

RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY

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RELIGIOUS THOUGHT
IN ENGLAND

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IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY THE
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P R E F A C E

‘I DO not judge, I only record,’ said Goethe, as he followed the great discussion before the French Academy, between Cuvier and St Hilaire, concerning the mutability of species. Some men write critical histories, some philosophical, and others write in the interests of a party ; but merely to give premisses or, at the most, to indicate conclusions has been the object of the writer of this volume. This may not be satisfactory to all readers as most people like a guide, and prefer one who agrees with their present convictions, and this agreement is taken as confirmation of what they already believe, while the impartial record often too plainly indicates that some of the most cherished beliefs must be relegated to the category of what the Germans call ‘stand-points overcome.’ What many once regarded as the very essence of Christianity must often now be set aside as merely amongst the accidents, and the result is that the consolation of many a devout soul is for a time inexorably swept away ; but Milton once wrote, ‘All opinions, all errors, known, read and collated, are of much service and assistance towards the speedy attainment of what is truth.’ To refute error it is often enough merely to state it clearly.

The first and most obvious lesson to be learnt from the record of the religious thought of this century is the necessity for toleration, or the duty of impartially weighing beliefs other than our own. Whatever estimate we make of Revelation no

one can say it is as clear as we wish it to be, or that it is given in the manner that we would have devised. Our wish is to see it written in the heavens and the veil so withdrawn that there would not remain a shadow between. But we can only come to the light by degrees, or it may be that only in this way can the light come to us. The strifes about opinions are manifestations of human infirmity, the outcome of the disposition to determine what Revelation should be and how it should be given, instead of patiently inquiring what it is, and how it has been given.

In the study of religious thought great allowance must be made for the individualities of men's minds. Psychological idiosyncrasies will often account for differences of belief and unbelief. So men's opinions do not make truth. Revelation may be true, though as yet it may not have been fully apprehended by one single person, and no two minds have agreed as to its meaning in every respect. Some will cling to authority rather than undergo the sense of partial uncertainty implied in a process of inquiry. Others naturally tend to see nothing as settled. There is such a thing as a genius for negation.

In the following pages all appellations are used in their conventional sense. Orthodox are not those who hold right doctrine but those commonly called orthodox. Heresy is not taken as that which is wrong but as a departure from the conventionally orthodox. Catholic does not and cannot mean the universal, as there is no universal Church in the sense of one visible organisation which was the original, and is the only consistent idea of a Catholic Church. Protestants are not those who protested at the Diet of Spire, but those who protest against, or stand apart from the Church of Rome. Unitarian is not one who believes in the unity of God with the implication that Trinitarians deny that unity. It merely means those commonly called Unitarians.

The author is aware that a second-hand account of any writer's belief is rarely reliable. It may not be always intention-