

AUTHORITY.

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SOME Evangelicals insist strongly on the "right of private judgment." Unfortunately this is in practice open to much the same objection as the "divine right of kings," which was seldom invoked unless the king's action was open to serious criticism and not easy to justify on other grounds; hence the alleged right could fairly be termed "the right divine of kings to govern wrong." Similarly "the right of private judgment" in practice not unfrequently means the "right of private *mis*judgment"—of deciding questions without careful thought, on superficial grounds. Not that private judgment can be dispensed with; the mistake consists in regarding it as a *right* rather than as a *duty* or a *responsibility*. In a sense, as Dr. Salmon points out (*Infallibility*, ch. iii.) private judgment is necessary and inevitable; to allow others to choose for us is itself an act of private judgment. We need to recognize our responsibility for the way we use our judgment; we must do our best to inform ourselves, perhaps by consulting others; we must give each point the consideration due to its importance. As usual, it is far better to look at duties or responsibilities than at rights.

Before dealing with the main question of the seat of authority in religion, it is well to distinguish between several kinds of human authority. There appear to be three kinds, of very different value.

There is first the authority of what we may call "tradition"—accepted opinion. This is of many degrees of weight, down from "*quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*," down to "we were always taught so-and-so," which exposes the speaker to the rejoinder "Some people are taught very badly!" This kind of authority should on the one hand never be lightly disregarded; but on the other hand it is never final. It calls for respect partly in proportion to its extent, partly according to the opinion we hold of those who represent it. There is always a presumption in favour of good traditions, which needs to be met by clear arguments. But ultimately the authority of tradition rests on the presumption of superior knowledge, and so resolves itself into one form of the authority of such knowledge. If such knowledge is not assumed, the authority is

legitimate. "The Lord said 'I am the Truth'; He did not say 'I am Custom.' Therefore where the truth is seen, custom must yield to it."

The next form of authority is that of official position. In matters of practice, this may prevail; but in matters of opinion and doctrine it is of no value, except so far as this official position may be taken to rest upon or point to superior knowledge.

This last form of authority is supreme. We are justified in deferring—in fact, bound to defer—to those who know more on the subject than we ourselves do. We have indeed to take judgment as well as learning into account; the two do not always coincide; and must beware of following experts blindly. We cannot dispense with experts; but they do not always agree together, and always tend to exaggerate the importance of their own specialities. Still, with these qualifications, the authority of superior knowledge is supreme.

But in practice it often requires care to distinguish between these three kinds of authority. An obvious example is the way in which "the man in the street" commonly regards bishops as the greatest authorities in theology. This is largely due to attaching undue weight to the authority of official position. But it also rests on the mistaken supposition that bishops are necessarily leading theologians, and so speak with the authority of superior knowledge. Well-informed people, of course, know that many other things are desired in a bishop, and that wide knowledge of theology is only one qualification, not possessed by all, or necessarily by the most prominent. There are indeed some bishops whose opinion on various theological questions is of the greatest weight; but it is not as bishops but as individual theologians that they possess this authority, and would have had it none the less had they never been raised to the episcopate. But the opinion of a number of other bishops on points of theology is of no more weight than that of the average clergy, and much less than that of some priests or even deacons; e.g. few bishops can rival Dr. Plummer. The difference between the theological authority of certain individual bishops and that of the episcopal order generally was well brought out by Dean Armitage Robinson in the preface to his "Thoughts on the Incarnation," in 1903, when Dr. Gore had not long before become Bishop of Worcester. There was then a demand that the bishops should issue an authoritative statement on the doctrine of the Virgin-Birth. Dr.

Robinson, deprecating such a statement, asked " Can any one believe that . . . the signature of the Bishop of Worcester to a joint episcopal declaration on the matter could effect anything at all for perplexed inquirers in comparison with the writings of Charles Gore ? "

On the general question, the seat of authority in religion has been variously stated as the *individual* reason (or conscience, or " inner light," or experience) ; as the Scriptures, or as the Church. The first of these positions is commonly taken by " Liberals," whether Anglican or Nonconformist ; the second by " Evangelicals," whether Anglican or Nonconformist ; the third by " Catholics," whether Anglican or Roman. Each view separately is open to serious criticism, and has got it fully from the advocates of the others ! It does not take much knowledge of history to see the errors into which each may lead and has led. The individual judgment may be blinded or distorted ; Scripture is variously interpreted, and does not deal directly with all cases ; the Church has unquestionably sometimes gone far wrong. But in practice it is rarely that any one stands alone ; our interpretation of the Bible depends partly on our own ideas of what is right and true, partly upon our previous training, which comes from the Church, taken in a wide sense. Again, those who maintain the authority of the Church are glad to reinforce this if possible by the testimony of Scripture and by that of reason and experience. And the individual experience and judgment must in religion as elsewhere be checked by that of others, which really means falling back on the authority of the Church, and of the Scriptures as recording the religious experience of men of special opportunities and capacities.

