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THE CONTROVERSY

ABOUT

PRAYER.

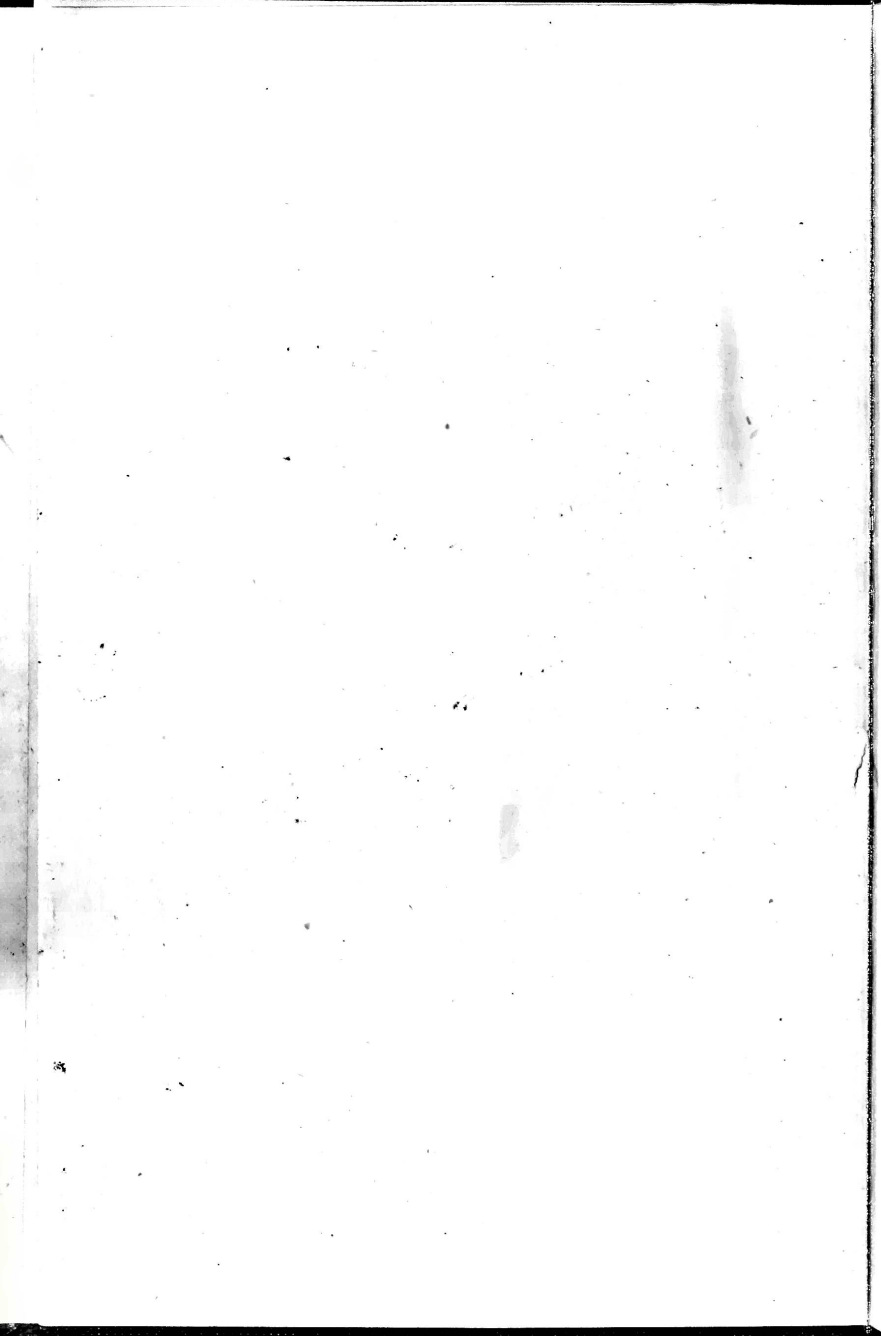
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THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT PRAYER.

