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M D Conway Esq

No. IV.

THE

GS356

Sunderland Unitarian

Pulpit.

2ND QUARTER, 1876.

PRICE TWO-PENCE.

**“The Ecclesiastical Conception
of God,**

AND ITS RELATION TO THE SCIENTIFIC
AND RELIGIOUS WANTS OF MAN.”

A SERMON

DELIVERED AT THE PENNSYLVANIA YEARLY MEETING OF
PROGRESSIVE FRIENDS IN THE YEAR 1858.

By THEODORE PARKER.

“Honor, then, to the manly simplicity of Theodore Parker. Perish who may among the Scribes and Pharisees,—“orthodox liars for God,”—*he* at least, “has delivered his soul.”—PROFESSOR MARTINEAU.

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Sunderland :

PRINTED BY B. WILLIAMS, “TIMES” OFFICE, 129, HIGH STREET.

UNITARIAN CHAPEL,
BRIDGE STREET, SUNDERLAND.

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- April 9th.—Rev. JAMES MACDONALD. — “ Modern Literature in Relation to the Bible.” (By request).
- April 16th.—Rev. JAMES MACDONALD.—“ Paul at Athens.”
- April 23rd.—Rev. JAMES MACDONALD.—“ Religious Life and Sectarian Stagnation.”
- April 30th.—GEORGE LUCAS, Esq.—“ Wasted Life—a Lesson drawn from the Times we live in.”
- May 7th.—Rev. JAMES MACDONALD.—“ Christ and the Pharisees.”
- May 14th.—Rev. JAMES MACDONALD.—“ The Basis of Religious Belief.”
- May 21st.—GEORGE LUCAS, Esq.—“ True Nobility—Words of Encouragement for the struggling and the tempted.”
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THE
ECCLESIASTICAL CONCEPTION OF GOD,
AND ITS RELATION TO THE SCIENTIFIC
AND RELIGIOUS WANTS OF MAN.

A SERMON
BY THEODORE PARKER.

The great and Dreadful God.—DANIEL ix. 4.
Our Father which art in heaven.—MATTHEW vi. 9.

IN the Religion of civilized men there are three things:—Piety—the love of God, the Sentimental part; Morality—obedience to God's natural laws, the Practical part; and Theology—Thoughts about God and Man and their relation. the Intellectual part. The Theology will have great influence on the Piety and the Morality, a true Theology helping the normal developement of Religion, which a false Theology hinders. There are two methods of creating a Theology,—a scheme of doctrines about God and Man, and the relation between them, viz.: the Ecclesiastical and the Philosophical.

The various sects which make up the Christian Church pursue the Ecclesiastical method. They take the Bible for a miraculous and infallible revelation from God—in all matters containing the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—and thence derive their doctrines, Catholic, Protestant, Trinitarian, Unitarian, Damnationist, or Salvationist. Of course they follow that method in forming the Ecclesiastical Conception of God, in which the Christian sects mainly agree. They take the whole of the Bible, from Genesis to the Fourth Gospel, as God's miraculous affidavit; they gather together all which it says about God, and from that make up the Ecclesiastical Conception as a finality. The Biblical sayings are taken for God's deposition as to the facts of his nature, character, plan, modes of operation—God's word, his last word; they are a finality—all the evidence in the case; nothing is to be added thereto, and naught taken thence away. Accordingly the statement of a writer in the half-savage age of a ferocious people is just as valuable, true, and obligatory for all time as that of a refined, enlightened, and religious man in a civilized age and nation; for they are all equally God's testimony in the case, his miraculous deposition; God puts himself on his *voir dire*, and it is of no consequence

which justice of revelation records the affidavit of the Divine Depoent. The deposition is alike perfect and complete, whether attested by an anonymous and half-civilized Hebrew fillibuster, or by a refined and religious Christian philosopher. The statement that God ate veal at Abraham's, or that he sought to kill Moses in a tavern, is just as true and important as this, that "God is love." It is said in the Old Testament that the Lord is a "consuming fire;" he is "angry with the wicked every day," and keeps his anger for ever; that he hates Esau; that he gives cruel commands, like that in the thirteenth chapter of Deuteronomy, forbidding all religious progress; that he orders the butchery of millions of innocent men, including women and children; that he comes back from the destruction of Edom red with blood, as described in the sixty-third chapter of Isaiah. In the New Testament he is called Father; it is said that he is Love, that he goes out and meets the returning prodigal a great way off, and welcomes him with large rejoicing.

