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1925

674TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING,
HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOM B, THE CENTRAL HALL,
WESTMINSTER, S.W., ON MONDAY, MARCH 9TH, 1925.
AT 4.30 P.M.,

THE REV. ERIC K. C. HAMILTON, M.A., IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read, confirmed and signed.

The CHAIRMAN explained that the Rev. Dr. C. E. Raven had, for reasons of health, asked that his engagement might be cancelled, and that the Rev. Charles Gardner, M.A., had stepped into the breach at very short notice. The best thanks of the Council were due to him for this.

The CHAIRMAN then called on the Rev. Charles Gardner, M.A., to read his paper on "Nature and Supernature."

NATURE AND SUPERNATURE.

By the REV. CHARLES GARDNER, M.A.

MATTHEW ARNOLD said that the saints of the Middle Ages were governed by heart and imagination. They feared the senses and the body, and mortified the bodily senses with extreme austerity. In the sixteenth century a reaction took place, and this reaction was carried on into the eighteenth century, when there was the restoration of the intelligence and the senses. Matthew Arnold defined the modern mind as imaginative reason: a definition which, I think, served for the nineteenth century, but it does not serve for the twentieth, because in our own time we have had a reaction against the intelligence. A great many followers of Bergson are anti-intellectualists.

Coming back to the Middle Age, it emerged out of such a dark period; nobody knows exactly what was happening during that dark period, but out of it came the great Middle Age. Many people hark back to it, their imagination captivated, or in doubt of present time. I want to give a negative definition, and say what the Middle Ages were not remarkable for. Mediævalism was essentially a distrust of nature. Nature had so far fallen out of account in the scientific world that if you happened to be a physician you had to quote Galen or Averroes. You must never make direct observations on nature, otherwise you ran athwart

the Scholastic tradition. With the theologians and saints there was a very sharp antithesis between nature and grace. Nature was mistrusted, and therefore to be overcome, and when nature was overcome the saint hoped to attain perfection in the supernatural life. Let us look more closely at this word "nature." We understand by nature in the widest sense of the word the universe—and not only as we know it in this world. Nature includes man's body, which it constantly affects.

To take examples from the Middle Ages. When you start with a distrust of nature and a distrust also of the intelligence, but retain a passionate belief in the heart and imagination, you get the sort of saint that is represented by St. Bernard. Notice especially how he sets about to imitate Christ. Bernard begins with a fixed determination to overcome nature in order to reach to a supernatural life. He finds himself in his lower nature a part of this nature—that is, by his body; and living in an age when asceticism was very much to the fore in the Church, he thought he could help by taking his body in hand, starving it as far as he could; and, not only so, he proceeded to dull every one of his senses, and actually to bring them to a state of atrophy. One of the strange things about St. Bernard was that he could go through the most beautiful country in France and never see the natural beauties all along his walk. You might give him the sourest vinegar and he would not know the difference between that and wine. And so with his ear. He could not distinguish between the sweetest song of the nightingale and that of any other bird. You cannot say his spiritual life was rooted, in any sense of the word, in the natural. Certainly it was rooted in God, but cut off from any natural foundation. It is really a spirituality that is divorced from nature. The result is, that when St. Bernard reaches his ideal he is desperately thin, and his eyes are almost starting out of his head, the flesh has so completely fallen away. But he does stand for spirit, and he has a very exquisite spirituality. A man of heart, a man of very lovely imagination, which he revealed in his work on the *Song of Solomon*. His treatise on *The Love of God* shows the same qualities. There is always in these cases of exaggeration a reaction. We can very conveniently study the reaction here in Abélard, who represents all that is denied by Bernard. He was stirred by a passionate love of nature. He had a most romantic love affair with Héloïse. Taking the typical examples of the Middle Ages you can see the age cut into two by Bernard and Abélard—the extraordinary

and dramatic Abélard, who had travelled in many countries of Europe, and had come so victorious out of every University that he was considered the great dialectician. He had only one man to reduce to silence before his victory was complete. That man was Bernard, and they were to meet at the cathedral of Sens. All the great ladies were present, all the savants, all the learned people of the age. Bernard came—a little, thin man, head down, and eyes to the ground. Abélard looked disdainfully at him, and then a strange thing happened. Bernard looked at Abélard—spirit looked at nature, nature succumbed, Abélard's courage failed. He fled out of the cathedral, conquered by Bernard, showing that spirit, even if divorced from nature, is stronger than nature. If you have to choose between spirit and nature—Bernard and Abélard—you must choose Bernard.

