

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

STUDIES IN CONVERSION.

VII.

THOLUCK.

THE Germans, being an intellectual people, are fond of tracing the revival of religion which visited their country, as it did the other Protestant communities throughout the world, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, to Schleiermacher, the philosopher and theologian, who is looked upon by his fellow-countrymen as a second Luther and to whom all the schools of modern theology trace back their origin. But a close study of the facts will reveal that the revival, in the practical sphere, was due to older causes and humbler instrumentalities; and, whilst the influence of Schleiermacher was of inestimable value to many who had participated in the awakening, there is another name more deserving to be associated with the origination of the movement itself—that of Tholuck. The latter was in much more pronounced sympathy with the general European awakening; he was much more in contact with the men of the revival in other countries; his beliefs and experiences were much more those of average Evangelicalism; and he was animated, in a supreme degree, with the peculiar passion of the revival—that for winning souls. There is no parallel to his efforts in this direction amongst students, unless it be found in the evangelistic work of Professor Drummond in our own time among the students of the University of Edinburgh.

For a generation Tholuck was, in the public eye, the protagonist of the Awakening in Germany. When, in 1826, at the age of seven-and-twenty, he went as Professor to Halle, which was at that time the stronghold of Rationalism, a protest was made against his appointment by the members

of the theological faculty ; his windows were smashed by the students ; and many other marks of opposition fell to his lot. But such attacks proved a false move on the part of his antagonists, only serving to draw attention to him ; for he was a strong man, quite capable of standing a storm ; and he lived to see his cause triumphant. The Old Rationalism, as it was called, sank into contempt ; and Halle became the stronghold of Evangelicalism among the universities of Germany. One in the position of a theological professor requires, however, to justify himself by more than earnestness, if he is the mouthpiece of any cause ; for he is surrounded not only by students, who are always sensitive to the rumours of fame, but by professors who are able to point out any weaknesses in a colleague's armour. Tholuck was favoured with plenty of this kind of discipline, some of his Rationalistic colleagues being men of great ability as well as of European reputation, who did not spare his earliest efforts at authorship. But he had good humour enough to profit by such corrections ; and his books, which poured in rapid succession from the press, were always improving in ability and learning ; till he came, in course of time, to be acknowledged as the principal ornament of the University. On the occasion of his jubilee, in 1870, the King of Prussia sent him the Star of the Golden Eagle, and addresses of congratulation poured in on him not only from his native country but from many foreign lands.

The chief reason for mentioning him here is, that among his earliest books was one containing an account of his own conversion. This was thrown into an imaginative form, the story being told in letters supposed to have passed between two students, when they were in the throes of a religious crisis ; but it was substantially a record of his own experience. It was written in the glow of first love, and it is one of the most remarkable accounts of conversion ever

penned. The mind of the young author was stored not only with classical lore, but with the treasures of Oriental literature, in which he possessed rare proficiency, and he poured into his book all these materials, fused in the fire of religious passion. He has a great gift of style, and passages abound which are instinct with poetry and eloquence.

The title originally given to this production was *Guido and Julius*, these being the names of the imaginary correspondents, but, in subsequent editions, it was issued also under two other titles—*The True Consecration of the Doubter*, the reference here being to a Rationalistic book by De Wette, entitled *The Consecration of the Doubter*, and *The Doctrine of Sin*, the consciousness of sin being the decisive factor in the experience of the characters. Even yet it is as moving a book as a student can take into his hand ; but it is difficult now to realise the impression it made on a generation to which the ideas it embodies were startling novelties. Of it the author says himself : “ I have not derived the same pleasure from any of my other writings ; and there have been many, even in distant lands, who have acknowledged that they could look back upon the reading of this book as the turning-point in their lives.” The veil thrown over facts and personalities in this religious romance can be nearly altogether removed by turning to the *Life of Tholuck*, in two volumes, by his friend and disciple, Professor Leopold Witte ; and, in fashioning the following picture, the present writer is able to avail himself of notes, made at the time, of conversations with which the distinguished scholar, in his extreme old age, was good enough to honour him.

Friedrich August Gotttreu Tholuck was born at Breslau, the capital of Prussian Silesia, in 1799 ; and his boyhood and youth were spent among the religious influences which it was to be his lifework to denounce and counteract. Here is his own account of the kind of religion in which he was

educated. "The director of the gymnasium, an old man, honoured the pineal gland as the seat of the spirit, and had often discussed the question, whether it would not have been better if the Creator had given man a third hand or a third foot in place of a heart. He had to teach religion ; and day by day, without remorse, he hauled into the classroom the skeleton of it, which he had constructed, and rattled the bones, till the pupils shuddered. The other masters were no better : they were linguists without one living word in their entire vocabulary. The preachers of the town were some of them orthodox, others neologian ; but both kinds were feeble and insipid. All they had of religion consisted of cold lava collected from other people's volcanoes."