Now, say the Churches, all these statements are true, and the Christian believer must accept them all. Reason is not to sift and cross-examine the Biblical testimony, rejecting this as false and including that as true; for the whole of this evidence and each part of it is God's affidavit, and does not require a cross-examining, sifting, amending. We are not to reconcile it to us but us to it; and if it conflict with reason and conscience, we shall give them up. All the Bible, says this theory, is the inspired Word of God, and one part is just as much inspired as another, for there are no degrees of inspiration therein; each statement by itself is perfect, and the whole complete. The test of inspiration is not in man; it is not Truth for things reasonable, nor justice for things moral, nor Love for things affectional. The test is wholly outside of man; it is a miracle—that is, the report of a miracle; and so what contradicts the universal human conscience is to be accepted just as readily as what agrees with the moral instinct and reflection of all human kind. In the third century Tertullian, a hot-headed African bishop, said, "I believe, because it is impossible;" that is, the thing cannot be, and therefore I believe it is! It has been a maxim in ecclesiastical theology ever since; without it both Transubstantiation and the Trinity would fall to the ground, with many a doctrine more. I think Lord Bacon was an unbeliever in the popular ecclesiastical doctrines of his time; he would derive all science from the observation of nature and reflection thereon; but he left this maxim to have Eminent Domain in Theology! It was enough for him to break utterly with the Philosophy of the Schools; he would not also quarrel against the Theology of the Churches: thereby he lost his scientific character, but kept his ecclesiastical reputation.

Joshua, the son of Nun, was a Hebrew fillibuster, with a half-civilized troop of ferocious men following him ; he conquered a country, butchered the men, women, and children ; and he gives us such a picture of God as you might expect from a Pequot Indian in the days of our fathers. It is taught in the Churches that Joshua's statement about God is just as trustworthy as the sublime words in the New Testament, ascribed to John or Jesus, and far more valuable than the deepest intuitions, and the grandest generalizations, of the most cultivated, best educated, and most religious of men to-day ! The Christian Churches do not derive their conception of God from the World of Observation about us or the World of Consciousness within us, but from the "Book of Revelation," as they call that collection from the works of some hundred writers, mostly anonymous, and all from remote ages ; and they tell us that the teachings of Joshua are of as much value as the teachings of Jesus himself, far more than those of Fenelon or Channing.

Now from such facts, and by such a method, the Christian sects have formed their notion of God, which is common to the Greek, the Latin, and the Teutonic Churches ; only a few sects have departed therefrom, and as they are but insignificant in numbers, and have had scarcely any influence in forming the ecclesiastical conception of God, so I shall omit all reference to them and their opinions.

To-day I shall not speak of the ecclesiastical Arithmetic of God, only of the Ethics thereof ; not of God according to the category of number—the quantitative distribution of Deity into personalities ; only of the character of God by the category of substance—the qualitative kind of Deity, for that is still the same, whether conceived of in one person, in three, or in three million, just as the qualitative force of an army of three hundred thousand soldiers is still the same, whether you count it as one corps or as three.

Look beneath the mere words of theology, at the things which they mean, and you find in general that the ecclesiastical conception of God does not include Infinite Perfection. It embraces all the true and good things from the most religious and enlightened writers of the Bible, but it also contains all the ill and false things which were uttered by the most rude and ferocious ; one is counted just as true and valuable as the other. Accordingly God is really represented as a limited being, exceedingly imperfect, having all the contradictions which you find between Genesis and the Fourth Gospel ; he is not infinite in any one attribute. I know the theological language predicates infinite perfection, but the theological facts affirm exceeding imperfection. Look at this in several details.