The abuse in the Middle Ages is seen in a great many people who, in their distrust of nature, came to look upon nature as evil. It led them into a dualism of evil nature and good spirit. Seeing that man's body was part of nature, they regarded it as the seat of man's evil. That is Manicheism, which misapplies the principle of asceticism. When we get the whole thing into its right proportion, man's perfection lies not in bringing his natural self to perfection, but by being born again of the Spirit and reaching perfection in the supernatural life. There is required a certain amount of discipline of the body, and from that point of view asceticism is a help and not a hindrance.

* * * * *

There is an old truth which we are familiar with to-day—that we only live in so far as we die: that the Lord Christ attained to fullness of Resurrection Life because He first died. The process of dying to live has to be carried out in every part of our nature. Every Christian knows that there is a death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness. St. Francis rose again towards nature, but after that process of dying to live in nature he no longer regarded nature as his mother; he welcomed nature as his sister. When brother Francis comes back to nature, after having died to nature, he bursts out into a lovely song of the sun and moon and stars, and unexpectedly turning again to his body, which he had held in contempt, welcomed it by the name of "Brother Ass," because it carried so many burdens. I take St. Francis as an example of one in the Middle Ages who transcended his age.

Coming now to the sixteenth century. I am not going to touch upon the Reformation to-day. Another process discernible in the sixteenth century is a return to nature ; a return to nature that was begun, not by the Catholics, not by the Protestants, but by men of science, and I have chosen as my representative man Copernicus. He perhaps does not best typify the period, but he represents the scientific spirit, one of those names that has revolutionized the old cosmogony. He represents the return to nature and also a return to reason. He sat under a learned man of the day, Pomponazzi, who insisted on the use of reason. Copernicus, who was studying theology and was learning from Pomponazzi to use his reason, was also a good classical scholar, a philosopher and an artist. His doctrine of the earth going round the sun was opposed to the accepted scholastic tradition which prevailed until he began, with his own use of reason and eyes, to study nature and make his observations on the natural facts, and this was a beginning of what we call induction. That is, he made his observations, he grouped together his facts, and then he argued from particulars to generals ; and that is an accurate example of the way the modern mind works. I am understanding here the real, true modern mind. Copernicus then returned to the teaching of Pythagoras, who had affirmed that the earth went round the sun, and there was a huge consternation in the learned world. The Roman Catholic Church looked on him with interest, and, as she was busy revising the Calendar, she consulted him. Martin Luther called him "that fool." Calvin quoted the ninety-third Psalm and thought that was a sufficient refutation. The Church of Rome eventually condemned Copernicus. We must say in extenuation that she took the advice of scientific men, and it was the men of science who first condemned Copernicus. We are always hearing to-day that it was the Church, but having asked for advice she thought it better to follow the men of science.

This marks what I call a return to nature, and it has continued down to this twentieth century. Let us begin with the abuse of nature. Bruno is an example of the abuse of nature. Giordano Bruno is, however, fashionable to-day with the modern people, and they remember that the Church of Rome burnt him at the stake. Mrs. Annie Besant likes to believe that she was Bruno ! Bruno was brought up in a Dominican monastery. As a boy he accepted the Copernican system, but soon began to make his own observations on nature. He grew impatient of

the Church teaching. He despised the Dominican brethren and chaffed them for their devotion. He hated their heresy hunts and subservience to Aristotle. He fell in love with nature, and then, wanting to find a name for nature—he was so enamoured of her—he called nature his mother. He studied the multiplicity of facts in nature, and, with a desire to come to some sort of unity, he revived the old theory of Pantheism. He affirmed that there is only one substance, and, therefore, though there seems to be a multiplicity of persons and things, there is a fundamental unity of all persons and things in the unity of God, of whom every separate man is a part. Pantheism was the result in Bruno of his poring over the principles of Copernicus and falling in love with nature. I want you to notice the action of the Church of Rome with regard to Bruno. She did not understand the Copernican system, but she did understand Pantheism. She was one of the great religious bodies which have always known where they stood towards Pantheism. Watching Bruno she was inclined to think that the principles of Copernicus led to Pantheism, but she condemned Bruno as a Pantheist and not as a Copernican.

