

# "ATHEISM."

I.

## A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

JANUARY 12TH, 1873, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

*From the EASTERN POST, January 18th, 1873.*

On Sunday (Jan. 12th) at St. George's Hall, the Rev. C. Voysey took his text from Ephesians ii., 12., "Having no hope and without God in the world."

I was speaking last Sunday of our special mission to the Orthodox Christians, and how it lies in our power to liberate them from their present position of doubt and dissatisfaction, by winning them over to our more rational, simple, and consoling belief in God. But we have another high duty to perform, another mission to fulfil. There are around us on every hand, almost in every home, men who are practically Athiests, who without actually denying, in open speech, that there is a God, yet are totally indifferent to the subject, and care nothing at all whether there be a God or not. Some of these have joined the school of thinkers who look upon one question at least as definitively settled; who, at all events, have satisfied themselves that if there be a God it is impossible for man to know anything about him; and who, therefore think it is a waste of time, energy, and thought to pursue any enquiry into things Divine. I believe that by far the largest number of Atheists are men of this school, and the obvious causes of their Atheism may be found in the wide-spread diversity of religious opinion, which shows that even those who believe in a God cannot agree among themselves as to his nature, or attributes, or dealings with mankind; and also in the entire failure of Christianity to present us with a religious belief in harmony with the Reason, the Conscience, and the Affections of man,

The breaking up of their old belief has landed them in a waste howling wilderness. They have nothing in exchange for what they have lost. They are "Without hope and without God in the world." Now it is a fact which I never contemplate without the deepest delight, that there are some amongst us, some even of our most devoted friends and supporters, who were for a time Atheists, and whose hearts were clouded over by utter infidelity, but who recovered for themselves the blessed solace of a firm faith in a good God, and whose religious instincts have found new life and fresh occupation.

Years and years ago many of us must have foreseen what one of the immediate consequences of the downfall of Orthodoxy would surely be, viz. : "The temporary but total eclipse of faith in the hearts of thousands." Francis W. Newman, foreseeing this, prefaced all his work of destruction by sending forth his book entitled, "*The Soul; Her Sorrows and Aspirations*," which was, in reality, an "Essay on the Positive Foundations of Practical Religion." And his instinctive desire to furnish a foundation for true faith in place of the old one, which he was about to remove, has been shared by other great reformers in this age. In the works of Theodore Parker and of Francis Power Cobbe, and even in the purely critical works of Bishop Colenso, the same desire to establish a pure and true faith is everywhere manifested. The spirit which has animated the movement with which we are specially connected is essentially the same, and no libel could be more unjust than to say we only want to pull down errors and have nothing to put in their place.

I conceive it to be, then, a very important part of our work to endeavour to stop the further progress of that Atheism which threatens to become so popular, and to win back the poor wandering souls who have no Divine shepherd to feed, to guide, and to defend them.

But before we can undertake such an important task we must carefully consider how it is best to set about it. There are always two or more ways of doing everything, and we may do more harm than good if we adopt the wrong method.

Experience of certain wrong methods will furnish us with one or two excellent cautions which I will now briefly touch upon,

1. It was the custom for religious people to approach the unbelieving and the heterodox with an air of superiority; to treat them as if they were wicked, or, at least, greatly to blame for their unbelief or their heresy. Now, if we would do any good, if we wish to be true to our own principles, we must forswear such a grave mistake as that. The Atheist is, for the most part, on a level with ourselves, morally and intellectually, not unfrequently our superior in what is noblest in man. He, at least, has made the greatest sacrifice which a human heart could make for the sake of Truth. In his loyalty to what he believed to be true he gave up all the bright possibilities of a believer's joy, and abandoned all hope of a life to come.

We cannot, without folly, as well as impertinence, lecture such a man as a missionary lectures his idolatrous savage. We cannot, without indecency, approach such a man with our patronage and address him with a lofty commiseration.

The best attitude we can wear is that which most truly accords with our inmost humility as seekers after truth. What are we ourselves but learners? We may be very sure that the highest truth we clasp to-day with fond and grateful emotion will one day have to give place to a truth far higher still, and we may be sure that if we are ever so much nearer to the truth than the Atheist is, we must have some admixture of error. So if we betake ourselves to the Atheist it must be to hear and to learn quite as much as to speak and to teach.

Even granting that the truth is on our side, we may be very sure that he has some truth to tell, some correction of error to impart which is of priceless value. Let us argue with him (and argument means fair play on both sides), and not dictate to him. Let us remember that our dogmatizing is just as unwelcome and useless to him as his dogmatism is to us. We must not be afraid to argue even with the Atheist; for an opinion or belief that will not bear hard reasoning is in a rapid decline and will soon have to be buried. If our Faith be true, it will out-match all falsehood. If our belief in God be worth anything it will be armour-proof against the most subtle denials. So dearly, so intensely, do we love truth, that we would give up God Himself if God were a lie, and we would hug our own despair rather than be the dupes of a false hope. Let the Atheist see, then, that we are quite as much in

earnest as he is; quite as desirous of learning from him, as that he should learn from us. Such respect given can only win respect in turn. It is painfully true that many Atheists are the most vain and conceited of men—quite as pharisaical as the old chief priests and scribes down in Judea—quite as scornful in their pity of us “blind believers” as we have ever been towards them. But what has made them so? And who is to blame for it? Why, the scornful attitude of religious society during the last hundred years. Voltaire, Tom Paine, and the long list of their successors, though falsely called Atheists, were considered by Christians as the offscouring of the world, and a disgrace to mankind, not for blemishes in their lives, but for heresy in their opinions; and the real Atheist, in the present day, is, by religious people, looked down upon as contemptible, or dreaded as dangerous. It is, therefore, the fault of believers if Atheists have grown vain and conceited. False blame always tends to exaggerate the sense of our own importance, while merited praise tends to remind us of our shortcomings. If possible, we must change this state of irrational hostility, and drive out the pharisaism of Atheism, by first expelling the pharisaism of Belief. Mutual respect is the key to mutual understanding, and, without that, discussion and argument are vain.