1. God is not represented as Omnipresent. When the theologian says, "God is everywhere," he does not mean that God is everywhere always, as he is anywhere sometimes ; not that he is at this minute present in this meeting-house, and in the air which my hand clasps, as he was in the Hebrew Holy of Holies when Solomon ended his inauguration prayer, as he always is in some place called the Heaven of Heavens. There are degrees of the Divine Presence ; he is more there and less here. Some spots he occupies by his essence, others only potentially. He was creationally present with all his personal essence at the making of the world, but only providentially present with his instrumental power, not his personal essence, at the governing of the world. Thus the Queen of England, by her power, is present in all Great Britain and the British possessions, while by her person she occupies only a single apartment of the Palace of St. James in London, sitting in only one chair at a time. So it is taught that God must intervene miraculously to do his work : must come into a place where he was not before, and which he will vacate soon. So the actual, personal, essential and complete presence of God is the very rarest exception in all places save Heaven. He is instancial only in Heaven, exceptional everywhere else. He is not universally immanent, residing in all matter, all spirit, at every time, working according to law, by a constant mode of operation and in all the powers of matter and man, which are derived from him and are not possible without him ; but he comes in occasionally and works by miracle. He is a non-resident God, who is present in a certain place vicariously, by attorney, and only on great occasions comes there in his proper person. That is the ecclesiastical notion of Omnipresence.

2. He is not All-Powerful, except in the ideal Heaven which he permanently occupies by his complete and personal presence. On earth he is restricted by Man, who thwarts his plans every day and grieves his heart, and still more by the Devil, who continually thwarts his Creator. I know the ecclesiastical doctrine says that God is omnipotent, but ecclesiastical history represents him as trying to make the Hebrews an obedient people, and never effecting it ; as continually worrying over that little fraction of mankind, "rising up early and speaking" to them, but the crooked would not be made straight. Nay, he is unable to keep the Christian Church without spot or wrinkle for a single generation, charm he never so wisely ; but Paul fell out with such as were apostles before him, and the seamless ecclesiastical coat is roughly rent in twain betwixt the two !

3. He is not All-Wise. He does not know his own creation will work. He finished the world, and found that his one man,

running alone, did not prosper ; it was necessary to make a woman, to help him ; she was an afterthought. Her first step ruins the man she was meant to serve ; and God is surprised at the disobedience. He must alter things to meet this unexpected emergency ; he grows wiser and wiser by continual experiment.

4. He is not All-Righteous. He does great wrong to the Egyptians, for he hardens Pharaoh's heart, so that he may have an excuse for putting the king and people to death. He does injustice to the Canaanites, whom he butchers by Joshua ; he provides a punishment altogether disproportionate to the offences of men, and will make them suffer for ever for the sin committed by their mythological ancestor, six thousand years before you and I were born ; he creates souls by the million, only to make them perish everlastingly. In the whole course of human history, you cannot find a tyrant, murderer, kidnapper, who is so unjust as God is, represented by the ecclesiastical theology.

5. He is not All-Loving. Of the people before Christ, he loved none but Jews ; he gave no other any revelation, and without that, they must perish everlastingly ! Since Jesus he loves none but Christians, and will save no more ; the present heathen are to die the second death ; and of Christians he loves none but Church-members. Nay, the Catholics will have it that he hates everybody out of the Roman Church, while the stricter Protestants retaliate this favor upon the Catholics themselves. Nay, they deny salvation to all Unitarians and Universalists, to the one because they declare that the man Jesus was not God the Creator ; and to the other because they say that God the Father is not bad enough to damn any man for ever and ever. You remember that scarcely was Dr. Channing cold in his coffin, before orthodox newspapers rung with the intelligence that he was doubtless then suffering the pangs of eternal damnation, because he had "denied the Lord that bought him." You know the damnation pronounced on old Dr. Ballou, simply because he said men were brethren, and the God of earth and heaven is too good-hearted to create anybody for the purpose of crunching him into hell for ever and ever. According to some strict sectarians, God loves none but the elect—an exceedingly small number. It has been the doctrine of the Christian Church for fifteen or sixteen hundred years that God will reject from heaven all babies newly-born who die without baptism ; the sprinkling of infants was designed to save these little ones, who, as Jesus thought, needed no salvation, but were already of the kingdom of heaven. Accordingly, to save the souls of children ready to perish without ecclesiastical baptism, the Catholic Church mercifully allows doctors, nurses, mid-wives, servants, anybody, to baptize a child newly born,

by throwing water in its face, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and that saves the little thing. But the doctrine of infant damnation follows logically from the first principles of the ecclesiastical theology. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned!"

