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ATHEISM

A SPECTRE.

*WITH READING FROM MAX MÜLLER'S SIXTH
HIBBERT LECTURE.*

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BY

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READING.

(From Max Müller's Sixth Hibbert Lecture.)

IN the bright sky they (the ancient Aryans) perceived an Illuminator ; in the all-encircling firmament an Embracer ; in the roar of thunder and in the violence of the storm they felt the presence of a Shouter and of furious Strikers, and out of rain they created an Indra, or giver of rain. With this last step, however, came also the first re-action, the first doubt. So long as the thoughts of the ancient Aryan worshippers had something manifest or tangible to rest on, they might, no doubt, in their religious aspirations, far exceed the limits of actual observation ; still no one could ever question the existence of what they chose to call their Devas or their gods. The mountains and rivers were always there to speak for themselves, and if the praises bestowed upon them seemed to be excessive, they might be toned down, without calling in question the existence of these gods. The same applied to the sky, the sun, and the dawn. They also were always there, and though they might be called mere visions and appearances, yet the human mind is so made that it admits of no appearance without admitting at the same time something that appears, some reality or substance. But when we come to the third class of gods, not only intangible, but invisible, the case is different. Indra, as the giver of rain, Rudra, as the thunderer, were completely creations of the human mind. All that was given was the rain, and the thunder ; but there was nothing in nature that

could be called an appearance of the god himself, who thundered or who sent the rain. Man saw their *work*, but that was all: no one could point to the sky or the sun or the dawn or anything else visible, to attest the existence of Indra and Rudra. We saw before that Indra, for the very reason that there was nothing in nature to which he clung, nothing visible that could arrest his growth, developed more than all the other gods into a personal, dramatic, and mythological being. More battles are recorded, more stories are told of Indra than of any other Vedic god, and this helps us to understand how it was that he seemed even to the ancient poets to have ousted Dyaus, the Indian Zeus, from his supremacy. But a Nemesis was to come. The very god who seemed for a time to have thrown all the others into the shade, whom many would call, if not the supreme, at least the most popular deity of the Veda, was the first god whose very existence was called in question. . . . Thus we read, "Offer praise to Indra if you desire booty, true praise, if he truly exists. Some one says: There is no Indra! Who has seen him? Whom shall we praise?" In this hymn the poet turns round, and, introducing Indra himself, makes him say: "Here I am O worshipper! Behold me here! In might I overcome all creatures." But we read again in another hymn: "The terrible one of whom they ask where he is, and of whom they say that he is not: he takes away the riches of his enemies like the stakes at a game; Believe in him, ye men, for he is indeed Indra." When we thus see the old god Dyaus antiquated by Indra, Indra himself denied, and Prajâpati falling to pieces, and when another poet declares in so many words that all the gods are but names, we might imagine that the stream of religious thought, which sprang from a trust in mountains and rivers, then proceeded to an adoration of the sky and the sun, then grew into a worship of invisible gods, such as the sender of thunderstorms and the giver of rain had well nigh

finished its course. We might expect in India the same catastrophe which in Iceland the poets of the Edda always predicted, the twilight of the gods, preceding the destruction of the world. We seem to have reached the stage when Henotheism, after trying in vain to grow into polytheism on the one side, or monotheism on the other, would by necessity end in Atheism, or a denial of all the gods or Devas.