(2) Another caution I would mention is that against supposing that modern Atheism is *necessarily* connected with domestic immorality or social anarchy. I would not, myself, dare to prognosticate the results were the belief in God entirely to fade out of the hearts of our nation. There might be, for a time, a most fearful insurrection of men and women against the moral laws by which society is bound together; but it is impossible to say with accuracy what would be the result, because men and women are so illogical. Believing, as I do, in God, and assured, as I am, by the past history of our race that we are ever going forwards, I should expect that God would provide in the future, as he has ever done in the past, for the moral government of his children. At all events, so far, the modern Atheist is no ruffianly breaker of laws, or violator of the sanctity of human rights. Some of them, indeed, are among the world's most righteous men, most fond and affectionate husbands and fathers, most true and generous friends of mankind. Most of them are lovers of order as well as of freedom, and “use their

liberty" as if they believed themselves to be the servants of God." It will not do, then, to make the mistake of assuming that the Atheist is at all our moral inferior. It is false in fact; and to go upon that assumption is not only to insult a body of highly honourable men, but to ruin our own work at the outset.

(3.) In the third place, we cannot be too candid in our discussions. It is a very common fault in theologians to shut their eyes to unpleasant facts, and to refuse to draw obvious conclusions.

If we desire to influence reasoning men we must show our own knowledge of the laws of the game, and use skilfully and fairly the weapons of logic. Nothing helps sooner to confirm any one in his own opinion than to hear it feebly assailed, or unfairly opposed. The weapons of modern Atheism are very powerful and finely tempered. We cannot, with a wave of the hand, or a shrug of the shoulders, get rid of the army of unpleasant facts and stubborn difficulties in the condition of humanity and of nature around us, which will be arrayed against our belief. We must ignore nothing, we must not gloss over a single flaw in our reasoning, or make any leaps such as delight theological controversialists. The battle of argument must be fought inch by inch, and there must be no strategem, no surprises.

(4.) As our real aim must be the discovery of the truth, it will never do to give *undue* weight to the personal value of our own convictions. That value is enormous, and of its weight, as an argument, I shall presently speak; but it must not be used in its wrong place. The pleasantness of a conviction, by itself, is no more proof of the truth of that conviction than the pleasantness of an action is a proof that that action is right. "Pleasant but false" is quite as good a proverb as "pleasant but wrong." To believe a doctrine only because it consoles, is to confess that it has no other logical basis, and therefore is not to be accepted by reasonable men. We must be prepared to be utterly loyal to reason and truth, remembering that if there be no God it is our manifest duty to ascertain and prove the fact, and if there be a God—a God of truth and equity—it will not please Him to deceive ourselves, or to prop up our belief by false arguments. If there be a God, the very Atheist commends himself to the Divine approval whenever he is true to himself.

For what other purpose was our Reason given us than to be

supreme in all intellectual inquiries. It was surely intended to raise us into a condition superior to all fear, and far above all bribes. It was given to be the master of our spiritual emotions as well as the governor of our animal passions, and we cannot honour God by renouncing our own Reason, or suffering ourselves to be carried away from the stern truth, however terrible, by the allurements of a false hope, or by the terrors of a dismal certainty. But, then, if *truth* be our chief aim, and not our own mental enjoyment, we *must* gain by it in the end ; it will make our souls more heroic ; it will prepare us the better for that clearer knowledge of God Himself, which may await us as our reward. But if, on the other hand, we let the Atheist see that we only believe in God because we want to be comfortable, we put a stumbling block in his way, and shew ourselves to be unworthy and selfish in our aims, and no true seekers after truth. The moral effect upon him, of such a discovery, would be quite fatal to his conversion.

(5) The last caution I would name is that against mistaking the exact limits of our inquiry. It must ever be borne in mind that the Atheists and ourselves stand on the same ground in denying that the existence of God can be demonstrated in the same way as we demonstrate a mechanical fact or a scientific proposition.

Time and breath would be spent in vain if the disputants were to miss the main point of the question. We do not want to do the impossible task of demonstrating or defining the existence of God. We want only to make it clear that the balance of probability is on the side of Belief—that it is far more likely that *there is* a perfectly good and capable God, in whose hands every real or apparent evil is sure to issue in final good to every conscious creature who is the subject of that evil, *than that there is no God at all* ; still more probable than that there is a God to whom the sufferings and failures of his creatures is a matter of unconcern.

If we will only bear in mind that the Atheist can never prove that there is no God ; and that we can never prove to him that there is one, we shall more easily confine our discussion to the balance of probabilities, and that, in all conscience, is wide enough to occupy the deepest and most laborious thought.

It is the province of Reason to examine these probabilities *pro*

and *con* ; it is not the province of Reason to believe anything. That we have, most of us, a faculty of believing in God which is not mere credulity but a reliance of a dependant creature on the goodwill of its Creator, is one of the facts of the universe which it will be impossible for the Atheist to ignore ; but that faculty is not called upon to reason about its object any more than the eye is called upon to reason about what it sees.

We may first reason upon probabilities and thus call into exercise our sense of Faith ; or we may first believe and then justify our faith by the exercise of our Reason.