6. He is not All-Holy, perfectly faithful to himself. He is capricious and variable; men can wheedle him into their favorite plans; now by penitence or a certain belief, they can induce God to remove the consequence of their wicked deeds; and the effects of a long life of wickedness will at once be miraculously wiped clean off from the man's character; he will take the blackest of sinners and wash him white in the blood of the Lamb, and "in five minutes he shall be made as good a Christian as he could become by fifty years of the most perfect piety and morality." Since God is thus changeable, men think they can alter his plan by their words, can induce him to send rain when they want it, or to "stay the bottles of heaven" at their request, to check disease, to curse a bad man, or to pervert and confound the intellect of a thinking man. Hence comes the strange phenomenon which you sometimes see of a nation assembling in the churches, and asking God to crush to the ground another people at war with them; two years ago you saw Englishmen bending their knees in the name of Christ, to ask God to blast the Russians at Sebastopol, and the Russians bending their knees and in the same name asking God to sink the British ships in the depths of the Black Sea!

Put all these things together—God is not represented as a perfect Creating Cause, who makes all things right at first; nor a perfect Preserving Providence, who administers all things well, and will bring all out right at last. Even his essential presence is only an exception in the world, here for a moment, and then long withdrawn. According to the ecclesiastical conception, God transcends man in power and wisdom, but is immensely inferior to the average of men in justice and benevolence; nay, in hate and malignity he transcends the very worst man that the very worst man could conceive of in his heart.

I. Now, this idea of God is not adequate to the purposes of Science. To explain the World of Matter, the naturalist wants a sufficient power which is always there, acting by a constant mode of operation; not irregular, vanishing, acting by fits and starts; but continuous, certain, reliable; an intelligent power which acts by law, not caprice and miracle. No other God is adequate Cause of the Universe, or of its action for a single hour.

But the Christian Church knows no such God, for all the Biblical depositions concerning him, all the pretended affidavits whence it has made its conception of God, came from men who had no thought of a general law of matter or of mind, and no notion of a God who acted by a constant mode of operation, and who was the indwelling Cause and Providence of all things that are. Just so far as any scientific thinker departs from that limited idea of God, who comes and goes and works by miracle, so far does he depart from the ecclesiastical theology of Christendom. The actual facts of the Universe are not reconcilable with what the ecclesiastical theology teaches about God. This has become apparent, step by step, in the last three centuries.

Galileo reported the facts of astronomic nature just as they were. The Roman Church must silence her philosopher, or else revolutionize her notion of God. Had not she God's own affidavit that he stopped the sun and moon a whole day, to give Joshua time for butchery of men, women and children? would she allow a philosopher to contradict her with nothing but the Universe on his side? He must swear the earth stands still. "And yet it does move though!"

Geologists relate the facts of the universe as they find them in the crust of the earth. The Churches complain that these facts are inconsistent with the story in Genesis. "We have," say they, "God's deposition that he made the Universe in six days, rested on the seventh, and was refreshed! What is the testimony of the rocks and the stars, to the anonymous record on parchment, or the printed English Bible?" So the geologist also has a bad name in the Churches, many equivocate, and some lie.

For the history of the heavens and earth, theologians would rely on the word of a man whose name even they know nothing of, and reject the testimony of the Universe itself, where the footprints of the Creator are yet so plain and deeply set. Zoologists find evidence, as they think, that the human race has had several distinct centres of origination; that men were created in many places: and a great outcry is at once raised. Such facts are inconsistent with the ecclesiastical idea of God! So, to learn the structure of the heavens, the earth, or of mankind; you must not go to the heavens, the earth, or mankind; you must go to the book of Genesis, and if the facts of the Universe contradict the anonymous record therein, then you must break with the Universe and agree with the minister, for the actual testimony of things is worth nothing in comparison with the words of a Hebrew writer whom nobody knows!