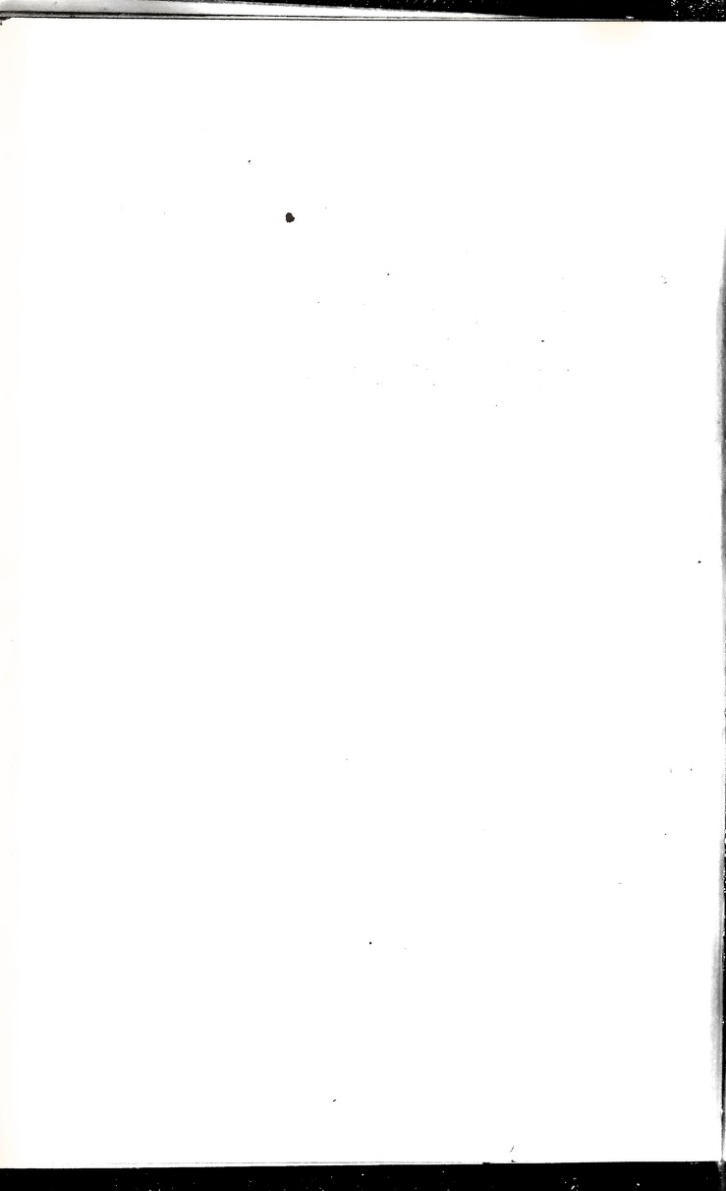
So it did. Yet Atheism is not the last word of Indian religion, though it seemed to be so for a time in the triumph of Buddhism. The word itself—Atheism—is out of place as applied to the religion of India. The ancient Hindus had neither the *θεός* of the Homeric singers, nor the *θεός* of the Eclectic philosophers. Their Atheism, such as it was, would more correctly be called Adeism, or a denial of the old Devas. Such a denial, however, of what was once believed, but could be believed no longer, so far from being the destruction, is in reality the vital principle of all religion. The ancient Aryans felt from the beginning—aye, it may be more in the beginning than afterwards—the presence of a Beyond, of an Infinite, of a Divine, or whatever else we may call it now; and they tried to grasp and comprehend it, as we all do, by giving it name after name. They thought they had found it in the Mountains or Rivers, in the Dawn, in the Sun, in the Sky, in the Heaven, and the Heaven-Father. But after every name there came the No! What they looked for was *like* the Mountains, *like* the Rivers, *like* the Dawn, *like* the Sky, *like* the Father: but it was *not* the Mountains, *not* the Rivers, *not* the Dawn, *not* the Sky, it was *not* the Father. It was something of all that, but it was also more, it was beyond all that. Even such general names as Asura or Deva could no longer satisfy them. There may be Devas and Asuras, they said, but we want more, we want a higher word, a purer thought. They denied the bright Devas, not because they believed or desired

less, but because they believed and desired more than the bright Devas. There was a conception working in their mind: and the cries of despair were but the harbingers of a new birth. So it has been, so it always will be. There is an Atheism which is unto death, there is another Atheism which is the very life-blood of all true faith. It is the power of giving up what in our best, our most honest moments, we know to be no longer true; it is the readiness to replace the less perfect, however dear it may have been to us, by the more perfect, however much it may be detested, as yet, by others. It is the true self-surrender, the true self-sacrifice, the truest trust in truth, the truest faith. Without that Atheism no new religion, no reform, no reformation, no resuscitation, would ever have been possible; without that Atheism no new life is possible for any one of us.