Now we may come down rather more rapidly to the nineteenth century and see what was its attitude towards nature. To start with Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle represented a very large number of thinkers who turned from the supernatural, and reacted so violently against it that they returned to nature, and said that what you call the supernatural is simply a part of nature itself. It is a part of the natural process, and nature is the handiwork of God who works mediately through her. Therefore, if you will turn to nature and study her laws, you will find as much as you can know of God. Supernatural religion, the miraculous element in the Bible, all idea of revelation as something that God has given directly, were repudiated, and men said: Maybe the great moral laws are to be found in nature. Let us study nature and see whether we cannot find in her everything that justifies our morality. They turned to nature, and the early Victorian said: What we call morality is the result of a long course of evolution. We learned long ago that it is better to have a clean face than a dirty face. We learned later by experience that it was better to have a clean heart than a dirty heart. They evolved this great principle of nature of which man himself is a part. Then they went on to ask: Can we find in the moral world sufficiently the law of cause and effect? When they studied again they

discovered in human conduct that what a man sows that he always reaps. Every action, every thought is so much seed, and brings its inevitable result; and, therefore, they said, the wise man is the one who studies the law of cause and effect in human conduct, and when he has mastered that law applies it to his own life, working it out in his own conduct. One good came from this movement: it taught men to see that in the spiritual life there is this law of cause and effect. After men had repudiated the supernatural and very much of the spiritual world, and learned to respect God's laws in nature, at a later stage they turned round and said: May we not find these laws working through the spiritual world? It was Henry Drummond who wrote a book called *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*, which is useful because it does mark in the latter part of the nineteenth century the application of what men were learning from nature to the facts of supernature. It is a little harbinger of the swing of the pendulum when the supernatural shall come into its own.

Now for the twentieth century and where we stand. I know there are some teachers in high places in the Church who repudiate the supernatural on the ground that it is all to be found in nature. The Dean of St. Paul's is one who takes that line. There are signs that men, having discovered just how much they could learn from nature of the law of morality, are turning back once more to the supernatural. They are studying the laws of the supernatural life; and, they declare, not that natural law is found in the spiritual world, but spiritual law is running throughout the whole universe. This recovery of the idea of law in the supernatural is, I think, the most supremely important thing that is going on at the present time. The reaction of the sixteenth century has spent itself. We are coming back to the supernatural. What will be the result when we have reinstated the supernatural? This is, I think, something of the line we shall take. We shall say that God has two ways of working. He works mediately through nature; that is, nature is His means of working on a particular level. Then, on the higher level of the supernatural life He works both mediately and immediately; that is, God can use means for working, but God is Himself higher than law, being the Lawgiver, and therefore must never be regarded as subject to His own laws. Immediate action of God is what used to be called in the old-fashioned days a miracle, or a supernatural act. In getting back to it in this way we are not repudiating nature, but we have climbed

by means of nature, and we have come back to nature through the supernatural way.

How does this affect the whole of the question of faith and the question of the Bible? An experiment has been made—it has been made a thousand times—to take the supernatural element out of the Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments, and people have thought when they have done it they might get a good result. The experiment has shown that when the faith is rejected a philosophy must take its place, and the Bible is read in the light usually of the particular philosophy of the passing age. If that is so, we may ask ourselves, what happens, supposing we begin again to read our Bibles with a frank recognition of the possibility of the supernatural?