The great obstacle to the advancement of science, nay, to the diffusion of knowledge, is not the poverty of mankind, not the lack of industry, talent, genius amongst men of science; but it is the ecclesiastical conception of God. Not a step can be taken in astrogoly, geology, zoology, but it separates a man from that notion. The ecclesiastical conception of God being thus utterly inadequate to the purposes of science, philosophic men turn off from the theology of Christendom; and some, it is said, become atheists. Look at the scientific men of England, France, and Germany, for proof of this. In America there is no considerable class of scientific and learned men, who stand close together, write books for each other, and so make a little public of their own; so here the scientific man does not stand in a little green-house of philosophy as in Europe, where he is sheltered from public opinion, lives freely, and expands his flowers in an atmospere congenial to his natural growth, but he is exposed to all the rude blasts of the press, the parlor, and the meeting-house; so is he more cautious than his congeners and equivalents in Europe, and does not commonly tell what he thinks; nay, sometimes tells what he does not think, lest he should lose his public reputation amongst bigoted men! To this there are some very honorable exceptions; scientific men who do not count it a part of their business to prop up a popular error, but who know society has a right to demand that they tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. But if you will take the hundred foremost men of science in all Christendom who are not ministers, I do not think that ten of them have any belief in the common ecclesiastical conception of God. Some have better—nay, a true idea of God, but dare not divulge it; and some, alas! seem to have no notion at all. Accordingly, men of science turn from theology; soon become atheists, and all lose much from lack of a satisfactory idea of God. You all know what clerical complaints are made of the infidelity and atheism of scientific men. Three hundred years ago the Church suspected doctors, and invented this proverb:—"As many doctors, so many atheists;" because the doctors knew facts irreconcilable with the ecclesiastical theology. I think the charge of atheism grossly unjust, when it is brought against the great body of scientific men; but where it is true, it ought to be remembered that in the last two hundred and fifty years the Christian Church has had no idea of God adequate to the purposes of science, and fit for a philosopher to accept; and if it be so, will you blame the philosopher for rejecting what would only disturb his processes? The cause of the philosopher's atheism often lies at the Church's door, and not in the scholar's study.

II. But this ecclesiastical conception of God is as inadequate

to the purposes of Religion, as of Science. In religious consciousness we all want a God whom we can absolutely rely upon; who is always at hand, not merely separate and one side from the World of Matter or the World of Man. We want a deity who acts now, and is the Infinite God, who desires the best of possible things for each man, who knows the best of possible things, and has will and power to bring about the best of possible things, and that for all persons. We want a God all powerful, all-wise, all-just, all-loving, all-faithful; a perfect Creator; a perfect Provider, who will be just to each of his children. I put it to each one of you—thoughtfullest or least thinking—is there one of you who will be content with a God who does not come up to your highest conception of power, wisdom, justice, love and holiness? Not one of you will be content to rely on less! You must falsify your nature before you can do it. But according to the ecclesiastical conception, God is the most capricious, unjust, unreliable of all possible beings. Look at this old and venerable doctrine of eternal damnation, believed by all the Christian sects, save the Universalists, Unitarians, and Spiritualists—not yet a sect—who make at the most some four or five millions out of the two hundred and fifty or sixty millions of Christendom. This is the doctrine:—God is angry with mankind, and will burn the greater part of them in hell, for ever and ever. Why is “his wrath so hot against us?”

1. The Jews are God's ancient covenant people; with them he made a bargain, sworn to on both sides: it was for a good and sufficient consideration, value received by each party; he commanded them to observe the Mosaic form of religion for ever; if any prophet shall come, working never so many miracles, and teach them a different conception of God, they must put him to death, and all his followers, with their wives, their children, and their cattle. (Deut. xiii.) But now all these “chosen people” are to be damned for ever because they do not believe the theology of Paul and Jesus, whom the divine law commands the Jews to slay with the edge of the sword for teaching that theology. So God commands the Jews to kill every man among them who shall teach the Christian doctrine, and yet will damn them for not believing it.