In the eyes of the Bráhmans, Buddha was an Atheist; in the eyes of the Athenian Judges, Socrates was an Atheist; in the eyes of the Pharisees, St. Paul was an Atheist; in the eyes of Swiss Judges, Servetus was an Atheist; and why? Because every one of them was yearning for a higher and purer conception of God than what he had learnt as a child.

Let no one touch religion, be he clergyman or layman, who is afraid of being called an Infidel or an Atheist—aye, who is afraid of asking himself, Do I believe in a God, or do I not? Let me quote the words of a great divine, lately deceased, whose honesty and piety have never been questioned: "God," he says, "is a *great* word. He who feels and understands that will judge more mildly and more justly of those who confess that they dare not say that they believe in God." Now, I know perfectly well that what I have said just now will be misunderstood, will possibly be misinterpreted. I know I shall be accused of having defended and glorified Atheism, and of having represented it as the last and highest point which man can reach in an evolution of

religious thought. Let it be so. If there are but a few here present who understand what I mean by honest Atheism, and who know how it differs from vulgar Atheism, I shall feel satisfied, for I know that to understand this distinction will often help us in the hour of our sorest need. It will teach us that, while the old leaves, the leaves of a bright and happy spring, are falling, and all seems wintry, frozen and dead within and around us, there is and there must be a new spring in store for every warm and honest heart. It will teach us that honest doubt is the deepest spring of honest faith; and that he only who has lost can find.



ATHEISM.

THE boldness of Max Müller's defence of a faithful Atheism which I have read you, does not consist in its thought so much as in the word he adopts. The thought is that which sad experience has revealed to many a reverential thinker in the past as well as the present. William Penn, the Quaker, said that he who speaks worthily of God is very like to be called an Atheist. We owe high honour to the man who has courage to proclaim in Westminster Abbey the truth which hitherto has been uttered by the despised and rejected. But it remains doubtful whether even the independence and fidelity of the Hibbert lecturer, and his learning, will be able to recover a word so fraught with misunderstandings as the word "Atheism." If mankind used such words etymologically, "Atheism" might be restored; but they do not; and it is to be feared that as the name of Jesus could not save "Jesuitism," and the name of Christ cannot save "Christian," so in another direction the fact that "Atheist" means one who denies the gods of common

belief, and is without any theory of God, cannot outweigh the popular meaning of the word. To the masses Atheist means a godless man, and a godless man means a bad man. Because of that acquired accent of immorality Theologians seem fond of using the word. It is, therefore, a bit of debased currency, and, as I think, will one day drop out of use. Yet many excellent people, like Max Müller, see that while theologically the word carries a vulgar meaning, morally it represents the right of man to grow. In this sense it represents the freedom of man to deny any and every god which others set up. If that right had not been exercised we should still be worshipping Siva or Odin, or the Virgin Mary. The same authority which would to day silence the Atheist before Jehovah, would have silenced Paul before Diana of Ephesus. "Atheism" is a flag that means unlimited right of denial, and that involves the right of progress and the pursuit of truth.

Many liberal thinkers accept the epithet, not as dogma—not as antitheism—but because they mean to stand by their freedom, and will not cower before popular clamour. Trelawney asked the poet Shelley why, with his high pantheism, he called himself "Atheist." Shelley replied that he did not choose it. That name was the gauntlet they threw down, and he picked it up. In that heroic spirit, some still call

themselves "Atheists," even at risk of being misunderstood. And it must be acknowledged that the epithet will carry with it a certain accent of moral honesty and courage, so long as intellectual liberty is met with menace. When that lingering struggle is over and past, and the victory of free thought is completely won, as won it must be, it will no longer be any surrender of their colours if such brave men and women consult with their allies to find whether there may not be a broader, a more universal, banner to represent our common liberty than that marked "Atheism." But, before that time can arrive, earnest and thinking people must give up their horror of "Atheism." That name now means to most people what devil meant to our ancestors, and it is equally mythical, unreal, fantastic. Even many so-called liberal people have not sufficiently thrown off their theological training to be released from terror of this latest phantom.

