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"SCIENCE AND RELIGION."

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM
PLACE, SEPTEMBER 20, 1874, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

The text was taken from Job xi, 7, "Canst thou by searching find out God?"

He said—After much hesitation, I have consented to speak to you, my friends, on the Inaugural address recently delivered before the British Association by Professor Tyndall.

It is scarcely necessary to explain that I hesitated to do so partly through a diffidence which it is impossible to conceal, and partly because I shrink from the ridicule which I should deserve if I came forward as Professor Tyndall's apologist or eulogist. Such a man needs no defence, and for a clergyman to patronize him would be to earn derision.

At the same time no one would lament more than the Professor himself an excessively jubilant tone on the part of either believers or unbelievers over his Address. He would be equally displeased to hear the believer say "Now we can go on believing in God, because Professor Tyndall says we may;" and to hear the unbeliever say "We have no souls and there is no God, because Professor Tyndall has declared in favour of materialism." But despite all the great teacher's modesty and moderation, there will be many on both sides to feel, if not to say, such silly things. Leaving this attitude for the little-minded and shallow-headed, we are nevertheless conscious of the great importance to our own times of an *ex cathedra* declaration of the latest scientific conclusions. It is of consequence to the world at large what such a Professor may think and what he may say on such an august occasion. And although the truly wise will never take any opinion, or accept any inference, merely out of reverence for the speaker; the speaker has a claim on the attention of the enlightened world in proportion to his knowledge and his uprightness.

I do not intend to review at any length, or with any attempt at criticism, the Address with which I hope we are all familiar. All I desire to do is to direct special attention to certain striking points in it and especially to those which have more bearing on religious questions.

At the outset, I own with pleasure that the oftener I read the Address the more I like it and admire it. In the first place it is delightfully honest, and, I am sure, that is no small claim on our attention. It is of course full of learning as one might expect, and will help to popularize the best thought of our best men. Its tone is everywhere moderate and generous, which ought to soften even the prejudices and asperities of bigotry itself. And while the Professor declares boldly his present convictions, and presumes that time and further research will only strengthen them, he admits the possibility of future modification, and leaves to us—as a right not to be disputed—the field of religious enquiry, so long as our researches therein shall not be pursued to the injury or enslavement of the understanding.

I do not say that this concession was necessary, but it was generous. The Professor had a perfect right to proclaim his theory of materialism, to show how the doctrine of evolution, amongst others, overthrows the popular conceptions of God and the soul, and to have religion unnoticed. No one—especially in the present jealous attitude of theology towards science—could have blamed him for steering clear of all such reefs and shoals. But it seems an act of consideration to have admitted the existence of some kind of religious enquiry which in the opinion of the speaker did no violence to the claims of science. It was a condescension to opponents who have hitherto done little to deserve tender treatment.

The most striking of what I may call the negative conclusions of the Professor are these: First, that he sees no necessity for a Creator; the term Creator here being used in the hitherto popular sense of the term. There is no room in nature's operations for the interference of the gods. Secondly, that he can discover no soul in man, as the term "soul" is popularly understood, or even as it is represented by Bishop Butler under the figure of an operator using a machine. Thirdly, with the popular idea of soul, personal immortality also vanishes from his conception of human destiny.

Now if we bear in mind that these negations are not put forth as dogmas, but as inferences ; are not so much the conclusions of scientific knowledge, as confessions of scientific ignorance, we shall be able to examine them and to hear them repeated without the least mental disturbance. They are put forth much in this wise :—Science reveals that natural laws and forces are sufficient to account for all phenomena. Matter is and ever has been adequate to produce all that we see and all that we are. The origin of matter is still undiscovered, and a great mystery still hangs over the mighty past and present which is yet unsolved. Everything tends to prove that matter existed from all eternity, and every atom of it is everlasting. The perpetual changes in the combination of molecules are enough by themselves to produce all the varying forms of animate and inanimate existence. Creation by jumps is out of the question. Origin of species by caprice, or by independent exercises of a creative will, is but a bungling method of explaining what is now perfectly clear without any such Divine interference. Science does not say there is no God at all ; but only says, There is no room in the perfect self-sufficiency of matter for that manipulating, contriving artificer of a God whom the orthodox world have called “The Creator of the Universe.”

Now I wonder what there is in all this for any religious man to take objection to ? As a firm and unshaken believer in God, I have long been familiar with the modern scientific conceptions of the universe, and my faith has never quailed before them. Years ago, before a country congregation, I preached the doctrine of the eternity of matter and succeeded in showing my rustic hearers that there was no more difficulty in believing *that*, than in believing the eternity of God Himself—far less difficulty indeed than in believing that God made everything or anything whatever out of nothing. Our notions of God’s relation to matter might change again and again, without our losing any assurance of His Being and His Love.