SOME have said that religious knowledge is not progressive: with about as much truth we might say that medical knowledge is not progressive. On each topic mankind has made enormous errors, and on each is still very far from a sound and satisfactory state; yet on each it has left many errors far behind.

Primitive theology is man's interpretation of the outer world which he perceives; and his interpretation is largely influenced by his consciousness and his emotions. Enlarged and improved knowledge of the universe almost necessarily modifies theology, as does the improved moral culture of nations. Religion therefore (in its popular sense of "thought concerning God"), unless artificially stereotyped by nationally established creeds and by sacerdotal authority, must everywhere tend to improve, as nations become nobler in morals, or in breadth and accuracy of knowledge. So strong indeed is this natural tendency, that we do in fact trace this improvement, in spite of hierarchies and domineering institutions, and sometimes, in the higher minds, even in spite of public demoralization. Theological opinion, and the interpretation of generally received doctrines, cannot but undergo change, when the ascendant system of (what is called) metaphysics changes; much more, when,

as in the last three centuries of Europe, acquaintance with the outer world has been immensely enlarged and at the same time become beyond comparison more accurate.

But the mass of the population in Christendom is very far from duly appreciating the truths of natural science; and the teachers of religion on the one side are bound down by Church Articles and Liturgies, or on the other cannot conveniently outrun the traditional creed of their congregations. Men of business have not much time for original thought concerning religion; and a great majority of the female sex have too little scientific knowledge or too little independence of judgment to deviate knowingly from current opinion. Necessarily therefore within the same Church, whatever the submission to common ordinances, there is a great mental gap between those who are most and those who are least influenced by the thought and knowledge of the age, especially in Astronomy, in Geology, in Geography, in Physiology, to say nothing of History and Literary Criticism. Minds which have by no means gone so far as to throw off belief of an established religion, or the cardinal and prominent tenets of a creed, nevertheless to a great extent *interpret* things differently, so as practically to come to a different result from the older beliefs.

Now in this matter of Prayer, it is obvious what was the primitive doctrine of most nations, and in particular both of the Hebrews and of the early Christians. That God ruled the universe by law, none had any idea. They supposed that His rule might be compared to that of an earthly king, who said to one servant *Go*, to another *Come*, to a third *Do this*, and was obeyed. Indeed the Hebrews, like the Persians and Arabs, supposed ministering spirits to guide the actions of the elements and of the heavenly bodies; also, to guard or watch human in-

dividuals. Instinct, under a sense of weakness or desire, often impelled them, as it impels us, to pray for this, or for that; and they could but very vaguely define to themselves the limits within which prayer was right, and beyond which it would be rather impious than pious. We should all be much astonished to hear of barbarians so stupid as to pray that the new moon should give as much light as the full moon, or that a winter day should be luminous and long as a day of summer. In the very infancy of man the steadiness of sun and moon was so fully recognized, that it would have seemed idiotic to pray for any irregularity. But there has always been an enormous margin of events concerning which man saw no revelation of a fixed divine purpose, and therefore could not chide prayer as a presumptuous desire to turn the divine decrees aside. Indeed under polytheistic belief, the gods are morally imperfect; and no greater impropriety was felt in coaxing a god (a genius, a fairy) than in coaxing a mortal man. A vow,—in which a promise was made *contingently* upon the god hearing a prayer,—was thought a pious procedure; yet it is nothing but an attempt to *bargain* with the god. Such bargains in antiquity were solemnly sanctioned by many states, as by the Romans, and public money was often voted in fulfilment. In the Hebrew book of "Judges" the atrocious vow of Jephthah is not blamed. To vow to a god the tithe of an enemy's spoil on condition of victory, seemed wholly unblameable and decidedly pious to most ancient nations.

