

CHAPTER 2

THE IDEA OF AN INTRODUCTION TO DOGMATICS

In Protestant circles it is commonly admitted that faith and knowledge have each a distinct sphere. Religion, confounded with religiosity, should be solely an "affair of the heart". Its exclusive domain should be that of sentiment. It should add nothing to our knowledge, the rôle of extending our knowledge having devolved on science.

Now, it is certain that Reformed Christianity, as a social, traditional, and historical fact, presents itself as the depository of a revelation which does not visualize the heart except through the intelligence. It attaches value to emotion and enthusiasm only in so far as these sentiments are provoked by religious truth, recognized as such, by a divine promise, the meaning of which has been grasped and the divine character of which has been verified intellectually. No doubt, as Calvin's well-known aphorism declares, the seat of religious knowledge is the heart rather than the head. But, in order that it may descend into the heart and set the will in motion, it must in the first place be received in the mind and understood by it.

Thus, even in so far as it has been assimilated by the individual and has become subjective, religion is not purely an affair of sentiment, still less of sentimentalism. To our knowledge of sensorial and rational origin, it adds supra-sensorial and supra-rational knowledge, concerning that which God wills that we should think of Him, in order that we may glorify Him and find in Him our happiness and our "unique consolation in life and death".

The organ which grasps religious truth must be normally that which we call religiosity, or religious consciousness, that is to say, the intelligent sensibility of man, orientated towards God. This sensibility must be considered above all as a representative faculty; or better, to adopt the phraseology of the philosopher Wolff, as a "presentative faculty", but this faculty has been gravely injured by sin: it requires to be regenerated and restored. It then takes the name of virtual faith. This latter is pure receptivity, aptness to recognize the divine reality, in the scholastic sense of stable disposition. Faith in act is religious knowledge grasped and possessed by the subject.

In a general sense, it may be said that for Rome faith is a pure and simple intellectual adhesion to the teaching of the infallible Church. The Reformers profoundly modified this conception. Calvin, for example, declares faith in act to be "a certain and firm knowledge of the love of God towards us, according to which, by His Gospel, He declares Himself to be our Father and Saviour by means of Jesus Christ."¹

Here, faith has for its object no longer the Church but God and His promises. It rests on the Word of God. It is no longer an intellectual state, pure and simple. It is as inseparable from the confidence of the heart as the sun is from its heat or its light.² It has an object which it grasps intellectually: God, His love; Christ, His redemptive work. It is a knowledge of these things, founded on the authority of God, speaking in and through the Scriptures. The act of adhesion of the will follows and does not precede the knowledge, for it is the latter which conditions it. By the aid of a *Deus dixit* our Reformer criticizes the doctrinal system of Rome, and in the Word of God, which is for him the Bible, he seeks out all the materials for his theological edifice.

It follows that while a theology which will not take into consideration this fact and which imagines itself capable of building on a different foundation may claim the title of Protestant, it places itself historically outside the current of the Reformation. A new principle demands a new name. The title inscribed at the head of this work indicates our standpoint: the formal external principle and the supreme rule before which we bow. The canonical books of Holy Scripture are, for us, in the sense in which they were for our fathers, the source and the rule of faith. "We believe that the Word contained in these books has proceeded from God, from whom alone they derive their authority and not from men. And because it is the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation, it is not permissible for men, nor even for angels, to add to it, diminish or change it; whence it follows that neither antiquity, nor customs, nor the multitude, nor human wisdom; nor judgments, nor sentences, nor edicts, nor decrees, nor councils, nor visions, nor miracles, ought to be opposed to this Holy Scripture but, on the contrary, all things ought to be examined, regulated and reformed in accordance with it."³

The principle, which is for religion the principle of all revision,

¹ *Geneva Catechism*, XVIII.

² Calvin, *Opera*, II, 183 ff.

³ *Confessio Gallicana* or *Confession of La Rochelle*, 1559, art. v.

is itself irrevocable: it is the *inconcussum*. To replace it by another is, from the intellectual point of view, not simply to reform the ancient religion, but to pass from one religion to another. Now we intend to live and die in the faith for which our martyrs suffered and died, because we believe it to be true. We can do no other. We are bound by a power which we perceive to be the power of God.

The idea that one might dream of re-establishing in all its vigour the formal principle laid down by the Reformer of our Church will probably be envisaged with amazement by those who imagine that this principle is discredited scientifically. We ask such to suspend judgment until the moment when we shall be in a position to study the relations between the doctrine of inspiration and the claims of science.

Since it is our declared intention to reaffirm Calvinism in the scientific sphere, we can have no objection in principle to textual criticism, nor to literary criticism of the documents of revelation, provided it is conducted with a strict regard for facts. But we consider that theological subjectivism has taken the wrong direction by following the line of least resistance. Instead of progressively narrowing the fact of inspiration, restricting it first to the ideas, then to the things, then to the persons, and finally to their religious emotions, the means of effecting a fundamental reconciliation between dogma and the findings of science should be sought in a more supple, organic and vital conception of plenary inspiration itself. This is what we hope to do at a later stage of the present work, and it will be for our readers to judge whether we succeed or not.