Moreover, when Darwinism arose—instead of dismay—wonder and admiration were awakened afresh at the marvellous wisdom of the world’s order. To have had a toad or a snail for one’s grandsire only added to the awe and thankfulness of feeling that one was a man and could worship God ! It is what we *are*, and not whence we came or how we were born, that should regulate our conception of HIM.

There is nothing whatever, then, in the first of these negative propositions hostile to religious belief. On the contrary, in so far as it of necessity relieves the idea of God from unworthy conceptions, it is an aid to faith, and leads to an exaltation of religious feeling.

The next proposition, that man has no soul independent of his body and brain is at first sight a little more alarming. But in the first place, science here only confesses she cannot find a soul, and points somewhat triumphantly to the utter absence of all mental or spiritual phenomena when the brain is totally disabled by torpor or death. The evidence is only what might have been expected. Even in life-time we can give no demonstration of our own "soul" as it is called; nor receive any proof from others that they have souls. Accepting entirely and frankly the hypothesis that the so-called "soul" is only the product of a living brain, (though how produced is admitted to be another great mystery) yet there is no evidence forthcoming that once produced it is not immortal; that impressions made upon the mind are not indelible *somewhere*—the dissolution of cerebral tissue notwithstanding. Hitherto Science has not proved this negative, and, what is more to the purpose, we do not expect to find that the most minute microscopical investigations can ever reveal what we call the soul, or make manifest to the senses what can only be found in an entirely different region. As we cannot find God in matter, so we do not expect to find the soul in man; though in each we may detect, as it were, the footprints of a presiding ruler, and the traces of a force which eludes our grasp.

While Life itself remains shrouded in an impenetrable mystery, how can we dream of understanding even the nature of a soul or God? The term "soul" is after all only an apology for our ignorance. One of the commonest of human weaknesses is to give a name to what no one understands. We so label some of our aches and pains, just to distinguish one from another, but the name seldom throws light on the nature of our malady. But whether it be named or not, no man can rid himself of that thing, or aggregate of things, or product of things, which is commonly called his soul—himself—the source of his most solemn action, the medium of his communion with other souls and with the Father of all souls—God. That self, or soul, is a reality, while

it lasts, and cannot be left out of human consideration, merely because we cannot weigh it in our scales or seize it with our forceps. But I go further still and say, should it ever be proved that the "soul" is material and God Himself also material—in the sense understood by men of science who include invisible gases, electric and magnetic phenomena and the forces which produce them, under that term—I do not think I should lose my faith in God or immortality. At this present moment I have the impression that there is something common between me and my God, some identity of nature between Him and what I call my spirit, although I do not know in the least degree what that nature is, or how it differs from tangible matter. It is enough that I am, and that I think invisible thoughts and feel imponderable emotions towards one who corresponds, so to speak, with my aspiration and sympathizes with my feeling. I did not make myself thus. I accept the doctrine of Herbert Spencer on this matter without reservation, and conclude that my emotions are the result of the accumulated emotions of my ancestors. Still Nature has made me thus, and—let my soul and God be what they may, material or not—*they meet here in this life*; trust is inspired, and love follows trust, and hope promises endless communion.

The apparent inadequacy of the means to the end is no serious discouragement; for this is Nature's way—from the embryo, to the wisest of philosophers—her beginnings are feeble and seemingly contemptible when contrasted with her finished work. Of course we have no proof, nor as yet can we get one, of a future so carefully veiled from our sight and experience, and only opened to our imagination and hope. But the change from the primal cell to the perfected living man, is not less marvellous and *a priori* incredible, than would be the production of an immortal soul from the mortal brain. To leave, however, all speculation, we admit and have admitted many times, that neither God, nor the soul, nor immortality is as yet capable of demonstration either by scientific or any other means; and yet we believe. In this address Professor Tyndall has said nothing of a negative character which, as true and firm believers in God and immortality, we could not honestly endorse.

I now turn to those passages in the Address which may be termed *Concessions of Science to Religion*.

They may be summarized as follows :

(1) Physical science does not cover the whole ground of man's being, or exhaust the legitimate objects of his interest and study.

(2) There is still behind Nature, and what we call Life, a mystery, as yet unsolved.

(3) There is a kind of enquiry into this mystery involving the exercise of religious emotions, which is not contrary but supplementary to science.

With reference to the second of these important admissions by Professor Tyndall, I need say very little, as there is no controversy about it whatever. The more we really know, the more we find there is to be learnt. And science herself having made such vast explorations in our own times, in every possible direction, admits with every fresh conquest, that new fields yet untrodden are rising to view on every side.