Stat nominis umbra. It is the shadow of a name. That I propose to prove to you. The laws of nature have been sufficiently explored to turn the devil into a grotesque superstition; the laws of mental and moral nature are sufficiently known to lay this spectre of "Atheism" which has followed him. The so-called "Atheist" is no more outside psychological laws than he is bodily outside physical laws. Moral and mental facts hold him as much as gravitation holds him.

Those facts he may name one way and you another, but where the reality is the same shall we be tricked by names?

There are cases in which the reality is not the same. A man may believe in a three-headed deity, in a tri-personal deity, in Jove, Jupiter, Adonai, or some other celestial thunderer; such belief is not of thought but authority, it does not pretend to rest upon fact and evidence, but on tradition or revelation. We must at present leave all that out of the question. What we are now concerned with is the difference between those who, exercising the same reason, in the same method, upon the same facts, in them and outside them, state their conclusions differently. One calls himself "Theist," the other calls himself "Atheist." These words are opposite. But are the realities under them opposite?

To find out that we must ask what is in the consciousness of each when he so names his conclusion—assuming that conclusion to be divested of all tradition in the one case, and of all mere pluck in the other—in each case a genuine product of reason resting on evidence.

What then is in the mind of the intentionally rational Theist when he says: "I believe there is a God"? There is in his consciousness a concept of law and order in the universe; there is a recognition

of facts in himself, reason, love, the sense of right, the ideal, the beautiful ; he reasons that because these things are in him they must be in nature, for he is in nature, and of nature ; and combining these inward realities with the law and order of the universe, and with the tendency of the world to his ideals, the Theist generalises them all in the word " God."

But here many a Theist would break in and say : " Your statement is incomplete. I believe much more than that. I believe that God is a personal Being ; I believe that He created the universe ; I believe that He hears and answers prayer." To which I reply : " No doubt you *believe* these other things ; but the question is not what you *believe*, but what you think, what is purely the product of your reason acting on evidence. A Catholic believes in his Madonna as strongly as any Theist in the personality of God. But what evidence does either give us for such belief ? None at all. What facts show that the world ever was created ? Nobody pretends any. What evidence that God hears and answers prayer ? Absolutely none."

But then this believing Theist answers : " It is true I cannot actually prove the truth of my belief in these particulars. It may be sentiment, but must sentiment count for nothing ? What would life be if everything depended on cold logic ? I feel that I have a Heavenly Father with whom I can hold communion."

Very well ; but now comes along our man who has not that feeling at all. He says he feels sure that the world was never created ; that if there were a God who answered prayer the world would know less misery ; and that he can imagine no personality of God that would not make him a huge man.

“Then you are an Atheist!” cries our believing Theist.

“If to disbelieve your private god be Atheism, I am.”

“Then I will have nothing to do with you,” the Theist may say.

“I am much obliged to you,” the Atheist may reply. “In old times they used to have a good deal to do with us ; it is something to be let alone.”

But now let us cross-examine this Atheist, in his turn. “Do you believe in the laws of nature?” “I do.” “Do you believe in reason?” “I do.” “Do you possess the sense of right, acknowledge the sacredness of love, reverence your ideal of truth, goodness, and beauty?” “These make my moral and intellectual nature ; I can not help believing in them.” “Do you believe in the progress of mankind?” “My life is devoted to it.”

Now, another question—“Taking all these things together, what do they sum up in your mind?” “A universe, or nature.”

“Would you mind calling it God?” “Yes; I object.” “And why?” “Because most persons when they say ‘God’ mean something very different, and they would understand me as believing what I do not believe, and what cannot be proved true. In India they would understand me as believing in Vishnu on his Serpent; in Turkey they would think I meant Allah of the Koran; here some would think I meant Jehovah, others that I believed in the Trinity, and yet others that I believed in an omnipotent sovereign Man reigning over the world.”