2. The Heathen also are to be damned because they have no faith in Christ, no belief in the popular theology of the Catholic or Protestant sects. But that theology is unreasonable, and thoughtful, unprejudiced men cannot believe it; besides that, the greater part of the Heathens never heard of such doctrines, or of Christ; still God will damn them, millions by millions, to eternal torment, because they have not believed

what was never preached to them, what they never heard they must believe. Three hundred years ago Spanish Jesuits preached the doctrine of eternal damnation to the heathen at Japan, who asked of the missionaries, "Is it possible that God will damn men for ever?" "Certainly, without doubt," was the reply. "And if a man dies who has not heard of these things before, will God damn him for ever?" "Yes," was the answer. The whole multitude fell on their faces and wept bitterly and long, and would not believe it. Do you blame them for casting those priests from the island, and saying, "Let the salt sea separate us from the Christian world for ever."

3. Then the Christians themselves are not certain of their salvation, The Catholics are the majority, and they say God will damn all the Protestants; the Protestants say the same of the Catholics. The ecclesiastical idea of God in both represents him as ready enough to damn either; and if the first principle of the Catholic Church be true, no Protestant can be saved; and if the first principle of the Protestant Church be true, then every Catholic is sure of damnation and nought besides.

See how the Protestants dispose of one another.

(1.) All "unconverted" and positively wicked men are to be damned; God has no love for them, only hate.

(2.) All "unconverted" men, not positively wicked; they have no salvation in them; they may be the most pious men in the world, the most moral men, but their own religion cannot save them. They must have "faith"—that is belief in the ecclesiastical theology—and be Church members; that is, they must believe as Dr. Banaby believes, and be voted into some little company called a Church, at the Old South or the New North, or some other conventicle.

(3.) New-born babies not baptized must be shut out from the kingdom of heaven, if not included in the kingdom of hell; such has been the doctrine of the Christian Church from the time of Justin Martyr, who I think first broached it seventeen hundred years ago, and it follows with unavoidable logic from the ecclesiastical notion of God and the ecclesiastical method of salvation. So Jesus must have made a great mistake when he took babies in his arms, and blessed them, and said, "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven;"—he ought to have said, "Suffer *baptized* children to come unto me," &c.

Now what confidence can you have in such a God, so unjust, so unloving, so cruel, and so malignant? I just now said that God is represented as transcending men in hate and malignity. Look at the matter carefully, narrowing the thing down to the smallest point. Suppose there are now a thousand million

persons on the earth, and that only one shall be damned ; and suppose that some day a hundred years hence, all the nine hundred and ninety-nine millions, nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine of us are gathered in the kingdom of heaven, enjoying all the blessedness that Divine love can bestow on the vast faculties of man, still further enhanced by the first taste of immortal life ; suppose that intelligence is brought to all and each of us that one man is miserable, languishing in eternal fire, to be there for ever ; suppose we are told that a globe of sand, big as this earth hangs there before his comprehensive eye, and once in a thousand years a single atom is loosened and falls off, and he shall suffer the cruellest torment till, grain by grain, millennium after millennium, that whole globe is consumed and passed away ! and yet then he shall be no nearer the end of his agony than when he first felt the smart. Suppose we are told it was the worst man of all the earth, that it was a murderer, a violator of virgins, a pirate, a kidnapper, a traitorous wretch, who, in the name of Democracy, sought to establish a despotism in America, to crush out the fairest hopes of political freedom which the sun ever shone upon : or even it was an ecclesiastical hypocrite, with an atheistic heart, believing in no God, and loving no man, who, for the sake of power and ambition, sought to make men tremble at the ugly phantom of a wrathful Deity, and laid his unclean hands on the soul of a man, and made that a source of terrible agony to mankind ! When you are told that this man is plunged into hell for all time ; is there a man who would not cry out against the hideous wrong, and scorn heaven offered by such a Deity ? No ! there is no murderer, no pirate, no violator of virgins, no New England kidnapper, no betrayer of his nation, no ecclesiastical hypocrite even, who would not reject it with scorn, and revolt against the injustice. But the ecclesiastical doctrine represents God as thus damning not one man, but millions of millions of men, the great majority of mankind, nine hundred and ninety-nine out of every thousand, and those, too, often the best, certainly the wisest and most loving and pious men ! Do you wonder, then, that thoughtful men, moral men, affectionate men, and religious men turn off with scorn from this conception of God ? I wonder not at all. The fact that the majority have not done so only shows how immensely powerful is this great religious instinct, which God meant should be Queen within us.

