

FICTITIOUS GODS.

BY ARTHUR B. MOSS.

I N all countries belief in gods has arisen from the ignorance and impatience of man. The complex phenomena of the universe he could not explain; everything appeared to him to be shrouded in mystery; his whole nature was weighed down by fear; and, instead of patiently studying nature, he set himself the task of manufacturing gods and devils, to whom he referred as the source of all events in the universe. His first objects of worship were fetiches—gods of wood, stone, trees, fire, water. In course of time, however, he began to worship living beings, whom he considered to have powers and qualities infinitely transcending his own. With the development of the human mind came a change of belief respecting the gods; and with the decay of fetichism grew up a belief in Polytheism—that is, a belief in a number of gods and goddesses ruling over and superintending various departments of nature. This belief is far more natural to the human mind than the modern idea of one ruling and controlling power in the universe. “Though,” says John Stuart Mill, “I have defined the problem of natural theology to be that of the existence of God, or of a God, rather than of gods, there is the amplest historical evidence that the belief in gods is immeasurably more natural to the human mind than the belief in one author and ruler of nature, and that this more elevated belief is, compared with the former, an artificial product, requiring (except when impressed by early education) a considerable amount of intellectual culture before it could be reached.” And so men worshipped numberless gods and goddesses, and each had control over certain departments in nature. One was master of the wind and the storm; another made the sun to shine, the trees to grow, and the heavenly bodies to move in perfect order; another was the god of war; another the perpetual president

of the Celestial Peace Society. Some of these gods had innumerable heads ; some had only one eye or one arm ; others had wings ; others, like serpents, dragged their weary lengths upon the earth ; some appeared like giants, and hurled thunderbolts at the heads of offending peoples ; some were invisible spirits, and others were visible in the form of man.

The progress of human knowledge has shattered into fragments belief in such gods or goddesses as Jupiter, Jove, Apollo, Venus, etc. ; and this has given place to belief in one God, called in different countries by the names of Brahma, Buddha, Allah, Jehovah, or Jesus. But if the old gods were merely chimeras, resulting from the desire of man to explain the cause of all things "in heaven above or earth beneath," without understanding them, are we quite sure that this one remaining God is any more a reality than the sham gods of the past ? Are we sure that the phenomena of the universe cannot be explained without reference to God ? We are told now that there exists but one God, and that, though he is called by a variety of names, he is, in reality, but one and the same being. When asked what are the distinguishing characteristics of this God, theologians tell us that he is an infinite spirit, that he has existed from all eternity, that he is all-powerful and all-wise, and that he is infinite in goodness and mercy.

Though there are millions who believe in the existence of Brahma, Buddha, and Allah, a careful study of the religions of India and Turkey will satisfy us that each of these gods is destitute of many of the qualities that are ascribed to the Author and Governor of the Universe. Neither of them is all-mighty, or all-wise, or all-good. Each of them has many qualities which belong only to man. They hate and love alternately, and are pleased with the sacrifice of innocent blood. They are jealous, and abhor none so much as those who despise them. But in England we are told that Jehovah is the only true God, and that Jesus is his son. We are informed that the Bible contains a true description of Deity, and that the part of it called the New Testament records the life and teachings of Jesus, who was God and the Son of God at the same time, and belief or disbelief in whom will determine our everlasting destiny in another world.

We turn to the Bible to study the character and doings

of Jehovah, who sometimes was known by the name of Elohim, the great "I Am." To our astonishment and disgust, we find that, instead of the Jewish Deity being an "infinite spirit," he is represented as a petty tribal God, possessing all the worst characteristics of the people out of whose imagination he grew. He is a visible God, who sometimes walks in a garden at the "cool of day," or hides himself behind a burning bush, or has an occasional interview with one of his chief priests on the summit of a mountain, or a quiet meal with another at an obscure inn. He is a jealous, vacillating, vindictive being, who does many barbarous things to gratify his own personal vanity. He is neither wise nor just, and is utterly powerless against nations with "chariots of iron." Such a God, then, cannot be the one whom men allege they worship as the author of the universe. Must we turn, then, to Jesus as God? He was no God; he was a man, and nothing more. Though he is alleged to have been brought miraculously into the world, and taken out of it in an equally mysterious way, he did nothing to lead the people who knew him to suppose that he was a God. On the contrary, the Jews thought him a blaspheming impostor, who deserved to die an ignominious death. It took some time for the idea of the divinity of Jesus to grow in the minds of men. In his "Philosophical Dictionary" (page 405) Voltaire says: "The Socinians, who are regarded as blasphemers, do not recognise the divinity of Jesus Christ. They dare to pretend—with the philosophers of antiquity, with the Jews, the Mohammedans, and most other nations—that the idea of a God-man is monstrous; that the distance from God to man is infinite; and that it is impossible for a perishable body to be infinite, immense, or eternal. They have the confidence to quote Eusebius, Bishop of Cæsarea, in their favour, who, in his 'Ecclesiastical History,' book i., chapter 9, declares that it is absurd to imagine the uncreated and unchangeable nature of Almighty God taking the form of man. They cite the fathers of the Church, Justin and Tertullian, who have said the same thing—Justin in his Dialogue with Triphonus, and Tertullian in his Discourse against Praxeas. They quote from St. Paul, who never calls Jesus Christ God, and who calls him man very often. They carry their audacity so far as to affirm that the Christians passed three entire ages in forming by degrees the apotheosis of Jesus,