It is the glory of science to recognize the limits beyond which scientific investigation cannot pass. Those who have reached the confines of knowledge in our own day, are the first to confess that the mystery of mysteries lies yet under an impenetrable veil. This of itself is justification enough for proper religious enquiry, and ought to silence the scorn of those who deride religious investigation as childish and futile.

But in the other two concessions, the Professor goes much further. To him the mystery is insoluble, and on that account investigation may have been abandoned by him as altogether fruitless. He is, however, not so narrow-minded as to turn round upon others and forbid their searching into the mystery, if they please. He has no words of ridicule for those whose chief pursuit is in a field of enquiry, which, to him, cannot be explored. So far from that, he announces, almost at the outset, that "Man never has been, and he never will be satisfied with the operations and products of the understanding alone ; hence, physical science cannot cover all the demands of his nature." Later on, he says, "It comes to pass that, over and above his understanding there are many other things appertaining to man, whose prescriptive rights are quite as strong as that of the understanding itself." Amongst these rights, he enumerates, the exercise of awe, reverence, love, and what he calls the "deep-set feeling" of humanity, that which "incorporated itself into all the religions of the world."

"You," he says, "who have escaped from these religions into the high and dry light of the understanding, may deride them; but in so doing you deride accidents of form merely, and fail to touch the immovable basis of the religious sentiment in the emotional nature of man. To yield this sentiment reasonable satisfaction is the problem of problems at the present hour."

I think you will agree with me that no rebuke, so just and well-timed, has been administered to the fashionable Atheism of the day from any pulpit in Christendom. Professor Tyndall has discerned what has escaped less thoughtful minds, that it has been the errors, the assumptions, and the intolerance of the religions of the world, which have earned the contemptuous rejection of the wise; and not Religion itself, which has been wrongly identified with its corrupt forms and accessories.

It is to solve "this problem of problems," that we, my friends, are bound together. To yield to the religious emotions a reasonable satisfaction. We have, each in his own way, given up all for this. Despite our failures and discouragements, we hold our ground with a desperate determination that we may hew out a path for others to walk in, and by kindling a little twilight that others may usher in the day.

Our religion is nothing if it be not reasonable. Long ago did we renounce that fatuous hostility to and dread of science common to Theologians, knowing well that whatever science might reveal, it would bring glory to the God of the whole universe, and give us better for our worse, more truth for our partial and dim perceptions—yes, and more ground for hope that every thing that breathes was wrapped in the same everlasting arms of Divine Love. We welcomed science as our schoolmaster, and our constant guide to warn us from the pitfalls of ignorance and superstition, to give us the ballast of sober thought when enthusiasm or imagination might tempt us to soar too high. We have nothing to fear from science so long as she is true to herself and speaks the plain truth. As plainly as words can speak, she bids the seeker after God forego his fruitless search for demonstration in the realm of matter, "Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but He is risen—risen from your earlier and false conceptions into a region where only the spiritual eye can find Him." We were, indeed, on the

wrong scent when we were mixing up our speculations on the origin and formation of matter with our search for the living God, and though we may use out of mere habit, or in religious poetry, the term "Creator," yet we have long since abandoned the meaning of that term which science has condemned. What may be God's relation to matter must for a long time remain an insoluble mystery, but this does not concern those who love Him, and strive to do His will, and trust His constant goodness. We do not know what we ourselves are—how much less can we know what God is! But we know that "we love Him because He first loved us," and in that daily, hourly, most profound satisfaction, we have the consent of our understandings that it is perfectly reasonable.

I will conclude with a fragment from Professor Tyndall's peroration, in which every one present will recognize the spirit and aims of our own work.

"I would set forth equally the inexorable advance of man's understanding in the path of knowledge, and the unquenchable claims of his emotional nature, which the understanding can never satisfy.

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"And, if still unsatisfied, the human mind, with the yearning of a pilgrim for his distant home, will turn to the mystery from which it has emerged, seeking so to fashion it as to give unity to thought and faith—so long as this is done, not only without intolerance or bigotry of any kind, but with the enlightened recognition that ultimate fixity of conception is here unattainable, and that each succeeding age must be held free to fashion the mystery in accordance with its own needs; then, in opposition to all the restrictions of materialism, I would affirm this to be a field for the noblest exercise of what, in contrast with the *knowing* faculties, may be called the *creative* faculties of man. Here, however, I must quit a theme too great for me to handle, but which will be handled by the loftiest minds ages after you and I, like streaks of morning cloud, shall have melted into the infinite azure of the past."