In conclusion, I will say a few words on the immense value of our personal convictions as to the existence of God and the hope which they inspire. Having in the most unqualified manner asserted that *truth* must stand first in our regard, that all ease and comfort and even hope itself *must be* given up if they clash with the claims of truth, I trust I shall not seem inconsistent if I say that the joy and consolation of believing God is one of the strongest arguments in favour of His real existence. For this joy and consolation, this perfect peace in the present and hope for the future, are exactly what we needed to make us to bear up under the pains and evils of our mortal life, and to watch with submissive hope the fearful sufferings in the world around us. The strongest argument the Atheist has against our belief lies in the sin and misery which abound. I do not see how men and women can behold all this, believing it to be the work of blind Nature, and yet preserve their reasons. To take such a view of life, as that described in the last pages of the *Martyrdom of Man*, by Mr. Winwood Reade, and to have no God in whose good purposes to confide, no hope for a future in which present evil shall work itself out in everlasting good, would be to darken the whole atmosphere of life and thought, to paralyse moral energy, and never to smile again. What conclusion could we draw from all we see and suffer, if there is to be no beneficent issue to it all, but that we are the sport of a malignant fiend who has not only amused himself thus at our expense but mocked at us with false hopes and fond delusions, creating us, indeed, unspeakably nobler than he is himself, and worthy to put our feet upon his neck.

If there be no redress, if all these woes, and strugglings, and sorrows, and irreparable losses are purposeless, the universe itself

is cursed ; it has stultified and degraded itself by evolving such a creature as man, who can sit in judgment on the morality of its course. All its starry gems, its gorgeous drapery, its siren songs, its fascinating forms, its entrancing magic, its lustrous light and heat all these, its enticements and allurements, testify, not to the benevolence, but to the infinite perfidy of the whole design. They are no better than the deadly gaze of the venomous snake, or the treacherous blandishments of the harlot. All nature is a foul cheat, if the aspirations of moral man are false. But I turn from this dark picture, which is, after all, but a hideous passing dream, to the fact that under all trials, under every degree of suffering, physical and moral, men and women have been sustained by a belief in a God who is filled with all the tenderest and purest feelings of humanity without sharing any of its faults or ignorance. Their minds resting on God, they have not only borne unspeakable tortures, but they have looked full and steadily in the face of the world's worst moral corruption, and their hearts have told them, "Bear it all ; it will all yet turn to good. Be patient ; God's ways are mysterious and, to our eyes, often entangled, but good shall come at last to all. We know not how, or when, or where. But He who made us what we are, to long only for *good*—not for mere happiness but goodness—must Himself do good, and only good. And in Him we rejoice. Yea ! and will rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." Without God we are without hope, and the whole world is "a blunder infinite and inexcusable ;" but with God we can abound in hope, and the mysterious dealings of God with us and with nature are made, not only bearable, but even appear as steps unto Heaven for every suffering creature. Verily, God is as real a necessity to the life of reasoning moral men as the glorious sun to the planets around him.

Let us not, then, forget the enormous value of this personal experience as an argument to meet the strongest arguments on the other side. The world is only seen to be hopelessly wretched and base where the Light of God's righteousness has been shut out from the soul of man. But everywhere and in everything there is ground for hope when the fearful shadow has been withdrawn, and the beams of His Eternal Love burst forth upon us once more and turn our night into day.



# "A T H E I S M."

II.

## A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,  
JANUARY 19TH, 1873, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

*From the EASTERN POST, January 25th, 1873.*

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On Sunday (Jan. 19th) at St. George's Hall, the Rev. C. Voysey took his text from Psalm viii., 6., "Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet."

In undertaking a task of such magnitude and difficulty as that of supplying reasonable grounds for belief in a Perfect God, I am deeply conscious of the inadequacy of my own powers and knowledge; and it is only natural for me to approach the work with fear and trembling lest through my feebleness or errors I should give a new occasion for the Atheist to triumph. But while I thus flinch, and am full of diffidence, I am unspeakably consoled and strengthened by the fact that whatever is really true will prevail at last, and cannot suffer permanently from the strongest opposition, or from the feeblest support; it is also an encouragement to remember that mine is only one poor voice out of many; that no one is pledged or compromised by what I may say; that I speak for myself alone; and that, should I fail in my effort, the only logical conclusion to be drawn from it by the Atheist is, that one man has tried without success to convince the unbelieving world of the reasonableness of his faith, not that his faith is unreasonable. My failure will not prove that Atheism is true, though it might in the eyes of some persons be thought to damage Theism,

Now, our first step must be to describe, if possible, what we mean by the term God. The Christian, the Theist, the Pantheist, all use the same term, but each in a different sense. I pass over the first, with which all of us are familiar, to notice the difference between the Theistic and Pantheistic senses of the term God. The Pantheist denies self-consciousness to God, while the Theist affirms it. The Pantheist affirms, not merely the co-extension of God with the universe, but their absolute identity; the Theist, denying this identity, affirms that God is distinct from the universe, however inseparably they may be united. The Theistic idea of God is of a Being without form, without material substance, one whole and indivisible; a Being who is self-conscious, and who possesses intelligence, power, and love, only in a degree far more exalted than we can comprehend or describe; and who, therefore, exercises will and works from design. The Theist confesses that he has no other means of gaining a conception of God than that which is afforded him by the contemplation of the works of God, and especially of His noblest work—man. From a contemplation of the highest part of man's nature, viz., his intellect, conscience, and affection, he rises by a single step into a conception of a Being who possesses all these faculties in their fullest perfection, without any of the limitations of matter, time, and space.