Scripture is the unique source of religious knowledge. Faith does not derive this knowledge from itself but is merely the receptive organ which takes cognisance of it (*fides qua creditur*). By extension, the term faith may denote the religious truth itself to which the believer adheres (*fides quae creditur*), that which is believed.

It is of the highest importance to observe that in religious language, as distinct from current speech, to believe does not signify to maintain as true something which one recognizes as merely possible but does not know effectively. In the two senses of the term, religious faith signifies the supreme certitude: the faith of the subject who believes excludes the doubt of adherence and repels the doubt of temptation. The faith which is believed, that is to say, the objects of the faith, the dogmas, whether directly, in virtue of their intrinsic force, or indirectly, in virtue of a testimony the authority for which has the same

intrinsic force, are capable of claiming our adhesion legitimately. The subject who believes is psychologically conscious of being affected by an object to the constraint of which his judgment submits: it is only by adhesion that faith becomes a free act.

From the epistemological point of view, it will suffice, strictly speaking, to notice two moments in the concept of faith. First, a receptive moment: the judgment (representative and intelligent sensibility) is put into active receptivity through contact with divine realities. This is the moment of intuition and of intellection. Second, a dynamic moment: the will adheres and the heart confides. This moment is determined by efficacious grace. It is the act of faith properly so called: the succession of these two moments involves as a necessary consequence a knowledge distinguished by the repose of the intelligence in the certainty of divine faith.

The first of these moments implies that God knows himself perfectly (*theologia archetypica*): that according to the analogical method, he is capable of communicating this knowledge to creatures endowed with intelligence, in particular, to man (*theologia ectypica*). Our early theologians also designated this mode of religious knowledge by the expression *theologia viatorum*, the theology of the wayfarer. After glorification in heaven this knowledge will become a knowledge of possession by the perfect realization of the promises. This will then be the theology *beatorum*. The religious thought of Christ, the supreme teacher and prophet of mankind, was described as a theology of the personal union of the divine human nature (*theologia unionis*). The second moment implies that the believing reason is capable of receiving a revelation communicated in human language and of systematizing the ectypic knowledge so acquired.

Dogmatics is nothing less than science, that is to say, the genetic and synthetic exposition of realities of which faith has only a spontaneous knowledge, certain indeed, but scarcely, if at all, organized. Reduced to these proportions, however, dogmatics would be no more than an incomplete science. Every discipline sufficiently elaborated must be taken as itself the object of its researches and must reflect on its own methods, principles and origins. It is not sufficient for the theorist to introduce precision and order into its facts: he should be able to give an account of the route which he has followed in arriving at them. Every order of science has a corresponding philosophy. It is to meet this need that introductions and prolegomena to

dogmatics are attempted, as well as philosophies of religion or of belief, when they are the philosophies of believers.

Reformed theology itself, which became Cartesian in the 17th century, and thus formally rationalistic, while remaining all the while materially orthodox, has been particularly fruitful in treatises of natural theology. These treatises have generally been little else but thinly disguised essays on the philosophy of religion. Natural theology is considered in them as an autonomous discipline, constituted solely by the resources of the light of nature and leading to the living God, the author of positive revelation. The function of revelation begins, once this truth has been acquired. Properly considered, however, this manner of procedure is incompatible with certain doctrines which possess a vital importance for the Reformed religion, for example, the doctrine of total corruption.

Moreover Calvin, Peter Martyr and the first Calvinistic divines make the certitude and exactitude of the results obtained by the light of nature to depend on the very principle of dogmatics. This is one of the most happily original aspects of primitive Reformed theology. Recent Calvinistic theologians like Boehl, Kuyper and Bavinck, have returned to the primitive conception which Voetius still maintained in the 17th century. With this fundamental conception we associate ourselves.

The introduction to the study of dogmas is a philosophy of faith through the faith. It thus constitutes not the final chapter of a metaphysics but the first part of dogmatics itself. It is only by justifying its principles and methods scientifically that religion and theology, the science of religion, can escape from the debasing servitude to which Durkheim, the leader of the sociological school, would reduce them when he writes: "Actually religion does not know itself. If does not know of what it is made, nor to what need it corresponds. Far from being in a position to make law and science, it is itself the object of science."¹

Religious thought is bound, therefore, to show that it has an answer to questions concerning the nature, objects and objective certitude of religion. It must perform this duty if it does not wish to deliver the keys of the fortress into the hands of the satellites of the man of the totem. For such a task the religious

