

# ORTHODOXY AND PANTHEISM

## A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,  
DECEMBER 29TH, 1872, BY THE

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On Sunday (Dec. 29th) at St. George's Hall, the Rev. C. Voysey took his text from the 2 Corinthians, iv. 13 v., "We also believe, and therefore speak."

He said—In a splendid oration before the scholars of Liverpool College, the Right Honourable William Ewart Gladstone made an appeal to his young hearers on behalf of the Christian religion, warning them against the Pantheism which Dr. Strauss has recently put forth, with all frankness and courage, in a book entitled, "*The Old Belief and the New.*"

We cannot but sympathise with the pious intention of this warning, nor can we fail to admire the high and generous tone which the speaker adopted in reference to the great critic whose opinions he deplored and denounced. The temper of the speech was as perfect as its eloquence, and, although we may find grave fault with some of the positions he assumed, we feel quite assured that the speaker was honestly doing his very best for the moral and religious interests of the youths before him, and that he was only uttering forth the most cherished convictions of his own heart.

In the interests of that very religion of the soul, which Mr. Gladstone would defend with all the great powers of his mind and tongue, we must, however reluctantly, bring to light some of the mistakes into which he has fallen, and place the relations of Orthodoxy and Pantheism in a new light.

I say, in the interests of true religion, we must do this; for whether Orthodoxy be true or false, there are thousands of Orthodox people who are truly religious, who are living lives of earnest faith and love towards the highest God they can conceive, and while they thus live (kept back by some cause or other, not of

their own fault, from rising into a higher conception) they are truly religious; and God above, whom the best and wisest of us know so imperfectly, will surely say of them all "They have done what they could, it is not their fault if they have done no more."

So far as the words we are considering were spoken by a truly religious man, we must sympathise with him in his repudiation of Dr. Strauss' Pantheism. The learned critic declares his Pantheism with a plainness of speech which commands our gratitude. He says, "There is no personal God; there is no future state; all religious worship ought to be abolished. The very name of Divine service is an indignity to man?" Instead of God he offers to us what he calls the All or Universum. This All or Universum has neither consciousness nor reason. But it has order and law. Now Dr. Strauss might be right or wrong. We are not now discussing the question, we only contrast this Pantheism with the devout language of our own hearts; and it is no stretch of enthusiasm to say the contrast is as between darkness and light—Heaven and Hell. We who utterly believe in a God who has both reason and consciousness, in One who knows all about the past, present, and future of every one of us; in One who really love us each and all with a fatherly and motherly affection, and who has taught us to look up to Him, and love and trust Him, and seek to do His will, for the sole satisfaction of doing it; we to whom good and ill-fortune, health and disease, life and death, are all ministers of His Divine will to work only for our good; we, who thus believe, should be plunged into the outer darkness of despair if Dr. Strauss' Pantheism were true. You may put out a man's eyes and sentence him to livelong night, but in the dreary gloom there come sweet voices of loving friends, gentle hands to make sure the companionship, and to guide the steps, and beams of Heavenly sunshine to warm the chill blood in his veins, and tell him that the glorious light still shines on. But if you put out the eyes of a man's soul, who across that nethermost abyss can reach him with a word of hope, or melt the frozen fog in which his spirit is imprisoned? The darkness of night is as clear as noon-day compared with the blackness of despair when the light of the soul has been put out. But to feel this horror, in all its intensity, you must once have known what it is to see God, and to live joyously in his presence. To be born blind is not to suffer 1,000th part so much as to have once had eyesight and lost it. The Pantheist or Atheist is almost

always one who never was truly religious, who never did really believe in God at all. Now and then you find exceptions of those who have lived in the blaze of Heavenly sunshine, and then suffered a total eclipse of faith, and as far as my experience goes such sufferers have nearly lost their reason, and some have put an end to their torture by suicide.

I do not wonder, then, at the earnestness with which Mr. Gladstone pleaded with those young people not to go too near that awful precipice. I think that passionate fear for their safety justified him in warning them of their peril.

If we have nothing but unconscious unreasoning Universum, we have no God. Its boasted order and law are cruel and inexorable. Nay, rather they can have no moral significance to the moral beings who are tortured by their caprice. Without the heart of man to reflect the heart of God, the order and laws manifested in the phenomena around us chiefly tell of reckless disregard of human feeling and utter negligence of creature happiness. What is it to me to be told that the greatest number are happy, when I may be one of the wretched few whose life is a torment? Take away God, and the whole creation is cursed—not a single solution left of all its malignant riddles, not a grain of hope left at the bottom of nature's infernal gifts. Its very joys mock us; its sweetest pleasures grind to ashes as we taste them. But oh! with just one gleam from Heaven, refracted from the poor dull broken mirror of the heart of man; what light and joy spring forth; how all the woes of earth are relieved, how its most suffering victims are pillowed on a mother's breast, how its worst despair is conquered by the feeblest hope! If we only believe in One just a little better than ourselves, a Heavenly voice goes through the world cheering the drooping souls on its way with the celestial song, "Glory to God in the Highest, on Earth there shall yet be peace, for all is goodwill to man." And they hear a voice behind them saying, "Fear not, for I am with thee. Be not dismayed, for I am thy God. I will help thee. Yea, I will strengthen thee, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness."