In his later life he used to narrate innumerable anecdotes illustrative of the beggarly and bankrupt state into which the mind and heart of Germany had been brought by the dominance of Rationalism, and he has left behind him books from which the most graphic picture may be obtained of what Rationalism actually was. It was the counterpart of what, in England, in the eighteenth century, was called Latitudinarianism and in Scotland is remembered as Moderatism. It was a form of Christianity with all that is distinctively Christian left out ; it was a religion taught by men in whose life the conspicuous thing was the absence of religion ; it boasted of its morality, but, under its influence, the life of the people became sordid, pagan and profane. In Germany Rationalism had the same character, but it was much more unorthodox than its counterparts in this country ever ventured to be. The students were taught from the professor's chair that the Widow's Son at Nain was not really dead, but that Jesus, chancing to meet the funeral procession at a moment when signs of life were visible in the apparently dead body, took advantage of this circumstance to effect what was considered a resurrection ; that the Feed-

ing of the Five Thousand was due to the good example of Jesus, who opened His basket of provisions, and thus induced others likewise to assist their neighbours, till all were satisfied—and so on, the miracles of our Lord being one and all reduced to mere natural events. Jesus Himself was a good man and a great teacher—only somewhat enthusiastic and extravagant.

When Tholuck went to Halle, there were seven hundred theological students, but only five of these believed in the divinity of Christ: one of the five, he told me, was George Müller, afterwards so famous for his Orphan Homes at Bristol. For some years, as often as in his lectures the young professor referred to the deity of Christ, the students tried to ruff him down, until one day a big, brawny student put a stop to the practice by leaping up and, in terms the reverse of parliamentary, intimating that anyone who dared thus to interrupt again would have to answer to him.

These incidents of his subsequent life will convey some notion of the religious atmosphere in which he was brought up at Breslau. In his home there was nothing fitted to counteract the general impression; for his parents, though they went regularly to church, had no religion beyond what was formal. He remembered, indeed, seeing in his early days one humble figure from which true religion had looked forth on him now and then: this was a Moravian Brother, who was employed occasionally in menial work about his father's house. But his parents laughed at the child of God, turning his warnings and prayers into ridicule, and the boy too easily followed their example. At school he developed an extraordinary passion for languages; and, by the time he was sixteen years of age, he had mastered about a score of these. It was especially with the tongues of the Orient that he occupied himself. He wandered in the perfumed gardens of Arabia, and his mind intoxicated itself

with the pantheism and theosophy of Persia. In a public oration which he delivered, when leaving the high school, he placed Moses, Jesus and Mohammed side by side on the same level, but preferred to all three the Indian Menu, the Persian Zoroaster and the Chinese Confucius.

Thus the bastard religion of the time appeared likely to find in him an enthusiastic exponent, if ever he ascended the pulpit, though his thoughts at this time were directed towards the career of a traveller or Orientalist. But already he differed from his contemporaries in one important respect : he was thoroughly unsatisfied. He had a violent and volcanic nature, and his religion gave him no power to control it. His home was not a happy one. They had tried to make him a goldsmith—the trade of his father—but he found means of demonstrating that he was not fit for it. His mind was passionately set on the acquisition of knowledge, and nothing would satisfy him but a university career. He envied the sons of wealthier citizens, to whom the pathway was easy, and strove, not without success, to make a way by the force of his talents into their society. He was consumed with ambition and built the most daring castles in the air. His temper was uncontrollable ; and the cyclops within him—as he called the demonic element by which he was possessed—raged, when his will was crossed, not only against men, but even against God. From an early age he was haunted with the thought of suicide, and attempted more than once to end what he considered his miserable existence.

A step which he took, after he had been about a year a student in the university of Breslau, will show what an original and reckless spirit he was of. Having borrowed from a friend as much money as would take him to Berlin, he appeared one morning at the gate of one of the finest mansions in the capital, inhabited by a famous Orientalist, whose works he had been studying, with the intention of

asking that he might be taken in as an inmate of the house or made the adopted son of the great scholar. At the door he was informed that the master was ill and could not see any-one ; whereupon he rushed off to fling himself into the river from the parapet of a neighbouring bridge. The manservant, alarmed at a strange look in his face, ran after him and, having brought him back, consented to carry in, to his master, a letter in which the singular visitor described himself and his desires. And—marvellous to relate—the request was granted. The aged scholar, having just lost his private secretary, was in urgent need of someone acquainted with Eastern tongues who could write for him ; and, that very day, Tholuck was installed in the house as his amanuensis and, in no long time, was acknowledged as his friend.