Let me do no injustice. I admit the many excellent qualities ascribed to God in the popular theology ; but remember this, that as much as the noblest words of the New Testament add to the conception of God in the worst parts of the Old Testa-

ment, just so much also do the savage notions from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, from the baser Psalms, and the Prophets, take away from the Father who is in Heaven, the Spirit who is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth! In this "alligation alternate" one chapter of the Old Testament can adulterate and spoil all the blessed oracles of the New. Jesus is set off against Joshua; the whole of the Fourth Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount, and many a blessed Parable, is nullified by a scrap from some ancient Jew who thought God was a consuming fire!

The form of Religion demanded of men, in accordance with the ecclesiastical conception of God, certainly has many good things, but it is not natural Piety for its emotional part, the aboriginal love of God; nor natural Theology for its intellectual part, the natural Idea of God: nor natural Morality for its practical part, the normal use of every human faculty; but it is just the opposite of these; it has a sentiment against nature, thought against nature, practice against nature. In place of Love to God, with trust and hope, the most joyous of all emotions possible to man, it puts Fear of God, with doubt, and dread, and despair, the most miserable of all emotions; and in place of love to men, to all men, according as they need and we are able, it puts love only for your own little household of faith, and hate for all who cannot accept your opinions; for out of the ecclesiastical conception of God comes not only the superstition which darkens man's face, clouds his mind, obscures his conscience, and brutalizes his heart, but also the persecution which reddens his hand with a brother's blood. The same spirit is in Boston to-day that in the middle ages was in Italy and Spain. Why does not it burn men now, as once it did in Italy, in Spain, and in Oxford? It only lacks the *power*; the wish and will are still the same. It lacks the axe and faggot, not the malignant will to smite and burn. Once it had the headsman at its command, who smote and silenced men; now it can only pray, not kill.

Such being the Ecclesiastical Conception of God, such the Ecclesiastical Religion, I do not wonder it has so small good influence on mankind. Men of science, not clerical, turn off from such a God, and such a form of Religion. They are less wise and less happy; their science is the more imperfect, because they do not know the Infinite God of the Universe, the Absolute Religion. With reverence for a great mind, do I turn the grand studious pages of La Place and Von Humboldt, but not without mourning the absence of that religious knowledge of God, and that intimate trust in Him, which else would have planted their scientific garden with still grander beauty. I do not wonder that men of politics turn off from ecclesiastical

religion, and are not warned from wickedness by its admonition, nor guided to justice and philanthropy by its counsels. Look at the politicians of America, England, France, all Christendom and can you show me a single man of them in a high place who believes in the ecclesiastical conception of God, and in public ever dares appeal to the religious nature of man, and there expect to find justification of a great thought or a noble plan? No! when such politicians evoke the religious spirit, it is only to make men believe that it is a religious duty to obey any tyrant who seeks to plunder a nation, to silence the Press of France, to crush out the life from prostrate Italy and Spain, to send Americans kidnapping in Pennsylvania or New England. The great men of science have broke with the ecclesiastical notion of God; men of great moral sense will have nothing to do with a Deity so unjust; while the affectional and religious men, whose "primal virtues shine aloft as stars," whose deeds are "charities that heal, and soothe, and bless" the weary sons of men, they turn off with disgust from the ecclesiastical God, whose chief qualities are self-esteem, vanity, and destructiveness. One of the most enlightened writers of the New Testament says, "God is LOVE." "Yes," says the ecclesiastical theologian, "but he is also a CONSUMING FIRE; he gives all his love to the Christians who have faith in Christ, and turns all his wrath against the non-Christians who have no faith in Christ. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned."