We shall turn at first to what is central in the Bible, the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Incarnation is the interference or intervention of God in human history, and is itself a supernatural act of God putting forth His own will immediately to accomplish His purpose in the world. Supposing you accept that, then it seems to me congruous that the One born into this world in that way should be born, not like others, but supernaturally of a Virgin. Again, if such a One dies, there is a possibility of a supernatural act of God that would raise Him up again. Then the Resurrection supposes an Ascension. Reading the Bible thus, and seeing how the Old and the New Testaments are interwoven so closely that you cannot block out the one without the other, you then ask, finally, whether the supernatural is not the only key to the Bible.

Now, all the difficult and diverse and heterogeneous parts suddenly fall into place and converge to one central unity in Christ. I think if we look at it in this way we get our Bible back again, but at the same time keep a larger outlook.

Finally, I suggest that we need a new type of Christian. What draws us to our Lord is the spontaneous loveliness of His character that was not restrained, but fashioned freely by the passion, fire and impulse of His love to the Father and to His children. His divine love included all simple natural things, birds and fruits, earth and sky, till they became the pith and marrow of His parables. We die to live in Him, and when our love to Him becomes the central passion of our lives, it will create a new character in which all the parts of our manifold being, natural and supernatural, will be first unified, and each part will contribute to the completeness of the perfect image.

DISCUSSION.

The CHAIRMAN : Generally, I think you will agree that when one sees on the paper that the original speaker has to cry off at the last moment and another speaker is to take his place, the second string is almost always a sorry edition of the first. I have no doubt that Dr. Raven's paper was remarkable, but I daresay the paper we have heard on this subject would be second to none, and, although I know how appreciative you always are, I should like from the Chair to move a very hearty vote of thanks to Mr. Gardner for all that he has said this afternoon. (Acclamation.)

I see I am expected to make a few remarks. You will remember the extraordinarily vivid picture Mr. Gardner gave us of Abélard. I have a great sympathy for Abélard. You will remember he was in the cathedral surrounded by savants and rich ladies. Abélard was an extremely intelligent man—which I am not ; St. Bernard was also. More than that, Mr. Gardner is an extremely intelligent man, so that, far from following in his footsteps, I would rather beat an ignominious retreat.

I would like to ask one question which he may think it worth while to answer, and which perhaps someone in the room may like to enlarge upon. Though I felt I welcomed everything he said in his conclusion about finding the Bible again as a result of this return to the supernatural, I yet wonder with what equipment we may reverently criticize the Bible, while we are perfectly prepared—more than prepared—to accept the supernatural. I do not know whether I have made that brief question clear. We are not to give up an intelligent and rational interest in these documents, even if we are able, by the grace of God—or whatever way you like to put it, not merely to accept, but to look out for, again and again in the Old Testament, the supernatural, the immediate action of God.

The Rev. J. J. B. COLES thanked Mr. Gardner for his very interesting paper. The study of the phenomena of nature should be distinguished from psychological and religious questions relating to man's fallen nature and from the spiritual conflicts of the saints and mystics.

To be "dead to nature" should not be an excuse for unnatural

behaviour in our human relationships. "Union with God," which often occurs in the writings of Christian and non-Christian mystics, is not a Scriptural expression. "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit" is affirmed of the Christian, but "union with God" is not found in the sacred writings.

Mr. ROBERTS: I am very glad that Mr. Coles preceded me. He has said some of the things I should have liked to have said, and he has said them better than I could have done. I should like to give you my own experience as showing the extremely apposite illustration Mr. Gardner took in St. Bernard. I did not hear him commence his paper, but, as I came in, it at once flashed across my mind that this must be St. Bernard of whom he was speaking. I remember that St. Bernard spent three days walking round the Lake of Geneva, and during those three days he never once looked down upon the beauties of that lake, that he might reserve his thoughts for heavenly things.

We must remember we have spirits that God has endowed with an eternal existence, and that this spirit is under some malignant influence and has become rebellious against God, and that spirit has to be re-born; and while the process is going on in our earthly life of probation, we have to turn away from the "old man," but in doing so we should by no means turn away from nature.

There is one thing more I want to make clear. At the end of all I think we shall find that there is nothing arbitrary in the acts of God; that in creation and in the new creation, in the Incarnation and in our salvation, everything results from who God is. That is to say, God cannot do anything other than what He has done, because of who He is. We find that God is love, and this is manifested in His sending His Son to save us. Therefore we are thrown back upon the blessed God who works all things according to His own will, and we know what He is because He is the very God who has redeemed us.