This extraordinary incident made a deep impression on the young man's morbid mind. It stilled the tumult of his ambitions and created in him the faith that a Providence was watching over his way. Von Diez—the scholar under whose roof he had been so strangely received—was an earnest Christian ; and it excited many salutary thoughts in the secretary's mind to see so much learning in union with such simple faith. Besides, von Diez was in contact—and through him Tholuck was brought into contact—with circles in the city in which a totally different kind of religion was to be met with from any which he had hitherto known.

In the middle of last century Berlin was a very irreligious place ; in fact, " Berliner " and " unbeliever " were often said to be synonymous terms ; Frederick the Great delighting to entertain at his court Voltaire and the other famous infidels of the day. Yet in the very darkest time some sparks of living religion burn on. In Berlin, although public oracles were dumb, yet they that feared the Lord spake often one to another. They assembled in little meetings, which were harried by the police but, nevertheless, multi-

plied, till, when Tholuck came, there were twenty of them in different parts of the city. Those who frequented these gatherings did not turn their backs on the churches; on the contrary, they went gladly to any church where anything like a living gospel was to be heard; but they craved for more and closer intercourse with one another. They sang hymns and prayed extempore; and they often read the writings of the English Evangelicals or accounts of the work of the English missionary societies. The majority of those who attended were humble people, yet there was not wanting a sprinkling of the educated and the high-born.

“Before I knew Jesus myself,” says Tholuck, “I had sometimes heard individuals spoken of as Mystics, Bigots, Pietists.¹ I avoided such men, because there was nothing

¹ The following note on the nickname “pietist” is from *Bismarck, His Reflections and Reminiscences*, vol. ii., p. 302, and it belongs to a very early stage of the great statesman’s acquaintance with his future imperial master:—“A conversation connected with the name of Von Gerlach, which I had in 1853 with the Prince at Ostend, where I had been brought into closer connexion with him, has remained in my memory, for I was much struck by the Prince’s want of acquaintance with our public institutions and the political situation.

“One day he spoke with a certain animosity about General von Gerlach, who, as it seemed, in consequence of a want of agreement, had in a bad humour resigned his post as adjutant. The Prince spoke of him as ‘a Pietist.’

“I.—What does your Royal Highness mean by a pietist?

“He.—A man who plays the hypocrite in religion in order to advance in his career.

“I.—There is nothing of that in Gerlach; what could he become? In the language of the present day the word pietist has quite another meaning, viz., a man who believes in the Christian religion according to the orthodox creed and makes no secret of his belief; and there are many of them who have nothing to do with political life and do not think of making a career.

“He.—What do you mean by orthodox?

“I.—For example, one who seriously believes that Jesus is the Son of God and died for us as a sacrifice for the pardon of our sins. At the moment I cannot give a more accurate definition, but that is the essential part in the difference of belief.

“He (growing very red).—Who is there, then, so forsaken by God that he does not believe that?

I disliked more than narrow-mindedness, by which I felt that the open chest of a strong man was bandaged, the bold spirit of an ambitious youth handcuffed, and his life, like his face, turned to the pallid hue of death. I thought that with such views the splendid flower-garden of science would become a kitchen garden for daily use, the undulating Eden of nature would become a small, enclosed cloister-ground; while the immeasurable sky above my head would shrivel up to the vault of a catacomb." In spite, however, of these prejudices, he was providentially led into the circles he had despised, and he found them very different from what he had anticipated.

It happened at the time that the dominating figure in them was an aged Baron von Kottwitz. This man was a genuine original. He had seen much of the world and reflected deeply on what he had seen. He did not obtrude religious conversation, but talked with interest of ordinary things and did not disdain the exchange of blithe and witty remarks; but, when he was drawn out and in the right mood, he could speak with the depth and the fire of a prophet. He spent nearly the whole of his means and his time in works of mercy. On his journeys he visited prisons and hospitals, in the spirit of John Howard and Elizabeth Fry, and in Berlin his rooms were thronged by widows and orphans, and by representatives of every form of distress, to whom he never wearied of ministering. At the close of the Napoleonic Wars, when there was much suffering in Berlin through want of employment, the government placed at his disposal an old barracks, in which he succoured

"I.—If what you have just said were publicly known, your Royal Highness would yourself be counted among the pietists."