“Then what our Theist calls your ‘Atheism’ means only that you disbelieve all those particular personifications which men have imagined reigning over the universe, while you do accept all the facts they can show for their theories?”

“That is what it amounts to. I travel harmoniously with the Theist so long as he speaks of reason, love, truth, law, conscience, for these things I know. I still journey with him when he talks of the vast realm of the unknown, and of truths and realities that may be there beyond my grasp; but when he sets up his own theory about what is in that unknown, and demands that I shall believe that all the same as if it were proved fact, I am compelled to say I am not convinced. Then he calls me an Atheist and leaves me—probably hates me.”

Now, it is perfectly certain that there is no actuality in the mind of one of these men that is not in that of the other. As their eyes see by the same sunshine, and their lungs breathe the same air, their reason and rectitude are the same. Yet are they widely sundered—separated as by an abyss—so that we have the anomaly of an army of former comrades winning their common liberty only to use it in fighting each other.

Assuredly there is a serious fault here, perhaps more faults than one. One is the slowness with which liberal thinkers raise their hearts to the standard of their intelligence. In asserting the liberty of reason it would appear that many of them did not mean to be taken at their word. That was much the way with some of the Fathers of the Reformation. Luther affirmed the right of private judgment, but was aghast when he found people carrying it a line farther than himself, and said human nature was like a drunken man on a horse who, when set up straight on one side, toppled over on the other. John Calvin too asserted the right of private judgment. His idea seems to have been that men were perfectly free to think as they pleased, and he was perfectly free to burn them if their opinions did not please him.

After what happened to Servetus thinkers became prudent; they followed Erasmus who compared himself to Peter following his Lord afar off. But at last the cock crew. Thinkers took up their cross.

After many martyrdoms of the best men our laws have largely, though not fully, proclaimed the freedom of reason and conscience. But Orthodoxy has never conceded it. Dogma has been reluctantly compelled to transfer the faggot and stake by which free opinion was punished from this world to the next; and in this world still treats disbelievers as people who ought to be burned, and will be burned.

But those who call themselves liberal—liberal Christians and Theists—are persons who have avowed the conditions of freedom in good faith, and if they now recoil from the inevitable results of those conditions it is but natural that freethinkers should say they have not the courage of their principles.

I do not think that explains the whole case; but it is natural that it should be so said, and that the antagonism of freethinkers should be thereby intensified. The reserve or hostility of Unitarians and Theists towards Atheists, so called, is not altogether result of timidity. They themselves have a severe conflict with the orthodox, one largely involving their social relations, and they do not wish to be compromised by being supposed to hold views they do not hold. They know that men are apt to be judged by the company they keep, and so they keep aloof from those whose opinions seem to them extreme and untrue.

Yet are they wrong in this. They are throwing

their weight in favour of the discredited method of intolerance, and against the high principle they have espoused—intellectual liberty. They cannot serve two masters. They cannot claim freedom for themselves against the orthodox, then turn and deny it as against the Atheists. And it is a denial of freedom when we concede it verbally but treat it when exercised with aversion or contempt. The moderate liberal should beware lest in his care not to compromise himself he does compromise that great and wide principle of freedom on which he and the Atheist alike depend. Let him know too that his god is debased when set against mental independence ; and so long as any Theism excommunicates any honest thinker it not only renders Atheism necessary, but lowers itself beneath that Atheism. For surely that god is only an idol not yet mouldered, who is supposed to care more for recognition of his personal existence than for charity and the independence of the human mind.

Fundamentally, all alienations in the ranks of liberal people result from the survival in half of them of the ancient error, that some moral character inheres in mere opinion. There is a sense in which a man is responsible for his opinions ; he is responsible for the pains he takes to find the truth, and responsible for honest utterance of the thing he holds true. But it is a great and grievous error to suppose that a man can

be morally bound to accept any belief whether he has reason to believe it or not. For example, to tell a man he ought to believe in God is like telling a woman she ought to love her husband. If she has a husband, and if that husband is worthy of love, and wins her love, the exhortation to love him is superfluous; if otherwise, all the exhortation in the world cannot enable her to love one who is unloveable. Or, we may say, to tell a man it is his duty to believe in God is like lecturing oxygen on its duty to combine with hydrogen at the moment when galvanism has decomposed the two.