It is in vain that an opponent hurls at us his taunts about anthropomorphism. It cannot be avoided. We have reached the loftiest peak on which human feet have stood, when we have found what man can do and be. Man is our only key to the problems of nature, our only ladder from earth to Heaven. And in no other way is his present greatness attested, or his glorious future promised, so distinctly as in his own power to make, as it were, a God in his own image and after his own likeness, and yet One, stripped absolutely of every flaw and defect, and even of the remotest tendency to human weakness. Men have never invented a God morally inferior to themselves, the idols have only outlasted

their time, and have become anachronisms. As men grew loftier in mind and morals, the once revered images became first grotesque and then hideous. I therefore defend the anthropomorphism of the Theist as a merit, and do not apologise for it as a defect, of his system. Used with fidelity to the principles of progress in which he believes, his anthropomorphic conception of God is a constant guarantee of higher and higher knowledge, till he shall arrive at the innermost sanctuary of the Divine presence. At all events, if there be a God, it is clear enough that He has given us no other means of conceiving of Him at all. Man knows his own superiority to the beasts of the field, the fowls of the air, the fishes in the sea; to the trees and flowers, the rocks and hills, the towering mountains and the foaming sea. He knows his own superiority of nature, even in his extremest physical helplessness, to the wild and fierce forces which play about him. The winds and the waves, the roaring cataract, and even the burning lava, he turns to his own service and becomes their lord; the very lightning becomes the swift messenger of his thoughts, and the blazing sun itself, though enthroned afar in unapproachable glory, is made to unfold the secrets of its awful flame. A human mind which has mastered its subtle beams, draws them through a fragment of crystal, and reads the chemistry of the stupendous conflagration. Wonderful as are the resources, even in organic matter, yet with our little fragment of knowledge, and our sense of spiritual activity we have come to call the great masses of worlds around us "inert matter," and to regard the physical forces everywhere in operation as inferior to the emotions and aspirations of the human soul. From all this, but one conclusion can be drawn, viz., that there is something even in ourselves radically superior to that visible universe, from which we, ourselves, were evolved. Man is thus forced to feel the gulf between the seen and the unseen—between the grandest exhibitions of power in the world of nature and the spiritual forces at work within his own soul. It is in vain that you tell him how he has been evolved in the natural course of things from the simplest form of animal life, you will only increase

his wonder at the powers thus originated without shaking for one moment his confidence in their possession, or his faith in their grandeur. He does not care, except as he may care for every grain of true knowledge, how he came to be what he is, what chemical or molecular changes in inorganic matter produced his compound and complex organism; but he does care supremely to know himself as a man, and to wield the royal sceptre over that portion of the visible universe in which he woke up—a king.

In vain, too, will it be to show him the dissected brain of one of the world's great teachers and say, "We cannot find anything but what you see. All that made the man what he was lies now in those bony hemispheres; in a few days it will rot and be dissolved for ever." He will turn round upon you and say, "This is only what I expected you would find in the noblest head that lifted itself proudly above the intellects of men; what I have felt all my life, is that I am not identical with my body or any of my organs; that I am something superior to what I see and feel, and that this body is nothing more to me than the house in which I have dwelt, and shall dwell till I die. Even, if I never live again, it cannot alter the conviction of my life; that I have had a something, either the product of my brain, or the unpalpable and undiscoverable germ from which my brain was produced, which is *myself*, as distinguished from the body in which I now speak and hear. All that can be handled with your forceps, and seen through your microscope is, of course, doomed to utter and irrevocable dissolution—the particles will never again be united in their former condition. But if they sprung but yesterday from a mollusc, and are doomed to utter dispersion to-morrow, one fact remains, I am that I am. I have come into possession of these batteries of cerebral matter, and I shall have to lay them down; but they and I are not one and never were. However essential to our speech and action upon earth—to our communion with each other as fellow-beings, I have always felt that I was something greater than they, that by my will I could keep them in health, give them rest when weary, and alas! make them ache with pain by over-exertion, or by senseless folly."

Should this seem to be a digression, let me remind you of what I am driving at. I want to state with emphasis the fact, not merely of man's superiority to the visible Universe, but also of *his own consciousness of his superiority*. With the materialist he can go all lengths in the admission of the entirely physical origin of his bodily frame, and of all its organs, and consequently he can go all lengths with the materialist in saying that there is nothing discoverable by the eye as a basis of immortality. But he is no less certain that he is superior to the body in which he dwells, than certain that he is superior to the sun, without whose beams his body could not have come into being at all.

Now, if this superiority, which is instinctive in thousands and millions of our race, and in the highest portion thereof, be admitted, we have ground for justifying our search for God by studying man. Of course, it would not do to study man alone without studying also the other and inferior works of God, for that would make our conclusions too visionary and speculative; but it would be more erroneous still to study only the physical phenomena, and leave the soul of man out of the range of our enquiry. If we studied only the physical phenomena we could hardly come to any other than the conclusion of the modern Pantheist, whereas, if we study both the phenomena and the human soul, we naturally arrive at Theism. There is not much, if any, token of conscientiousness in the outer world. Individuals are simply ignored by the forces of nature, pain and pleasure are scattered about in what seems to be wild caprice, *i.e.*, in utter disregard of the merits or demerits of the individuals on whom they fall. But the whole thing apparently works pretty well so as to produce a constant supply of flowers and butterflies who are not expected to stay too long in their little patch of sunshine, and who must always be expecting to be done to death at any moment by a sudden change in temperature, or downfall of rain and hail. Still, no matter, a thousand dead things are soon replaced. The laboratory is always open, resources are abundant, the workmen never rest, and so far as a perpetual transformation-scene is the order of the day, nature certainly does her work with infinite skill and industry. But you don't want a moral God to do all this, it does itself

apparently ; once set going—no one cares to enquire how—it can't help going, till some fine day it will, perhaps, go to pieces and begin all over again, taking the first employment that offers itself. I, for one, do not wonder at the Pantheism or, as it may truly be called, the Atheism which comes of regarding only the *outside* of things, *i.e.*, of studying only physical phenomena with a determined blindness to the moral and spiritual nature of man. If nature outside of us were *all* we had to lean upon for instruction concerning God, I confess we should be driven either to attribute to Him frightful want of conscientiousness, or—what is more logical—to do without the hypothesis of a God at all.