It may be doubted whether in any Christian sect of England or the United States prayers of this character could be endured. A vow, as understood by Christians, has nothing conditional in it. If it be an arbitrary, yet it is an absolute, promise to the Most High; it is not a bargain, as with the Romans. Of necessity those among us who believe the tides, the meteors, the clouds, the winds, to be guided by laws

as fixed as gravitation, are hereby disabled from praying about them or against them, equally as about an eclipse. Nevertheless, whatever weaknesses—the fruit of ancient ignorance—are incorporated with the Christian Scriptures, are accepted and even treasured up by simple hearted and pious persons, whose intellect either is not duly informed or has not duly acted on their creeds; and the deplorable dogma of Infallibility has made it very difficult for the pious to go directly against the sacred book, however grave and obvious the error. But within the compass of that book itself there is a variety of doctrine, a higher as well as a baser view; and to the higher view the nobler and more thoughtful minds tend. If at one time encouragement is given to importunity in prayer, on the assumption that God is comparable to a man who grants a petition merely to get rid of a teasing beggar; yet elsewhere it is laid down that repetition in prayer is vain, and that God is not moved by much speaking. If in one place it is said, that when two or three shall *agree* to pray for a thing, be it what it may, it shall be granted to them; in other places there is limitation, and human ignorance of what it is wise to ask is pointed at. In fact, in every prayer for things outward, among persons not wholly fanatical, the proviso, “if it be according to Thy will,” is now understood or expressed; and in matters of vehement personal desire, the clause is probably added: “nevertheless, not my will, but Thine be done.” Also, if any Christian teacher be asked, under what circumstances it is reasonable to have confidence that our prayer will be granted, he will hardly fail to reply, under the guidance of a familiar text, that it is only when we know that we ask a thing which is in accordance with the will of God.

Under such a complication,—which is the ordinary state of every Church,—it is (I must think) painful rudeness in an opponent, if indeed he is as well

informed of the facts as a critic ought to be, to assume in the present generation of English Christians the lowest and meanest views of prayer which prevailed in less instructed and Pagan times. It exasperates too much to enlighten. It was a simple insult, nothing less, to propose that Christians should pray for the sick in one special ward of an infirmary, and then (as a test of the utility of prayer) should observe whether the patients recovered better in that ward than in the other wards. Did its proposer imagine that a Christian is *able* to pray for any thing that others may dictate to him? One must be drawn keenly by desire from within or by painful distress, and must feel either assurance or strong hope that the petition conforms with the divine mind, before he can pray fervently. A philosopher (whatever his merits in his own line) sadly lowers himself when he so intrudes into sacred feelings and judgments which he does not understand. At the same time, there was and is abundant cause for grave remonstrance with the religion of the day in this very matter; and with a moderate turn, the same proposal might have given point unblameably to the argument.

It might have been set before English Christians, that they would certainly resent it as an insult, if any one were to propose, as a test of the utility of prayer, petition for a given topic (such as that concerning the hospital-ward)—without caring to ascertain first whether the thing asked could reasonably be esteemed in accordance with the divine will, or whether they themselves had any fervent desire for it. This being the case, how can the same enlightened Christians passively endure that the Privy Council should dictate to them what they are to ask of God for each member of the Royal Family? How can they approve of a stereotype prayer against public enemies, as if it were always *à priori* certain that in every war England is right and has God on her side? Knowing, as all the

educated do, that rains and droughts and pestilences, follow laws of matter as fixedly as do the planets, how can they think it pious to supplicate the Most High to interfere with them? Such public prayers, written in an age of lower knowledge, and sustained by the routine of State, *train all the educated to hypocrisy*, and lower the standard of truthfulness. Evidently, to pray for the royal family is enforced as a test of loyalty; which is on a par with the command to show loyalty by worshipping Cæsar's image. The coarseness of (what is called) the National Anthem,—“God save the Queen,”—against the Queen's (imaginary) foes, is quite disgusting. There is plenty of matter here for just and profitable attack from those who never pray, if they would make the attack from the highest and noblest principles of Christians themselves; moreover, it is very reasonable to claim, that those who hold high dignity in Church or State, and at the same time are distinguished by intellect and freedom of thought, will initiate public movement against these evil stereotyped prayers. Will they for ever preserve a dastardly silence, and leave reform to avowed opponents or to enemies who are strangers to the deep things of the Christian heart?