The liberty of reason being introduced among the old creeds its effects must be accepted. It can no more be scolded than any other force in nature. The thinker must follow his thought, the reasoner must believe what he finds reason to believe, as the lover must love what he or she is impelled to love. If the thinking Theist would convince the thinking Atheist of a personalised Deity, he must introduce a force adapted to combine his proposition with the mind to be convinced. It must be a rational force if it is to affect the reason. Contempt is not a rational force—rather it is a confession that there is no rational force. It is falling back on the old dogmatic and coercive principle which, if it prevailed, would suppress all liberty and restore the faggot and the Inquisition.

The unity which I believe possible among the sons of freedom lies in the spirit of freedom and the spirit of truth. The position of the simple Theist is not even yet so popular as to require no sacrifices to maintain it ; shall he not respect the still greater sacrifices made by the man who is denounced as Atheist ? He may not like the word Atheist ; I do not ; for I believe that wherever there is such self-sacrifice, such fidelity rising above selfishness, there is a spirit essentially divine. But shall men be blinded by a name—a word ? Can they not see beyond all phrases that the spirit in which a man, even an Atheist, earnestly seeks truth, and bravely stands by what he believes truth—the spirit which for right, for freedom and justice, casts away all interests and all ease, toiling, living, suffering for his ideal right—O can they not see that such bear in their bleeding hands the very stigmata of Truth's own martyrs ? Can we not all see how far above our doctrines and definitions rises this fidelity of our time, though it be called infidelity now as it was called immorality in Socrates and Beelzebub in Christ—while it was then, is now, the spirit which in all history has been leading mankind from thralldom to liberty, from darkness to light ? If our Theism does not see that spirit, if our Theism cannot clasp to its heart all hearts animated by that spirit, be sure it is a mere relic of the past—some fragment not yet crumbled of ancient supersti-

tion ; be sure that the only true God is the God of the living—and they *are* the living whose lives are consecrated to truth and right, however they may be named, or be they nameless.

Theistic friend, your special theory will pass away. The highest mind of the past was not able to frame a god which you can worship unmodified, and you cannot frame—none living can conceive—an image which will not be fossil in a few centuries. Nay, your *Theos* may be even fortunate if it can be quietly dismissed before higher light without being degraded by its efforts to resist that light, sounding war-cries against earnest thinkers, and gradually taking on the base insignia of the many Idols, once Ideals, that kept not their first estate.

I was lately examining a devil carved on Nôtre Dame—a hideous creature crushing human beings beneath his feet. I thought, how hast thou fallen, O Lucifer, son of the morning ! Thou too wert once a light-bringer and a god ! But even so must fall all personifications which try to crush and menace the reason and nature of man. Just upon the head of this horrid Nôtre Dame devil—exactly between his horns—a little bird has built its nest, and laid its eggs, with the sky's soft blue upon them : and as I write it is probably gathering its young under its wing, and feeding them, and on the head of that personified

wrath of a god, fearless and free goes on the work of nature, the divine mystery of life and love.

The Theos of the Theist may wear a halo to-day, but it depends on his worshippers what that halo shall be when the personification passes away before another, or before the eternal Love which vaults above all personifications. That halo may become an immortal ideal if it mean love to all ; but such haloes have generally turned to horns, and the god of the Theist to-day need only denounce reason and hate freethinkers to become quite as grotesque a figure as that Nôtre Dame—and take the place of that Atheism which now makes a devil for so many. But above all such tyrannous forms—on their heads, between their finally powerless horns—the ancient mystery and beauty of Life will go on. Love will still gather its young under its wings. Mothers will feed their babes with tenderer thoughts and purer ideals. Reason will work on ; men and women will think and aspire, will save and be saved from actual hells regardless of fictitious ones ; the unnamed, uncomprehended, eternal spirit of nature and the heart will suffer no decay—but ascend forevermore.