On the other hand, if we take both together, and explain the one by the other, searching for all that nature has to tell, and remembering that if God works there, he also works in human hearts and souls, we shall be able at length, if not to explain every seeming moral anomaly, at all events, to give Him as much credit for good intentions, as we do to our fellow-men when we cannot exactly see what their aims really are, and when we cannot help finding fault with their methods.

The old maxim "Never let children or fools see half-done deeds," should have its weight in the correction of any impatient murmuring against the course of Providence. To Him we are but as children ; by the side of His wisdom, our greatest knowledge is but folly ; and therefore, if we are permitted to stand by His side, and follow His dealings as the world's great artificer, a becoming silence should mark our reverence, and a patient watchfulness should be our tribute to His wisdom and skill. "God is in Heaven, and thou upon earth, therefore let my words be few," contains a profound caution, which we shall do well to remember.

Having attained a clear perception of the superiority of man—as the highest product of nature yet known to us—our first question must be "Is there, or is there not, some Being higher still?" Now, most men, and even Atheists, readily admit the possibility of the existence of creatures higher than man. They do not know what other worlds contain, of course, but they think it quite possible, if not probable, that there are higher intelli-

gences, some where but still evolved like ourselves from the Universe. They will not take the next step, and say with me that it is possible that there is one Being, not evolved, but the source of evolution, above all other Beings, who has perfect knowledge of the Universe; but it seems to me but a very short step indeed, from the admission that possibly higher intelligences than our own exist somewhere. But if they have a right to assume there are higher intelligences, we surely have the right to assume that there is one Highest and Supreme.

Here, however, we must use the method of balancing probabilities. Supposing that there were no supreme and perfect intelligence, then as far as we *know*, man would be the Supreme Being of the universe—the one intelligent creature who stands on the highest pinnacle of knowledge. He knows more about the world than any other being. But what does he know as yet? He is only just beginning to find out how little he knows by comparison with the sum total of things actually present and visible. He knows very little about the past, next to nothing about the regions of the world which are invisible, and nothing at all about the distant future. A creature only of yesterday, not so long ago an ignorant savage, a little earlier still only an ape, how should he know more than he knows at present? But he has, nevertheless, learnt that there are system and law prevailing in every part of the universe, that invariable sequences attend given actions and mutations of force. Man has at least learnt to banish from scientific language the names of “accident” and “chance,” and he has tacitly admitted the presence of active intelligence in the evolution of all things. Nature has taught him all he knows. All his sciences, of which he is justly proud, are records of facts and phenomena actually observed, discoveries on his part of what had been done, or is now being done, without his aid, not inventions of his own or results of his interference. Nature is so manifestly controlled by intelligence, that the mind of man has its most exquisite delight in reading the secrets of nature, and watching her wondrous developments.

Man further admits that we ourselves are products of this carefully designed whole. That we are the latest, noblest, and fairest fruit of Nature's skill; and yet some men will hesitate to confess that the intelligence which arranged this grand evolution is grander

far than one of its products. If there be no higher mind than the mind of man, how could man have ever been evolved? '*Ex nihilo nihil fit*' stands good yet, and we can never be persuaded that the intellect of man is the offspring of that which had no intelligence. A perfect knowledge of all the sciences, and of thousands of things yet unknown to us, was required to produce even this little globe on which we live. Had there been false Chemistry, or deficient Mathematics, or ignorance of the laws of Astronomy, or of Optics, what hopeless chaos would have ensued! One false step would have ruined the whole. Can we then, who attach so much importance to our own tiny share in this knowledge, pretend that no knowledge at all was needful to produce the stupendous whole? It must be infinitely more probable that a Supreme mind is in existence who knows the whole, while we only know a small part, than that man is the supreme intelligence himself.

Moreover, if there were no such supreme intelligence, the universe supposing it to be self-evolved (and of course unconscious, since it is not intelligent) has only just come into self-consciousness through one of its parts, viz., man. It had been, so to speak, asleep all these cycles of ages till man was born, and his intellect dawned upon the world, and for the first time the Universe realised its own existence through the intelligent consciousness of one of its products! I do not think absurdity could go further than that. If there be no God then man is the supreme intelligence, and the product of what we must admit to be the most profound wisdom must then be wiser than the wisdom from which he sprang. And if there be no self-conscious intelligence but man, then the Universe is only just now, through man, becoming aware of its own existence.

I throw out these fragmentary hints for abler men to take up. They are only a specimen of what may be said for and against the probability that there is a self-conscious supreme intelligence at the root of, and behind, all visible and invisible things. But, if we take man as our key to the solution of the problem, we shall find much more in him than his mind, which justifies his belief in God; and of this I will speak another day. I conclude by saying that I shall be thankful to any one who will write to me, to correct my errors and to point out any flaw in my arguments,



# “ A T H E I S M . ”

III.

## A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

JANUARY 26TH, 1873, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

*From the EASTERN POST, February 1st, 1873.*

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On Sunday (Jan. 26th) at St. George's Hall, the Rev. C. Voysey took his text from Psalm XL., 10., "Thy law is within my heart."

He said:—Last Sunday we were considering the argument for the existence of a Supreme intelligence, which may be drawn from the intellectual part of man's nature. Our next step is to examine the moral part, and to endeavour to show that the Conscience of man furnishes strong ground for our belief in a Perfectly Good God.