Lieut.-Col. G. MACKINLAY said: I cordially second our Chairman's vote of thanks to our learned lecturer. I have been much impressed of late by the exhortation to be sober-minded in the shorter Pauline epistles, and I believe we have just listened to a most sober-minded address. We have been reminded very graphically of a good many of the prevailing fashions and changes of thought which have swept

over the religious minds of Europe during the last few hundred years ; the list is a long one, continued even to the present time. Our author has well described the reactions which have followed the adoption of almost all the phases of thought which have arisen since the dark ages.

Wildness of belief still arises and modern thought puzzles the man and woman of the present time. How important it is to be guided aright in the mazes which surround us !

Mr. Gardner highly praises nature and the laws by which it is governed—which are, indeed, the laws of the Creator ; our author wisely tells us that the Creator Himself can direct His own laws according to His own will. This is to be expected ; in the Christian plan we find miracles employed again and again ; in fact, the supernatural lies at the root of all the main facts on which the Christian religion firmly rests.

We were expecting another speaker this afternoon ; he was unable to come, and Mr. Gardner very kindly and readily consented to take his place at short notice, but I feel sure none of us will go away disappointed in any way this afternoon.

Mr. AVARY H. FORBES said : Mr. Gardner's interesting paper suffered from a lack of definition. The word " nature " ran through it from beginning to end, but was nowhere defined. It seemed to be contrasted, not with the artificial, but with—*nature*. There are long-standing ambiguities connected with the word, as we see in such phrases as " natural history," " a natural child," etc. Mr. Gardner seemed to use it, as St. Paul uses the word " flesh " (though that, too, is an ambiguous word), to denote man's experiences or feelings coming in through the bodily senses, in contrast to the higher intellectual and spiritual experiences which come in through the mental faculties. But these latter are equally part of our " nature." I quite believe that there is something transcendental and supernatural in the " joy unspeakable " experienced by some converts and mystics ; but when it is objected that religious revivals give rise to emotional feelings, and therefore appeal to a lower form of mentality than that of science and philosophy, it should be pointed out that the experiences of the philosopher and the scientist are precisely the same in kind as those of the convert, though usually

not so in degree. The *aim* also is the same in each case, viz., happiness. The scientist who makes a great discovery, or the philosopher who writes an epoch-making book on ethics or psychology, *rejoices* in his success, in the influence he wields, in the stir he has made, in the way he is talked about, run after, interviewed, quoted; or, it may be, in the way his name will be enshrined, for ages to come, in the world's temple of fame. His gladness may be more intellectual than that of the mystic or the convert, but it comes equally under the category of emotion, and therefore belongs equally to nature.

I should also incline to regard Bacon, rather than Copernicus, as the great pioneer and leader in inductive science. Copernicus concentrated on astronomy; Bacon's philosophy applied equally to all the sciences.

Mr. W. Hoste said: The interesting distinction the lecturer has developed between Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis d'Assisi, may be illustrated, I would suggest, from Psalms ciii and civ, clearly both by same author, let us assume, David. They are in marked contrast, though they both begin and end with the same phrase, "Bless the Lord, O my soul." Psalm ciii is occupied with the theme of spiritual blessings; the other almost entirely with creation and the good of nature. Bernard would have reversed this. Probably in his unspiritual days he admired nature, but that must be remedied. He must not love nature, but die to it. I have heard of modern pietists who refused to admire the most lovely scenery, on the ground that it was part of a doomed creation? They were seekers after the higher life; all that belonged to the lower must be suppressed. But to be "without natural affection" is not a feather in one's cap. However, eventually, Bernard leaves Psalm civ for Psalm ciii. With Francis the order was reversed. He learns to adore the Creator and love nature as a whole. Now, which of these Psalms is on the higher spiritual plane? Probably nine out of ten would say the former, but I think the reverse to be true. In Psalm ciii the writer is speaking to his soul about God, it was third-person religion—"my soul"—"He"; in Psalm civ he is speaking to God in more direct communion; it is second-person experience—"my God" and "Thine"—words never found in the other. I remember in a life by the late Dr. Moule of Durham—which I would earnestly commend to all present, of one who had equal claims, along

with the humblest believer in Christ, to canonization, in the New Testament sense, to Bernard or Francis, and whose sainthood was, I make bold to say, developed on simpler Christian lines than either of those great men—"Charles Simeon of Cambridge," how he admits that as he grew in spiritual experience he was increasingly led to worship God as seen in the works of nature realizing it was the Creator of those wonders who was his Redeemer.