As regards the authority of Scripture it is well to note the careful way in which this is stated in our Articles, as limiting the authority of the Church. " Whatsoever is not read therein nor may be proved thereby is not to be required to be believed as an article of the Faith or thought requisite or necessary to salvation." The Church has authority on controversies of Faith, yet must not ordain anything contrary to God's Word written, or besides it to enforce anything to be believed for necessity of salvation. Things ordained by General Councils as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared (i.e. shown, made manifest) that they be taken out of Holy Scripture. Thus the Church (1) may not contradict Scripture ; but (2) it has authority not only in

government and ceremonial, but also in doctrine ; yet (3) it cannot lay down terms of salvation, or truths necessary for salvation without clear Scripture warrant. But our Church, unlike some Reformed Churches, nowhere lays down that Scripture is the sole authority in e.g. Church Government or worship ; nor indeed that every true doctrine is necessarily taught, and taught clearly, in Scripture. Hooker, for instance, opposes the Puritan claim that all worship and government should be after Scripture precedent, which led to some very forced exegesis. He declares that whatever is said of God and of what is God's, other than the truth, " though it seemeth to be an honour, it is an injury."

But the present tendency is to attach too much importance to *experience*—this is in reality a partial test of truth. The appeal is to *experience* rather than to judgment. But individual experience may be narrow or partial. And to fall back on the religious experience, e.g. of great mystics, is open not only to the ordinary objections to Church authority, but to the further one that we are incapable of checking the records of such experience ; we can check the arguments of others, but not their feelings. And few things are less convincing than statements of other people's feelings unless we ourselves have experienced the like, at least in some measure ; otherwise they may fall absolutely flat. To take an illustration, to a non-musical man statements of the effect of music on the emotions are ineffective, if not meaningless. He is tempted to disbelieve all strong statements of this ; milder cases he may believe simply from the testimony of his friends, but without comprehending ; but anyhow, it has nothing to do with him personally. And the records of experience are inevitably coloured by the views held by those who relate it ; e.g. probably the real cause of healing is much the same in the case of cures attributed to charms, to Christian Science, to Faith-Healing, to oil blessed by the Bishop, or to our Lady of Lourdes.

But the best solution of the question seems suggested by the way in which the various authorities commonly combine. Authority lies not exclusively in any one of the three, but in their combination. None of them can be dispensed with ; each serves to support or control the others. The defects or delusions of the individual judgment or conscience are supplied or obviated by the authority of the Scriptures or of the Church, while *their* presumed directions have to

commend themselves to the individual's common sense or conscience. Also the Church rests or should rest upon Scripture as far as possible, and is its exponent and interpreter. Only we must have a wide view of what the Church is ; and also not regard its teaching as necessarily infallible—it needs controlling by the other sources of authority.

The ultimate authority in religion is the Holy Spirit. "These sources of authority all derive from Him. There is, however, risk of identifying His voice with that of any of those exclusively, or of maintaining that it guarantees infallibility in any of them. One regrets a recent tendency to support resolutions of conferences by affirming that their members felt the presence of the Holy Ghost. While probably not so intended, this looks like an attempt to silence criticism, and to prevent the resolutions being judged upon their merits. The Holy Spirit speaks through the Scripture, through the Church, and directly to the individual Christian ; but not in such a way as to deliver us from the need of thought, or to make it impossible to avoid error. In the days of the prophets, there were many false prophets, and probably a large number of prophets with very intermittent inspiration ; and the present day call for prophets is pretty sure to lead to a more abundant supply of these than of the genuine prophet. The criticism of prophets—"discerning of spirits"—was needed then, so also now. While the authority of the Holy Spirit is ultimate and supreme, this authority is exercised through these other sources of authority and their limitations are not removed by the fact that the Spirit speaks through them ; He is not their only inspirer.

We have therefore to recognize several relative authorities on religion ; to control each of these by the rest, and to set greater confidence in their combination. "A threefold cord is not easily broken."

HAROLD SMITH.

WORKERS' EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION

AN ADVENTURE IN WORKING-CLASS EDUCATION. By A. Mansbridge, Hon. M.A., Oxon. London: *Longmans, Green & Co.* 6s.

The Author of this book is the founder of the "Workers' Educational Association" ; for twelve years he was its General Secretary (1903-15) ; and now he gives us the story of the origin, beginnings, and development of the Association. The movement has spread to Australasia, and it will probably extend further. The volume has more than a dozen illustrations (groups of workers, and the like). An undeniably interesting book, to be sure, but not without some noticeable limitations : what of "the one thing needful" ?