Cicero and Horace alike held, that men ought to pray to God for things external,—which man cannot control and God does control;—not for things internal, such as contentment, courage, or in a word, virtue; which a man ought to provide by his own effort. To despise any one for believing with Cicero, I find myself unable; the contumely which I read in many quarters is to me very unseemly and painful. Nevertheless, I regard it as quite certain that the progress of knowledge will ere long enforce the entire abandonment of stereotype prayer,—prayer made beforehand,—for outward blessings or conveniences however inevitable it be, that under pain, want or severe anxiety human nature will ejaculate to the All-

ruler earnest desire, not unprofitably. "He who searcheth hearts" knows how to estimate such prayers aright,—cannot blame them,—and has his own way of answering them. But to plan beforehand how others may or shall pray for a King or Queen's "health, wealth, long life" and "victory," is quite a different matter from prayer that is extorted by inward instinct or agony. So too is the "agreeing together" beforehand what to pray for, as if (in the coarse words of a ranting preacher) "by a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all-together" men could rival Kehama, and drag God along with them.

Undoubtedly the received belief of old was, that God's Providence ruled the world by agencies from without. A pious saint in danger from enemies was imagined to pray for (perhaps) "twelve legions of angels" as a military aid. A prophet's eyes were opened to see chariots and horses, invisible to other mortals, fighting on the side of his people. To such a mental condition the prayer of those days adjusted itself. But now all thoughtful persons educated in England are aware that the Divine rule is carried on by the laws of the material universe, and by the agencies of the human mind; and as it is no longer admissible to entreat that the Most High will tamper with his own laws, prayer tends to concentrate itself upon the human mind,—that is, invokes influence from the Divine Spirit on the mind either of him who prays or of some others.

Against this form of prayer, which may be called spiritual prayer, materialists rush with as rude and coarse attack as against prayer for things external. Their tone, and frequently their bold utterances, all but make an axiom of Atheism. Now I have no harsh feeling for Atheists, knowing as I do with what difficulties noble intellects struggle, and how cruelly the follies and crimes of theological devotees have led astray and exasperated meaner intellects. But it

suffices to accept and accost Atheists as our equals, whom we invite to courteous debate on fit occasion, and will always esteem and love, if they be morally worthy. Many of them seem to manifest nothing but scorn for Theism, and demand to lay down axioms of their own, which no wise Theist can ever accept. One of these axioms is, that "of course we can know nothing but phenomena." Since God assuredly is not a phenomenon, this assumes that "of course" we can know nothing of God. Another axiom is, that when we speak of one thing as the *cause* of another, all that we mean is, that the latter invariably follows the former; so they attempt to resolve causation into antecedence. I stoutly deny that that is all that I mean when I say "cause;" and if they reply that it is all that I *ought* to mean, I beg them to prove that, and not assume it without proof, as they do. The purport of their pretended axiom is to involve the whole universe, material, moral, and mental, in a rigid mechanical chain,—that is, in Fate: this granted, prayer of course is vain. Again, the idea of a Personal Deity they treat with contempt as "anthropomorphic," and assert that Personality implies limitation. Nay, but Person is only another word for Mind or Spirit. If we say Divine Spirit, they show equal enmity to the phrase. What avails the objections of such men to prayer? Their attack is not against prayer as such,—*i.e.*, entreaty made to a Divine Spirit, but against the existence or accessibility of any such Spirit. Spiritual prayer of course assumes that God is in the human mind,—that he is aware and (so to say) conscious of all our minds,—moreover, that he not only approves of, but is concerned to promote, human virtue. In the attacks which I read against spiritual prayer, it is visible that these axioms of Theism are denied: hence the attack is really that of Atheism against Theism,—which is all fair, if it be conducted by quiet reasonable argument, not by

scornful assumptions, nor under a pretence that they are only attacking a practice of Theists.