Let us first inquire what is the proper function of the Conscience. In the first place it seems to be a faculty distinct from the ordinary reflective powers of the mind, which we sum up under the term Reason. I do not now enquire how Conscience is, in the first instance, generated, or whether or not it be some phrenological organ, more or less conspicuous as a bump on the human head. It is neither my province, nor within my grasp, to settle such questions as to its origin or physical construction, I have only to deal with it as it seems to most men to act a part in our complex nature, and to influence our conduct. In affirming, then, the distinctness of Conscience from the Reasoning faculties, I only speak of it as it appears to my thought. It does not, and cannot, teach me what is right or what is wrong. Only my

Reason can tell me that, but as soon as I perceive what is right my Conscience commands me to do it; as soon as I perceive what is wrong, my Conscience forthwith commands me not to do it. Many have been the strifes in the world owing to the confusion between Conscience and Reason. Our knowledge being defective, our reasoning must be sometimes fallible, our conclusions as to right and wrong, must be sometimes false, and yet the Conscience only sanctions what seems to be right, and forbids only what seems to be wrong. It follows, as a matter of course, that people will sometimes do wrong conscientiously, *i.e.*, not as wrong, but believing it to be right. "The time will come when he that killeth you will think that he doeth God service," is a good illustration of this perversion of mind. Many persons will thereupon jump at the conclusion that Conscience is not to be trusted, and that it must be over-ruled by superior authority external to itself—whereas the fault lies not with the Conscience but with the Reason which is imperfectly enlightened. The Conscience has nothing whatever to do with drawing the conclusions of the Reason; its only function is to endorse with all the weight of its sanction whatever the Reason has pronounced to be right. Conscience, even in its apparently worst perversions, is not perverted at all, is still loyal to the best that is put before it. It cannot help us to make up our minds in the least degree; it waits quietly till this process is completed by the Reason, and then steps in with its powerful mandate, to demand that the best alternative should be adopted and pursued. It has always seemed to me a great mistake to blame the Conscience for those moral errors which have been perpetrated in its name. Conscience is ever loyal to duty as duty, never sanctions any wrong as wrong, is a perpetual witness in the soul of man for all righteousness, and it differs in different men only in strength and intensity, in its power to control the life; it does not differ in being morally inferior and superior.

If my Conscience sanctions what another man's Conscience

would condemn, that only shows that there is a moral difference of opinion in our respective minds, not that his Conscience is more loyal to what is right than my Conscience, nor mine than his.

Looseness of language is largely responsible for many popular errors. We often speak of one man as conscientious, and another as unconscientious, when the real difference we wish to describe is the difference of their moral opinions. We ought never to use these terms "conscientious and unconscientious," except to distinguish between the man who obeys his Conscience and the other who disobeys it. We take too much for granted that our estimate of what is right and wrong is shared by every one else alike; and then come to the false conclusion that those who do not do what we believe to be right are acting against their Consciences.

Whole races of men we have heard stigmatised as wanting in conscientiousness because they are remarkably untruthful; others because they are habitual thieves; others because they love to shed innocent blood and their land groans with murder; others because they are frivolous, fickle and vain; others because polygamy is their law; others because they practice polyandry. In all these cases you find conscience quite as much at work as in ourselves, commanding what is believed to be right, forbidding what is believed to be wrong. They lie, and steal, and murder, &c., through their want of clear and vigorous perception that lying, stealing, and murder are wrong. Their education has been deficient, and the inherited tendency to these habits has not been resisted; they are ever ready with reasons to justify their conduct, or to make very light of it. Otherwise, it would have been impossible for whole populations to connive at these outrages, and to shield the guilty heads from the penalties of the law. But these same people taught from their youth up to regard some act of religious observance as the highest of all duties, and the neglect of it the most wicked of crimes, are very very conscientious in the discharge of that duty, and manifest the functions of Conscience in that particular, in a striking degree.

If ever the question is raised "Why does the Conscience bid you do this," the sole answer always is, "Because it is right." Never in any case is it "Because it is wrong."

The Conscience is, I grant, not equally strong in all men. In some natures it has more, in others less, power to influence the conduct. But this is only like all other faculties in man. The Reason, the imagination, the affections, the hopes, and the fears vary considerably in strength and degree in different men, and so also the Conscience varies; in some it is the lord of the whole life, in others it is hustled into a corner and seldom suffered to raise its voice. But it is sufficiently universal to be argued from as the common property of human nature, and in reasoning about the source and fountain of all things, the Conscience is as much entitled to be considered as the intellect.

Moreover, if we would argue fairly, we must take the average quality of the Conscience rather than the more rare instances of those who hardly exhibit any Conscience at all. In a treatise on the Reason of man, it would be manifestly unfair to take only the undeveloped state of it, as it appears in a child, or the diseased condition of it as it appears in an idiot: so in speaking of the Conscience of man we ought to take it in its more complete and perfectly healthy development, in the noblest moral examples, rather than its earlier and undeveloped state.

We are searching for indications of a Divine Being among the works of the universe, we have found, so far, that man is the noblest of them, by Reason of his Intellect alone, but we find that he has something else, which, in his own estimation, he reckons nobler still than Intellect—viz., Conscience, or the faculty which urges him to do what is right and avoid what is wrong, and this faculty is, in its normal exercise, one of the greatest blessings which man could possess.

In the first place, it marks afresh our superiority to the physical world. While everything around us is by the laws and constitution of its nature designed for selfishness, to win its way, if it can, in the struggle for existence; while even the body of man, with all its functions, has precisely the same nature, and might lawfully (were it not for the Reason and Conscience) study its own comfort

and well-being alone, and without the smallest scruple, enrich and adorn itself at the ruin of others ; while the unbridled indulgence of our physical instincts would lead us to the most profound animalism and bestiality, the Conscience is the chief faculty of our being, which rescues us from this degradation, and actually alters the whole natural course and tendency of our lives. That we should, to some extent, lead animal lives is not merely inevitable, but necessary and good, and, therefore, we find the Conscience, duly enlightened by Reason, sanctioning a certain degree of animalism for the very purpose of carrying out a benevolent design ; but the checks and limits, which the Conscience puts upon our indulgence, are of a nature to cause us, at times, positive pain and annoyance. We cannot obey the Conscience in everything without trampling on our physical nature, and sometimes not without permanent injury to our health and brain. Self-denial and mortification of the flesh, (and I use this term in the very widest sense, and not merely in the sense of asceticism) are absolutely necessary to the perfect supremacy of the Conscience when enlightened by Reason. If my Reason tells me that such and such a thing is wrong, *i.e.*, will inflict injury on others, that does not necessarily prevent my wishing to do it. I cannot help wishing to do it, if the gratification be very great, and do it I should to a certainty, but for that wonderful monitor within, who says "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God."