I must pause for a moment to explain what we mean by a "personal" God. We use this term only in contrast to Pantheism. It is commonly taken to imply a God in some form or other, possibly human. But of course that is not the sense in which we use it.

We mean by it only the individual self-conscious existence of God, which enables him to say *Ego et non-Ego*—I and the Universe, I and you. However mysterious and subtle the connexion may be between God and matter, yet we believe God is able to say "I and matter," that he is able to think, and to will, and to love. This is why we speak of a "personal" God, even while we have not the remotest anthropomorphic conception of the mode of His existence, or of the nature of His substance or essence.

To return to Mr. Gladstone's speech. The safeguard against Pantheism or Atheism which he proposes, is to hold fast "the faith once delivered to the Saints," viz., "Belief in the Deity and Incarnation of our Lord." These he describes as "the cardinal and central truths of our religion," "confessed by many more than ninety-nine in every hundred Christians."

With quite as deep a horror of Atheism as he has, we nevertheless demur altogether to his antidote, and we will give our reasons for it.

First, in passing, we may well question whether the Deity and Incarnation of Jesus was the faith once delivered to the Saints, or the belief of the Apostles themselves. But as it is a matter of no consequence whatever, except to the critics, we pass on at once to give our reasons for demurring to the efficacy of the safeguard proposed.

1st. Mr. Gladstone seems to us to make his first mistake in identifying a belief in the Deity and Incarnation of Jesus with religion. You will, perhaps, remember in my recent sermons on "*Faith: Intellectual and Emotional*," how I endeavoured to shew that Intellectual Faith was not only not essential to religion, but, for the most part, calculated to weaken and destroy religious emotion. I will not go over this ground again, but I can quite understand Mr Gladstone identifying the two things which are radically distinct, because all his own religious emotion has been derived, in the first instance, from impressions connected with the Christian doctrines, and they are now practically bound up together. That is, the historical Jesus, of whom his Church and his Testament speak, has become to him a God in Heaven, and the personal solace of his own soul. He cannot enter into the feelings of the Jew who, while looking upon Christ as only one of his countrymen and a mere man, lifts up his soul to Jehovah in the words of the Old Psalmist, "Whom have I in Heaven but

Thee, and there is none upon earth that I desire in comparison of Thee." To a votary of Mary or of Jesus, the religious man of another creed is an inscrutable enigma, he is an object of pity; considered to be only a poor lame or blind traveller in a wrong road, who shall be dealt with mercifully, if at all mercifully, because he was ignorant; and so the real religious element which is to be found in men and women of all creeds is thought, by all in turn, to be peculiar to their own creed.

Mr. Gladstone's creed may be true or false. Whether it be one or the other, true religion is to be found connected with all creeds.

But we demur to this safeguard on another ground, viz., that it is a belief resting solely on external authority, and not on the reason, conscience, and love of the human soul. Any religion coming to us on such terms, claiming belief in external authority, must expect to have its claims challenged, its witnesses cross-examined, its authority sifted.

Now-a-days we cannot expect men and women to believe the Deity of Christ because Mr. Gladstone believes it, or because others before him, not a bit more entitled to credit on such a subject, believed it. The appeal to antiquity is vain, for it proves too much; it proves Brahminism, Judaism, Buddhism, and ever so many things, false as well as true. Dr. Strauss himself, the master of modern criticism, has examined these historical claims for Christianity, and found them wanting. He began, no doubt as many begin, by thinking that the only God in Heaven was the God revealed in the Bible, and when he found that the Bible told falsehoods, and that the image of God, in some places therein described, was a foul image, to be hated and not loved by man, he ceased to believe in God at all. He cannot have had any religion, as we understand it, apart from his intellectual conceptions of the Divine Being, as drawn from the Old and New Testaments, interpreted by the Church, or else his belief in God would have survived the shock of his discovery. But having no idea of God, apart from what he had been taught, he came to the only logical conclusion—that there was no God at all. Dr. Strauss will pardon me if I have misread his experience; but it is that of thousands and thousands. It is not merely natural, it is inevitable.

The same process is going on around us in all the religious bodies of this country. So far as men and women have been taught that their Bibles and Churches are the only means of

knowing anything about God, so far, when they discover, as they inevitably must, the falsehoods and errors, and impieties of their Bibles and creeds, will they become Atheists, or Positivists, or believers in Dr. Strauss' unconscious Universum. Put a Bible into a man's hand and say to him "This is God's Holy Word. It is all true, and right, and good." If he have no religion independent of what he gets out of that book, resting on its authority alone, then as soon as its authority is shaken, or his eyes open to see its falseness and immorality, he loses his religion entirely, and has no alternative at first but to make a frantic effort to swallow it all down without another moment's reflection, or to turn his back on it for ever, and perhaps to sink down into the torpor and misery of Atheism.