As Cicero and Tacitus and Aristotle, and the wisest modern moralists, insist, there is no morality if there be no freedom of the will. If a man's action is in all details predetermined like the path of a comet, he can no more be virtuous or vicious, praiseworthy or blameable, than the comet. Whatever may be said for a doctrine of universal Necessity by eccentric and confident reasoners, who think themselves pre-eminently philosophic, the great mass of mankind continue to believe as firmly as their own existence, that they have a choice between the better and the worse, and that they deserve *blame* for many of their bad actions; in short, that God, "while binding Nature fast in Fate, left free the human will." For myself, I must profess that my belief in my Free Will is coeval with and as firm as my belief in matter; and I think it clear that the belief in *both* is the first principle of all knowledge, and of course is prior to a belief in God. The assailant of spiritual prayer is apt to assume that the actions of the human will are as much determined beforehand as the movements of material particles, and therefore such prayer is as vain as prayer for things outward. But he does not pretend any proof that the will is thus mechanically predetermined: indeed he knows that proof is impossible: but he says that we probably shall hereafter find that the case of mind is similar to that of meteorology, and that in the progress of knowledge it will be discovered that the mind has no freedom. This amounts to saying that the progress of knowledge will probably annul the first axioms on which all knowledge is built. I need only reply that it has not yet done so, and I utterly disbelieve that it ever will.

We see in the marvellous instincts of brute minds, and in human instinct too, the operation of a Higher Mind in the animated universe. *How* this action

takes place we are necessarily ignorant, just as we are *how* we think at all. We can have no ultimate standing ground but in simple fact. Thought, life, existence, must remain for ever a mystery. So must the action of the Divine Spirit on the animal mind, which I see as a fact; and seeing it, I cannot doubt the action of the same Spirit in the higher regions of the human mind. Religion has long been described by pious persons as a "walking with God;" that is, as a permanent tendency of the mind, when relieved of other necessary thought, to remember the oversight, the insight, the joint consciousness of the Divine Spirit, who essentially and primarily loves goodness, justice,—in short, moral perfection. That virtue is the final object for which man and the whole of human life is ordained is a main principle of Theism. To supplicate God inwardly for increase of virtue, or pour out gratitude for his tender mercies to ourselves, and admiration of his manifold infinitude, is therefore its natural instinct; and such instinct cannot have been given us for nothing. In fact, its moral influence on the heart which cultivates it is the richest of all rewards. Materialists and Atheists are generally very severe against those who needlessly mortify lower and animal instincts, and are often slow to discover when it is *not* needless: they have then certainly no right to claim that a pure and noble instinct shall be repressed rather than cultivated. The best informed among the opponents of all prayer will (with good reason) deprecate the epithet Atheist; but if the God whom alone they admit to be possible has none but a mechanical existence, and praying to him is no wiser than praying to the clouds, he is no more to us than the gods of Epicurus; we can have no personal relations with him any more than with dead men.

Let the strong and scornful opposition to Prayer, which has been so widely echoed, be directed on formal, public, cut-and-dried Prayer, lengthy musical

Prayer, profane singing of sacred words for the sake of fine music, Litanies with endless repetition, the "Lord's Prayer" recited so often and so fast that it becomes unintelligible;—and much good may come of this outburst. There is scarcely a public prayer used in all Christendom which does not admit, perhaps urgently need, keen criticism. The "Lord's Prayer" is nowise to be excepted from this remark. Moreover, to pray without desire, is the more profane, the more it is done in combination and in system. What then of coaxing or scolding young people into it? What of paying choristers and public singers of addresses to God? There is abundant room for intelligent and profitable correction, without shocking any of the rightful sanctities of the heart.