The collision is so complete between the higher voice and the impelling instinct, that one can only feel that the two are radically different in nature, and must have had a different source. This struggle between a strong desire and a higher law within the same breast if it gives any witness, bears testimony to the exalted nature of man, and almost drives him in thought to the threshold of that Heavenly Home, where he was born and cradled. To have the power of doing intentionally what one shrinks from doing, and to deny oneself the pleasure which is so fascinating, and which one longs to do, is to prove the immense superiority of our inner selves over the visible universe.

Here I must pause to notice an objection which may be urged, that whenever we obey the Conscience we only do so to gain a greater pleasure than we relinquish. It is said that we are still

selfish after all, and dread remorse more than the present pain of self-denial. Now I cannot, of course, speak for others, but for myself I deny this with my whole soul. I am perfectly certain that it is neither fear of greater pain, nor hope for greater joy, that makes me endeavour to obey my conscience. Many a time in my life I have had nothing at all but pain for doing what I thought to be right, and I did it too, grudgingly, half regretting my own self-denial, at the time wishing that I had not been so Conscientious. It is unfair to mankind to put such a construction upon their submission to that imperious call of conscience. To us, perhaps, the hope of being perfectly conformed to God's will, in some far-off future, may be an attraction entering into more than half our moral struggles; but nothing can be more false than to say it is always so, or to deny the possibility of a man doing what his Conscience demands from the most disinterested motives. For does not Conscience itself sit in judgment with Reason upon motives as well as conduct? Does it not condemn, as unworthy, all motives of action, the core and kernel of which is selfishness? No doubt in our imperfect state our motives are not always pure and perfectly disinterested, but the soul of man has at all events risen up to that height in which it deliberately distinguishes pure from impure motives; and while she gives her solemn approval to the nobler, she condemns and denounces the baser. There is all the difference between seeking to be true to one's higher nature and seeking greater happiness. It is true we cannot avoid the happiness, but we disqualify ourselves for its attainment the moment we fix upon it a longing eye. What often determines our choice is the strength of our conviction that a thing is right, not the possibility of our being the happier for it afterwards. The efforts made by some to depreciate the force and value of Conscience are unworthy of men who profess to be students of facts and phenomena; for if there had been no cases of genuine disinterested doing of duty for duty's sake, we should never have been able to discover the difference between that and seeking our own happiness. Man has detected the superiority of the one motive over the other, only after having witnessed or experienced the higher motive in himself. Had it never been done, man would never have imagined that it could be done.

And this brings me to notice that the Conscience, enlightened by Reason, always urges us to *do good* to our fellow-men, rather than to make them happy. An unenlightened benevolence, such as the animal instinct of an indulgent parent, which leads to the spoiling of a child, is a mere impulse to give happiness, and is on that ground actually condemned by the enlightened Conscience, because that happiness not only does not tend to the child's real and lasting good, but tends to his present and future degradation. In its higher state the Conscience bids us aim exclusively at the cultivation of all virtue in ourselves and in others. It teaches us always to subordinate happiness to holiness, and often deliberately to forego and withhold happiness, that goodness may ensue. Truth and righteousness would be preferred, not only before wealth and comfort here below, but even before an eternity of mere enjoyment without personal holiness. Thus, on every side, it seems that the superiority of our inner nature becomes an antagonism to the outward and visible. "The flesh warreth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary the one to the other." The contrast and hostility between them we all feel, but which of the two do we reckon the higher, the nobler, the truer part of man? Surely the Conscience—the Conscience which makes us mortify our flesh with its affections and lusts, which often and often mars our happiness and embitters our pleasure, upbraids us with reproaches, and stings us with remorse—that voice which hushes our cry for happiness, which will not endure a single selfish plea, but demands unquestioning obedience, and bids us fall down in the very dust before the majesty of duty. We all in our secret hearts revere this power, whether or not we obey it as we should. At least we pay it the homage of our inmost souls and feel how great and grand it is to be its slave.

We have here, then, something in man which we cannot find in the physical universe, where happiness is the aim of every living thing. Every single being in every class of animal life, including the body of man, is constituted to seek its own happiness first, but in man we find a principle entirely at war with this universal instinct, a power that forces us to break the natural law of mortal life, and to seek for that which is supremely higher than mere animal safety and enjoyment. For the sake of goodness, men have

learnt, not merely to suffer pain and loss themselves, but to undergo the still worse pain of inflicting suffering upon others. We would deliberately hurt their bodies and mortify their desires, if by so doing we could raise them into the exalted condition of goodness.

Now to me, I confess, this fact is a greater revelation of a Divine Being than even the intellect of man. For ignoring altogether the fact that men have almost universally regarded the Conscience as the vicegerent of God—the mere possession of a power which claims the mastery over our whole natures, which disturbs our animal repose, and which demands the deliberate surrender of happiness for the sake of truth, righteousness, and every form of duty, brings us face to face with a power—call it human or Divine—which, whatever it be, is absolutely transcendent over nature, and suggests to our minds the existence of another world altogether, in and around us, in which the laws and forces of the visible universe have no place. Were we to grant that our intellect is only an animal organism, we should still be at our wits' end to account for the Conscience on purely physical grounds; and we would never get over the anomaly and absurdity of the Universe evolving and evolving itself cycle after cycle till it produced an element at variance with its own laws, a power and a force which deliberately set them at defiance, and a conscious being who calmly rejected, for the sake of virtue, the most enticing happiness placed in its path. If we could get over the intellectual difficulty of Atheism, we could never get over the difficulty which is presented by the Conscience. I do not deny that there is antagonism in the physical universe; it abounds everywhere; it is in accordance with its own principle of "Everyone for himself;" but that antagonism is wholly different from that which exists between two distinct portions of one and the same being; greater still is the difference when we observe that the higher law often condemns as morally wrong what nature herself tempts us to do.