It is, therefore, not only the Christian creeds, but the Christian method of imposing them on the acceptance of men which is to blame for Pantheism and Atheism. You churches have done it; You Christian Evidence champions, in your mistaken zeal; You sticklers for dogma; You believers in moral and physical monstrosities; You slave-bound idolaters of the traditions of antiquity. It is you that have slain these poor souls, or shut them up in the dungeons of despair. It is on your heads that the blood of these victims will fall, and it cries up out of the ground for vengeance at the hands of the living God. No, not for such vengeance as your Bible teaches, "a fearful looking-for, of fiery indignation, to consume the adversaries"—not that; but for the plucking up, and tearing down, and ruthless burning of your false creeds, which are only cruel when they are not childish and silly. All these thousands and thousands of stray souls, driven out by your curses from green pastures into a waste howling wilderness—these bear witness against you, that when they asked you for bread you gave them only a stone; when they sought the Lord God who made them, you set before them a fierce and burning savage, more awful than Moloch, and then tried—but vainly—to shade his hideous image by the Cross of Calvary; when they wanted the eternal, you gave them only the temporal; when they panted for the living God, you gave them only a dying man. Oh! shame on your cowardice, your childish fears, which bind you to these old wives' fables, and make you an incubus on the face of God's fair earth. You make a darkness where all ought to be light, and would be light too, but for your crypts and cells. You make desolation where joy and beauty

ought to flourish, and the songs of the happy fill the spacious air. Is there no revelation of God in men's own hearts, that you must needs read solemnly your ancient tales of magic and Incarnation, and tell them this is God's only visit to earth, his one only condescension to the children of men? Does not my heart, from its lowest depths, scorn a boon so rarely, so grudgingly, so partially given, when I have my God with me, and about my path and about my bed by night and by day, healing all mine infirmities, saving my innermost life from destruction, and crowning me with mercy and loving kindness? What Incarnation or Deified prophet can bring God so near to me as he is now, has ever been, and always will be? To make me believe your old story would be to darken all my soul, and drive me, as it has driven thousands, to blank despair. But what if, besides this story of the Incarnation, your gospels and creeds drive me to believe in the damnation of unbelievers, and in the eternal wrath of your crucified God? Can you expect me to keep my reason, not to say my religion, in the presence of such a nightmare as that? Oh, if you would really save your young men and maidens from that horrible despair of hopeless Atheism, in the name of God I charge you to take from them their Bibles and Catechisms, and tear out those horrible leaves which tell such awful and blasphemous falsehoods to the dishonour of God, and the discredit of Christ. If you would have them grow up to be religious, keep far from them the sight and sound of those very things which you prize most dearly as "the cardinal and central truths" of your religion. The new world, taught by science, and it is to be hoped by a standard of morality not lower than the present, will laugh at your story of the miraculous birth, will grow impatient at the blindness of any who will think the Incarnation a great act of God's love and condescension, and will become indignantly deaf to the enchantments of anyone who dares to follow up your antiquated legends with threats of hell-fire everlasting, if they do not believe them. Take it home to your heart while you are still earnest to serve God, that you are doing his cause and his children infinite wrong by persisting in enforcing your absurd creed upon an age which has well-sifted its pretensions, and thus driving all restless souls from one extreme of a paralysing superstition to the other extreme of a blank and hopeless infidelity.

But there is yet hope for men and women in this world if the croning churches will but hold their peace. In the hearts of the young are strains of Heavenly music, which will lure them on into paths of holiness and peace, if the sounds be not overwhelmed by the threats of the creeds. "My son give me thine heart" is no pretty fiction of fabulist or poet; but a great multitude, whom no man can number, have heard that celestial entreaty and have cast themselves into the Father's everlasting arms. Tell them far and wide, over the whole earth, "God is Love." "God is Just." "God is Holy." Use what terms you will to express all that is noblest and highest—only, "Speak good of his name." Dishonour it not by your old fables. Blaspheme it not by your Bible curses. "Speak good of His name." "O, let your songs be of Him, and praise Him." "Let your talking be of all His wondrous works." "Be telling of His righteousness and salvation from day to day." And then surely you will find even the young ones more ready to embrace the holy joy, more willing to learn more about so great and good a God; and then the poor Atheists, too, whom your false creeds have blighted, will perchance come back, as many have done already, under the genial rays of such a gospel, and begin to believe in very earnest what their hearts had so long told them was "too good to be true." Let it never be forgotten that there is a third alternative between Orthodoxy and Pantheism, a true religion of love and trust towards God, and of love and duty towards men, without Bible, or dogma, or church; without Christ, or Paul, or John. And as it is most certainly true that Orthodoxy must fall when you take away from its foundations the bottomless pit of hell fire, so it is true that, so long as man is man, his faith will survive the ruin of the churches, and the burning of creeds and Bibles; and as the ages roll on, he will wonder not that he can walk so well without these long disused props and crutches, but that he could ever have borne at all such frightful and dangerous impediments to his communion with God.

If I have spoken too fiercely, I must say "my zeal hath even consumed me." I may be reproached for "pride and perverseness," but I am not ashamed of being proud to bear witness for the noblest conception of God ever held by mortal man, nor ashamed of a perverseness which refuses to be made the slave of foolishness, or the accomplice of Atheism.