It may be added, in explanation of the fulness and accuracy of Bismarck's information, that a sister of his was long one of the most conspicuous figures in Evangelical circles and in all kinds of Home Mission effort in the capital of Prussia.

hundreds of the poorest of the poor. Once, it is said, he chanced to call on Fichte, the philosopher, when, after disposing of business, they fell into religious conversation. The philosopher began by talking down to his visitor from the height of his reputation, and at last said impatiently, "Prayer is for children; men must will and act." "Well," rejoined the old gentleman, "I have on my hands six hundred wretched people, and I often do not know where their next meal is to come from; but I pray, and help comes." Fichte was silent; a tear rolled down his cheek; and he said humbly, "Ah! that is something quite beyond the scope of my philosophy." He asked the Baron to be godfather to a child born soon after.

With Von Kottwitz Tholuck was brought into contact; and the experienced soul-winner knew how to act. He did not thrust himself on the young man, but allowed himself to be sought, instead of seeking. He did not spare or flatter him, but treated him with manly frankness. It was not long, however, before each became aware he had found a treasure, and they gave their whole hearts to each other; Von Kottwitz, seeing in this young man of talent one who might be the heir of his own testimony, and Tholuck discerning in his aged friend such an unmistakable embodiment of Christianity that he could not doubt that he had come upon the secret of the Lord. To use his own words, "from the imitation he learned to know the Original; the disciple cast light upon the Master; it was really as if in the patriarch he saw Christ living before his eyes; and the sight of this sanctified life made intelligible in a moment many passages of Scripture which no book had ever explained to him."¹

¹ It is gratifying to note how the name of the humble and hidden servant of God is beginning to be assigned the place it deserves in the religious history of his country. Compare the frequent mention of it in H. Stephan's *Die Neuzeit*, which is vol. iv. of the latest considerable German work on Church History, Krüger's *Handbuch*. A small volume has also been recently devoted to his honour, *Baron Ernst von Kottwitz*, by A. Schultze.

Thus the redeeming force in Tholuck's experience was Christ brought nigh and made real in a Christlike disciple. But, in his autobiography, he explains also in detail how the leading elements of the Christian revelation were made personal possessions to him.

His tendency, from boyhood upwards, had been towards Pantheism, and this tendency was strengthened by his wide wanderings in the fields of Oriental Mysticism. Pantheism identifies the thinking subject with God ; and, in fact, in his daring moments the pantheist says, " I myself am God." To Tholuck's self-centred and towering nature this was a congenial doctrine. But, when he thought it out to the end, he found one rebellious fact, which obstinately refused to be reconciled with the system ; and this was the consciousness of sin. He felt himself to be standing alone and condemned, over against the commanding law of God. And the whole structure of Pantheism collapsed when touched with this one confession of conscience, " I have sinned."

Thus did he find sure footing for faith in the very sense of condemnation. But, in his case, this was no mere conclusion of the intellect. Mention has been made of his ungovernable nature, which allowed him no peace ; but of this he now obtained control. His existence had been not only self-centred, but dominated by an absorbing selfish ambition ; but now there awoke in his soul a hunger and thirst for the good of others which made him the friend and champion of every benevolent and missionary undertaking. His Pietistic friends were not always satisfied with his orthodoxy ; but, if he allowed himself a wider range it was because he desired to exhaust all the fulness of Christ. " In my opinion," he says, " it would have been better for the success of the message of salvation among men in our new time, if they had regarded the sun as sun, instead of breaking off its beams singly, which are sure to be extinguished when

separated. He is the Saviour, we say ; but we have laced up the idea so tightly that all life has gone out of it. We hear the word, and it suggests to us nothing else but—what is great indeed, but only in connexion with all besides—the blood and Golgotha. He came to be a Saviour for everything in thee that longs for salvation. He has saved thy heart and thy reason, thy spirit with thy body, thyself and nature round about thee. And He has saved thee not only by His death but also by His resurrection ; not only by His life on earth but also by His session at the right hand ; not only by what He did but by what He said ; not only by His manhood but by His godhead ; not only by His existence in time but by that in eternity. We cannot tie up the sunbeams in a bundle or put the sea in a tumbler.”

Thus did Tholuck lay hold of a complete Christ ; and he laid hold of Him with all his heart and soul and strength and mind. He found a Saviour who not only set his heart on fire at the time, but filled his words with force, as he testified for Him all the days of a life of more than threescore years and ten. In the glow of first love he took as the motto for his entire life the words of Zinzendorf, and even the founder of the Moravian Church was not truer to their spirit : “ I have only one passion, and it is Christ, and He alone.”

JAMES STALKER.