and that they only raised this astonishing edifice by the example of Pagans, who had deified mortals. At first, according to them, Jesus was only regarded as a man inspired by God, and then as a creature more perfect than others. They gave him, some time after, a place above the angels, as St. Paul tells us. Every day added to his greatness. He in time became an emanation proceeding from God. This was not enough : he was born before time. At last he was made God substantial with God. Crellius, Volquelsius, Natalis, Alexander, and Hornbeck have supported all these blasphemies by arguments which astonish the wise and mislead the weak. Above all, Faustus Socinus spread the seeds of this doctrine in Europe, and at the end of the sixteenth century a new species of Christianity was established."

Some of the utterances of Jesus would lead us to suppose that he made pretensions to being God, such as "I and my Father are one," "Before Abraham was I am;" and, when tempted by the Devil, he said: "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." But other declarations which he made go to show that at times, at least, he was more rational, and professed only to be a man. But, if Christians say that Jesus was "the very God of very God," it is sufficient to answer that he possessed none of the attributes which are said to belong to Deity, for no amount of argument could induce a rational being to believe that a finite man could be either omnipotent, omniscient, or omnipresent. How can it be said either that Jesus was born, or that he died, if he were God? Can an eternal being either begin or cease to be? And when Jesus was on earth, roaming about hither and thither, and preaching and performing the wonders that are related of him, was he also at the same time filling every particle of space in the universe, ruling and governing the mighty forces of nature, taking cognisance of every crime that was perpetrated, hearing and answering the prayers of the righteous, and meting out deserved punishment to the wicked? After he was crucified was the universe without a ruler and governor for two days, while the God Jesus lay dead in the silent tomb? The truth is, all the talk of the clergy in support of the Divinity of Jesus is but a farrago of nonsense; we are forced, therefore, to conclude that Jesus, in common with the others named above, is a fictitious God.

There yet remains another conception of Deity which it is necessary for us to consider. After all the erroneous conceptions with which we have just dealt have been swept clean out of the human mind, many persons still cling to the belief that there must exist in the infinite expanse a Supreme Being, who superintends the working of nature, and in whose mighty power are the destinies of all men. This belief is supported by four general arguments :—

1. That there is a general consent among mankind that such a Being exists.
2. That there must have been a "first cause to nature," and that God is the "first cause."
3. That the universe shows marks of design, that design implies a designer, and that God is the designer of the universe.
4. That man is conscious of the existence of God.

1. The mere fact that there now exist thousands of Atheists is overwhelming proof that the supposition that mankind generally consents to the existence of God is erroneous. Moreover, if there were a universal belief in the existence of God, there is abundance of proof that this belief is not in the God whom pure Theists profess to worship, but in a being of varying attributes, according to the climatic conditions, food, and education of the individuals who manifest belief.

2. "First cause," as applied to nature as a whole, is absurd. So far as man can ascertain, nature is infinite; and in an infinite regression there can be no first cause. Cause and effect are terms which apply only to phenomena, to the changeable element in nature. Man knows nothing of cause and effect, except in relation to other causes and effects which have preceded them, and without which they could not have happened. But in what sense can God be called "first cause"? To know whether he is "first," we must carry the inquiry further back, as the child frequently does, and ask, "What caused God?" and, if the theologian says that God is without cause, we at once ask whether it is not far more reasonable to suppose that nature—which appears to be infinite, and which it is impossible to conceive either as beginning or ceasing to be—is without cause—that is, infinite and eternal—than to say that God is the

uncaused causer of nature, without defining what is meant by God? In truth, man can have no idea of God, if by God is meant an infinite being. What is an idea? It is an image on the mind. The human mind is, as it were, a mirror upon which nothing is reflected but the external object of nature. Man has never had any ideas but those which result from the study and observation of nature. If we say to a man, "Think of a horse, or an elephant, or a man," he at once pictures these beings, which he has seen on his mind; but, if he were asked to picture some being that he had not seen or heard described, or seen a representation of, he could not do it. In like manner, man can never give an intelligible idea of God, because, in point of truth, he has no idea of God. His highest conception is of a great man; consequently, God has always been fashioned after his maker, man.