The Rev. A. H. FINN said he felt it would be presumption on his part to criticize anything said by Mr. Gardner, and asked that his remarks might be taken rather as suggestions than criticisms.

Mr. Gardner had alluded to the verse (1 Cor. xv, 40) "first . . . that which is natural and afterward that which is spiritual." He would venture to remind Mr. Gardner (though no doubt he was fully aware of it) that the word for "natural" was *ψυχικόν*, and *ψυχῆ* is the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew "nephesh," applied to birds and animals (Gen. i, 20, 24) as well as to man (Gen. ii, 7). It signifies therefore the life of intelligence, will, and emotion which to some extent animals share with man. The spirit, *πνεῦμα*, is the Divine element in man which enables him to enter into communion with God.

As to Psalm xciii, 2 (P.B.—"He hath made the round world so sure that it cannot be moved"), he had not the Hebrew with him, but believed the word for "round world" was "tebhel," which means the inhabited world (*οἰκουμένη*), and can hardly refer to the nations. The real difficulty lies in the words "be moved." The word used properly means "totter" (or "be shaken"; Gr. *σαλευθήσεται*), and does not imply that the earth is immovable. It refers to the motion being so equable that we do not perceive it, though we are flying round at thousands of miles an hour.

Reference was made to the 19th-century teaching, that every act or thought of man was a cause producing an inevitable effect, so that "as a man sows, so shall he reap." That was only what was taught five centuries B.C. by Gautama the Buddha. The difference between that and our belief is that those considered it in the light of a mechanical process, while we refer it to the will of God.

The Chairman had asked how far reverent criticism of Scripture was permissible. For himself, he was of opinion that much of modern criticism was decidedly irreverent. But his chief complaint against the Higher Criticism (and some present would know that he had

devoted a good deal of study to it) was that it was unscientific. It was often illogical, founded on perversion or ignoring of the facts. Many arguments are deduced, not from facts but from omissions, which is bad criticism.

As to nature and supernature, for us nature must mean all that God has created, and what are called the Laws of Nature are the laws which He has imposed on His creation. Men might try to eliminate the supernatural from the pages of Scripture, but they can never get rid of the Supernature which is the Creator.

The AUTHOR'S reply : I feel myself so in agreement with what has been said by the last speaker that I should have done better to have avoided any reference to the New Testament use of the word "natural." For instance, the *natural* man or the *natural* body always in the Greek is derived from ψυχικός, so that it did bring a little ambiguity into my address which I plead guilty to. I am understanding by "nature," this great world of nature on which we look out and which is not man's creation. I am not considering the mental processes in the consideration of the subject. I trust that this answer to Mr. Coles will put the matter in a better light, and I substantially agree with his remarks.

Let me come to Mr. Hamilton's remarks about criticism. I find it difficult to say in a few words all that I should like to, but certain things have come into my mind after reading some long German lives of Christ, and the first thing is that most of them are very dull. One German life of our Lord Jesus Christ goes into six volumes which are desperately prolix, and even though they contain quantities of learning, they show little imagination. German criticism originated with Britain and France. Voltaire went to the Court of Frederick the Great and introduced French rationalism. German students studied the English Theists. England and France set Germany at the work of criticism, and she worked upon it, generally, with a theory to which everything was subject. I say, get rid of that theory, and keep an open mind and admit the supernatural, and then, I think, we shall not stumble much over the difficult parts of the Bible. But is there anything we shall learn from these long lives of Jesus, and the interpretation of the Bible from the literary point of view and its more human side? Yes, we shall see better the Bible story in the context and perspective of human history.