¹ E. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, 1912, p. 615. [Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), French sociological positivist, stresses "the group mind" which for him is the point of reference for all human knowledge. The group mind has an impersonal, non-subjective character that is superior to the individual mind and acts as a directive force for the individual agents that comprise society.]

man alone is qualified, precisely for the reason which disqualifies him in the eyes of Durkheim who declares that "No one ought to study religion while taking into account his own experience of the religious life".¹ We maintain, on the contrary, that since he is religious, in him religion not only can live but can take cognizance of itself and become, for him who lives, the object of immediate observation. He knows it at first hand. Thus, to the paradoxical affirmation of Durkheim, we oppose the view that a personal knowledge of the matter and the processes of a discipline is the indispensable condition of framing a philosophy for it. No one would confide to a mathematician, limited by his branch of knowledge, the task of elaborating a philosophy of history. It would be presumptuous for a blind man to argue about a colour scheme with a man who can see. In this connexion, Aristotle's dictum cited by Höffding² at the head of the first chapter of his *Philosophy of Religion* is most apt: οὐκ ἔστιν λύειν ἀγνοῦντα τὸν δεσμόν. ("Only he who knows how can untie the bond.")

But it may be objected that religious thought in analysing the content of the faith and endeavouring to synthesize its own intellections, is not occupying itself with the religious problem properly so called. The problems with which it is occupied are connected with inner life of religion. In Höffding's view, Religion itself can never become a problem; it must be accepted as a starting-point which admits of no doubt.³

He is mistaken in this, however, for religious thought does occupy itself with the problems of which he himself treats. It is certainly true that the starting-point differs from his. Moreover, the religious problem appears under another aspect. The position of a believer confronted with a person who denies God or doubts His existence is analogous to that of a philosopher, convinced of the existence of other men, who finds himself at grips with a solipsist idealist. In the latter case, the problem would consist, not in proving the existence of other men, which is impossible, but in making the solipsist understand how we can be certain of it and how this certitude must legitimately take rank

¹ *Règles de la méthode sociologique*, p. 43.

² [Harald Höffding (1843-1931), Danish philosopher at the University of Copenhagen, author of texts in psychology, history of philosophy and the philosophy of religion. He held that the world of reality as a whole is unknowable, although we may believe that conscious experience and its unity afford the best keys to unlock the metaphysical riddle. His system of thought is classified on the positive side as a cautious idealistic monism (his own term is "critical monism"). Principal publications: *Philosophy of Religion* (1901); *Kierkegaard*; *Rousseau*; *History of Modern Philosophy*].

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 1.

in science. Another problem would be the investigation of the proper method of showing the illegitimacy of the doubt which the solipsist entertains with regard to the objective existence of the external world.

In order to arrive at a religious problem we have simply to transpose the question, and to envisage the doubt relative to the existence of God. Höffding takes for granted that his religious doubt is legitimate, for the sole reason that it is possible and real. The existence of honest doubters, intellectually normal, is certainly a problem to be considered by religious thought and one which it must endeavour to solve. The believer views the religious problem in a different light from Höffding: he does not ask, for example, what is to replace religion in order to save supreme values, when it has disappeared. He knows that it is irreplaceable and can tell the reason why. As a philosopher, Höffding should know that there are pseudo-problems. One of the tasks of a philosophy of religion, conceived from the viewpoint of faith, is to determine the proper methods for eliminating these pseudo-problems.

If the introduction to dogmatics is regulated by the same principles as dogmatics proper, it nevertheless follows a different method of exposition. The method of dogmatics proper is genetic and synthetic. Proceeding from the data of revelation, it formulates the dogmas, the mysteries of the faith, places in evidence the internal opposition implied by the encounter between the infinite and the finite, between God and the creature: then it endeavours to determine the organic bond which exists between the mysteries and thus to form a synthesis. The introduction to dogmatics is concerned with tracing facts and dogmas to the principles from which the synthetic exposition proceeds. Its method is analytical. But, in the same sense as dogmatics, it is a science of faith by faith. It would make no attempt to guide the seeker's feet towards its principle, if it had not already discovered that principle on its own account. Anselm's *credo ut intelligam* has a value for it in the same way as for the science to which it is the introduction.¹

In both cases, it is a question of understanding what one knows already by faith. In dogmatics proper, the purpose is to discover the organic bond which makes real the unity of the body of Christian doctrine: in the introduction to dogmatics, what is proposed for consideration is the nature and foundation

¹ [Anselm (1033-1109), O.S.B., born at Aosta, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 till his death; noted for his ontological argument to prove the existence of God; author of *Monologion*, *Proslogion*, *De Veritate*, and *Cur Deus Homo*? His theology and general philosophy are Augustinian.]

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of religious knowledge itself. Only the dogmas which have a direct relation with the epistemological problem enter into discussion here, and these are studied only from the angle of formal religious knowledge. It is our business to show that they have a meaning intelligible for us; that they are not mere formulas empty of all content assimilable by thought.

SAMPLE