3. It has often seemed strange to me that a philosopher like John Stuart Mill should have considered the "Design Argument" as having great force. To me the argument appears to be exceedingly weak. First, it is alleged that things wrought by human ingenuity show marks of design; but they only manifest these marks to persons who know something of human workmanship. An intelligent man can see that a watch has been designed: he judges that its mechanism is arranged by an intelligent being to effect a certain definite purpose; but, then, he invariably concludes thus because he knows something of the designers of watches. A savage would not conclude that a watch was designed by an intelligent being; he would be more likely to think it was alive. But what analogy is there between something made out of materials by man and a product of nature? Who would ever conclude that a blade of grass had been designed, or a tree, or a mountain? Surely no one. Theologians, however, tell us that a designer must be "intelligent," that an "intelligent being" must be a person, and that such a person is God. If man needed a designer because he is "intelligent," does not God need a designer because he is "intelligent"? And would not this lead, not to one god, but to an infinite series of gods, each greater and more complicated than the other? Theologians often illustrate the "Design Argument" by reference to the human eye. They could not well choose a worse illustration. Thousands of people have eyes without sight; hundreds of thou-

sands have weak eyes, and are compelled to call science to their aid, in order that they may see small objects at all. Surely an infinitely good God is not the intelligent designer of all eyes—the weak, the blind, as well as the strong? But if nature is designed, how can the author of it be said to combine the attributes of infinite wisdom and goodness? Do not animals live upon each other? Is there not a struggle for existence continuously going on, in which the weak go to the wall? What justice is there in this? An “intelligent designer” of earthquakes pestilence, famine, wars, volcanic eruptions, is surely not all-good! Nature in her mode of action is perfectly reckless. As John Stuart Mill says: “Nature impales men, breaks them as if on the wheel, casts them to be devoured by wild beasts, burns them to death, crushes them with stones like the first Christian martyr, starves them with hunger, freezes them with cold, poisons them by the quick or slow venom of her exhalations, and has hundreds of other hideous deaths in reserve such as the ingenious cruelty of a Nabis or a Domitian never surpassed.” Is it nature that does this, or is it the “intelligent designer” of nature? And how can a being be called good who is the author of such wickedness? It is said that the order of the universe demonstrates design. *Per se* there is neither order nor disorder in the universe; but man calls that order which is conformable to his own happiness, and that disorder which causes him misery. Yet everything in the universe acts according to its own inherent properties, and could not act otherwise: the same causes produce the same effects in never-ending succession; and earthquakes and volcanoes follow as necessarily from their causes as a tree, uprooted by the wind, falls into the stream because it cannot maintain its equilibrium. The Design Argument, then, must not be taken only when it points to a good designer: everything must be taken into account; for it is palpably unfair to take the fair things of nature, improved by the art of man, and then argue for a wise and beneficent Deity creator of them. The Theist must take the Design Argument all round: he must not cull the good things out of Nature's garden to serve his purpose, else the Atheist must insist upon his accounting for the wide waste outside that is pregnant with evils ineradicable.

4. It is not true that all men are conscious of the existence of God. I am unconscious of any such existence,

and thousands of Atheists and Agnostics are alike unconscious. Feeling never can prove anything on a subject like this. Consciousness can never extend to the "unknowable." And so I proclaim myself to be "without God" in the world—a disbeliever in all the gods that men have ever preached. But I am a firm believer in man and in his power to advance. We have had enough of the gods: they have stood in our path and hindered our progress long enough. With our poet, *Saladin*, let me exclaim:—

"'Tis not for man to look on high
 For Eden's fabled glow,
 But to clear away the weeds and make
 A Paradise below,
 And to make the world around him
 More holy and more true,
 And a nobler world to live in
 Than e'er his father knew.

"Oh, had man placed his heaven
 On earth instead of sky,
 And had he but discarded God
 For Man to live and die,
 With untold glory in his heart,
 High grandeur on his brow,
 He had himself, poor dreamer,
 Been god-like long ere now."

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Printed and Published at THE SECULAR REVIEW Office,
 84, Fleet Street, London.—Price One Penny.