If a man accepts this notion of God, he can never be certain of his own welfare hereafter; he may hope, he cannot be sure, for salvation does not depend on a faithful use of talents or opportunities; but on right belief and right ritual. And when neither the intuitive nor the reflective faculties afford and test, who knows if his belief is right? The Jews are to be rejected for their faith in Moses and the Prophets. The Fourth Gospel makes Jesus say that all before him "were thieves and robbers;"—I think he never said it. Paul repudiated Peter, if not also James and John; he was a dissembler, and they only "seemed to be somewhat;" while the author of the book of Revelation thrusts Paul out of heaven, consigning him to the synagogue of Satan. Now if Paul and Peter and James and John did not know what faith in Christ meant, and could not agree to live in the same Church, and sit in the same heaven, can you and I be sure of admittance there?

While the ecclesiastical conception of God is thus inadequate to a thoughtful man's religion, we are yet told that we must never reform this notion! There is a manifest progress in the conception of God in the Biblical books; but in the Christian Church we are told that there must be no further step; we

must stop with Joshua. "Fear hath torment," says that anonymous, deep-hearted religious writer of the New Testament, seventeen hundred years ago; but "perfect love casts out fear." We are told we must not cast it out, but must have a notion of God, which we must fear! Shame on us! Mankind has made a mistake. We took a false step at the beginning. The dream which a half-savage Jew had of God we take for God's affidavit of his own character. We do not look on the World of Matter and Mind, to gather thence a natural idea of God, only at the statements of certain men who wrote seventeen hundred or three thousand years ago, men who did well enough for their time, not ours.

All round us lie the evidences against the ecclesiastical conception of God, within us are they yet more distinct. The great mistake of the Christian Church is its conception of God. Once it was the best the nations could either form or accept. To-day it is not worth while to try to receive it. It is inadequate for Science, either the philosophy of matter or man, explaining neither the condition, the history, nor yet the origin of one or the other. It is unfit for Religion; for Piety, its sentimental part—Theology, its intellectual part—Morality, its practical part. I cannot love an imperfect God, I cannot serve an imperfect God with perfect morality.

There will be no great and sufficient revival of religion till this conception be corrected. Atheism is no relief; indifference cannot afford any comfort; and belief makes the matter worse. The Churches complain of the atheism of Science; their false notion of God made it atheistic. You and I mourn at the wickedness of men in power; is there anything in the ecclesiastical religion to scare a tyrant or a traitor? In high American office mean men live low and wicked lives, abusing the people's trust, and then at last, when the instincts of lust, of passion, and of ambition fail them, they whine out a few penitent words to a priest, on their death-beds, with their last breath making investment for their future reputation on earth, and also in the Christian Church! For this mouthful of wind do they pass for better Christians than a whole life of eighty years of philanthropy gave Franklin the reputation for. Thus selfish and deceitful men are counted for saints by the Christian clergy, while the magnificent integrity of Franklin and Washington never gave them a high place in any Christian Church! You weep at the poverty of life in the American Church—thirty thousand ministers with right of visitation and search on all mankind, and no more to show for it! A revival of religion going on over the whole land—and a revival of the slave trade at the same time, and neither hindering the other! You mourn

at the poverty of life in the Churches of America, but the Church of Christendom is no better—nay, I think the Church in the Free States of America is its better part; the Christian Church abroad strikes hands with every tyrant, it treads down mankind, nor will it be ever checked, while it has such a false conception of God.

Under us is the Earth, every particle of it immanent with God; over us are the Heavens, where every star sparkles with Deity; within us are the Heavens and the Earth of human Consciousness, a grander revelation of Deity in yet higher form. These are all of them a two-fold testimony against the Ecclesiastical Conception of God. Not one of them has a whisper of testimony in favor of atheism; all are crowded with evidence of the Infinite God,—First Good, First Perfect, and First Fair, Father and Mother to you and me, to all that were, that are, that shall be, leading us to life everlasting.

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Subject :—“**RELIGION AND THE BIBLE.**”

Service will Commence at Half-past Six.

There will be no service in the Bridge Street Chapel in the
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