards of doctrine expressly accepted by its ministry. It might or it might not be a wise and a charitable thing to deal with the case of Dr. McGiffert in this manner. We are much inclined to think that it would not be. But we are entirely at a loss to understand how The Outlook can say that such action would be "in direct antagonism to the traditions of the Presbyterian church." It would seem to us that it would be quite in harmony with those traditions. "The denial of Dr. McGiffert's accusers of his right to independent thinking," we are told, "is a return to the old Roman system of ecclesiastical authority." But the right of independent thinking on the part of a private member of a church is one thing, and the right of a duly authorized minister of a church to teach contrary to the recognized standards to which he and all ministers of the church have subscribed, is quite another thing. And as we understand the matter, it is this latter right only that, in the case of Dr. McGiffert, is called in question.

It is, in our view, an evidence of the growth of Christian wisdom and charity, that there is a growing disinclination in most Protestant communities, to exclude from the ministry of the church, men of undoubted sincerity of heart and personal fidelity to Christ, simply because their opinions and teachings upon some points of doctrine, are not in harmony with those generally held by their brethren or with the accepted standards of their church. But, on the other hand, if there is to be a reorganized ministry of the church, some exercise of ecclesiastical authority in respect to the conditions of entrance into and continuance in it would seem to be imperative. Probably even The Outlook would admit this, and the difference between its position, and that of those who would bring all church teaching to the criterion of the creeds, is perhaps not so much a difference of principle as at first sight it would appear to be. We may feel pretty sure, that no creed was ever drawn up in terms which its framers and first subscribers felt to be at variance with scientific truth. No intelligent Christian today wants a creed which contradicts well established facts. But there is always a question as to what can properly be called scientific knowledge, or ascertained truth. Some men, because they are more far-sighted, or because they are more credulous, than their brethren, are always ready to accept and proclaim as certain truth, what to others may seem no more than a bad guess at truth. So it must always be, as the light of science advances—with its broad penumbra of unproven theory—that there will be much conflict of opinion as to what may be regarded as truth. It is the duty of the church to teach the truth and the truth only, so far as it is known. There must always be room for the exercise of ecclesiastical authority in connection with the questions, who are to teach and what is to be taught, but it is to be expected that such authority will be exercised with an increasing wisdom and charity.

### Teacher and Healer.

Nothing is clearer from the narratives of the four evangelists than that they did not regard Jesus as in any sense a product of his times. Considering their presentation of him as a teacher, apart from what they say of his miraculous works, it is plain that in their thought he stands quite apart from other teachers of his day. Thus, in the Bible lesson for the week, Mark speaks of Jesus as creating astonishment among the people in the synagogue, be-

cause he taught them as having authority and not as the Scribes. That note of authority is discernible in the preceding lesson, in which Jesus was seen teaching in Nazareth, and declaring that the prophetic gospel was finding its fulfilment in himself. In the teaching of Jesus there was not, as with the Scribes, any citation of authorities or balancing of the names and the deliverances of one rabbi over against another. He spoke as supreme Master in the field of religious truth. As Dr. Alexander McLaren says: "Jesus does not argue, does not repose his teaching on precedents, owns no predecessors, but deigns only to give his bare word, and expects us to accept what he says because he says it, and because it brings its own proof with it." When any man whose heart was not wholly steeled against truth listened to Jesus, he felt the conviction in his soul that here was a teacher come from God. Honest men, in opposition to all their predilections, were compelled to confess, "Never man spake like this man." And he whose word and personality were so authoritative and convincing when he spoke to men by word of mouth, speaks with no less authority in the records of the evangelists. The New Testament carries with it its own authority. These simple narratives of the evangelists are ten thousand times more convincing than all the books on the evidences of Christianity that ever men have written. The world cannot pick up these records, scan them, lay them aside and forget them. They are imperishable as him whose teachings and whose works they record. Men of candid spirits must read them with a growing conviction that the words of Jesus are the utterances of one who has the right to preface his declarations with a "Verily, verily, I say unto you." His teachings are not the peradventures of an earthly philosophy, but the verities of one who has come down from heaven—a Son of Man who sees and speaks always from a heavenly, and not an earthly, point of view.

If the people in the synagogue at Capernaum were astonished at the teaching of Jesus, they were amazed when they beheld the manifestations of his power in the case of the "man with an unclean spirit." It is impracticable here, and likewise unnecessary to our purpose, to discuss questions as to the nature of this man's infirmity, and of other similar cases mentioned in the New Testament. Under the influence of a materialistic philosophy, there has been a growing tendency even among Christian men, to regard the idea of demoniac possession as absurd. It is said that such cases are evidently a species of insanity, that insanity is known to depend upon a diseased brain or some other abnormal condition of the human system, and that therefore there is no reason for bringing in evil spirits to account for the phenomena. It is better therefore, we are told, to suppose that when our Lord spoke of men being possessed by evil spirits, he was merely accommodating himself to the ideas of the people of that day. However plausible such a theory may be, it must be admitted that it does not fit well with the narratives of the evangelists, and in our view of the matter, our scientific philosophy is not sufficiently clear-eyed in reference to the physical, the mental, the spiritual, and their respective realms and relations, to justify it in assuming a confidently dogmatic position in reference to the matter of demoniac possession, against what appears to be the teaching of the New Testament. It is, however, a matter of greater significance to observe, that whatever was the character of this man's affliction—whatever the nature of the bonds which held his mind in slavery—there was sympathy in the heart of Jesus and power in his words to deliver the man. So also there was the healing hand stretched out to the fever-stricken patient in Simon's family. So also, for all the multitude of sick, and those possessed of demons whom they brought to him "when the sun did set." Very beautiful and very precious is Christ in his character of healer. His healing was an expression of his sympathy, and a manifestation of that power of life which he has in himself, and which he freely bestows upon every receptive soul. Wherever the angel of the gospel comes he brings healing in his wings. Wherever the gospel goes, there follows knowledge, science, all helpful, healing arts, hospitals, infirmaries, asylums spring up, and withal the Christian sympathy that pities and relieves the physical ills of humanity. But if Christ were the healer of the body only, it would matter little. The great significance of his relationship to men lies in the fact that he is the soul healer. And of this we shall see more in our next week's lesson.

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1. In refer Isa. 44: 3; E 10; John 7: 3