I cannot pursue the enquiry further at present, it is enough that the human Conscience is not merely superior, but antagonistic, to the selfish principle in nature, to prove that if we would search for indications of the Deity, we must make *man* the field of our enquiry.



# “ A T H E I S M . ”

IV.

## A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

FEBRUARY 2ND, 1873, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

*From the EASTERN POST, February 8th, 1873.*

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On Sunday (Feb. 2nd) at St. George's Hall, the Rev. C. Voysey took his text from 1 John iv., 16, "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him."

He said— We now come to the third branch of our enquiry into the nature of man, in search for indications of a Supreme and Perfect Divine Being.

We have perceived, in the intellect of man, manifest tokens of a supreme intellect from which it sprang. We have discovered in the Conscience a power, not only superior, but antagonistic, to the forces in Nature; and we must now direct our attention to Human Love.

What is Love? This sacred name has alas! been shamefully misapplied. It has been made to stand for its very opposite— selfishness. It has been used to denote the most imperious of our animal instincts, the gratification of merely physical desire; even the mere desire to attain such enjoyment, has been profanely called Love. Far be it from me to deem anything which God has placed in the nature of man as unholy or unclean. The animal instinct referred to is exquisite and sacred, the source of untold happiness, and the fountain of domestic virtue, but then it is not Love. When people talk of "making Love" and "falling in Love," they are using expressions of profound inaccuracy, for which the poverty of our language is the only excuse. The affection which

subsists between lovers, husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, is *sometimes* nothing more than a merely animal attachment to each other, which they share in common with the birds of the air and the beasts of the field. It is all called "Love," and we cannot in a day—no, not in a generation—change its name. But the time seems to have come for us to make long and loud our protest against the use of ambiguous terms. Words do re-act more or less upon those who use them, and if we persist in applying one and the same term to two or more absolutely distinct things, we shall come in time to lose sight of the distinction between them, and in that case the higher sense will be forgotten, and the lower one alone remain.

Now, to discern what Love is, we must contrast it with what it is not.

We find everywhere reigning in nature the law of self-love, of self-preservation, self-indulgence, and self-advancement. We own its necessity. No living thing is safe without it. It is given to us that we may live as long and as happily as we can, and that we may promote our own earthly advantage. In the struggle for existence this law bids us without scruple trample on the rights of others if they have any, and then might becomes right. In reference to self-indulgence, it bids us get all the pleasure we possibly can; it takes no account of the pleasure of others, except in so far as it may minister to our own. And as for self-advancement its maxim is to be first in the race if we can. Its cry is, "Every man for himself."

Now it is easy to see without illustration that were this the only law which governed humanity our time would be divided between avarice, lust, and war. We should have nothing else to do but to give free play to our appetites and to smite and murder every one who stood in the way of our gratification. Supposing that a certain amount of civilisation had been reached by mutual concessions for the attainment of happiness, then you would have

still a state of society, if society it might be called, in which selfishness would prevail, only somewhat refined and gilded over by conventionalities. You would still have men seeking to make themselves rich at the ruin of others, to indulge their animal passions at the cost of their neighbours' felicity, and to do each other to death only in a slower and less brutal manner than by bloodshed. They would still unscrupulously push themselves to the front if possible, not caring whom they crushed or trampled under foot in the struggle.

Bret Harte, an author to whom I shall again presently refer, among other writers has given pictures of life in the Far West of America, wherein all that we could imagine of such a state of society has been enacted within this century. Lawless, ruffianly, selfishness has been the rule, because most of the men gathered in those regions were mere animal men, carrying their whole animalism with them into a district where they had no law but themselves. This was the coarse and brutal picture of the reign of selfishness. But we need not go so far as to San Francisco to see the same selfishness under a more refined aspect. There are men and women in all our great cities, aye, and in the country too, (let us hope there are but few of them), who behave as if they were animals and nothing more—human animals with the cunning and resources of human skill, education, and prudence—who live for themselves alone, and who seldom feel what it is to *love*. They follow their strong instincts for pleasure and ease, their unscrupulous desire to enrich themselves on the race-course or at the gambling tables, their studious regard for their own health and the supply of every luxury; and they do not hesitate in the pursuit of their own indulgence to force their rivals or dependents down into unspeakable misery, or leave others to die in disease and poverty, rather than forego one of their accustomed pleasures.

We may fairly hope that such are extreme and most rare instances; but dress it up as finely as you can, you will only get

one result out of entire obedience to the natural law of selfishness, you must have avarice, lust, murder, and all manner of crime.

Now true Love is that principle which we find almost universal in human nature, which impels us to resist in a measure this law of selfishness, to overcome its dictates whenever they tend to entrench on the rights and welfare of others. Love will go long lengths in sanctioning the law of selfishness; but there is a point where it will stand up and resist it. It will sanction self-preservation until another's life is in peril. It will sanction self-indulgence until that indulgence becomes robbery of the happiness or well-being of another. It will sanction ambition, and even gathering of gold, so long as the means employed do not hinder a companion in the race.

Love will hide itself beneath an apparently selfish disguise, and all at once it will leap out upon you in all its glory, melting your eyes and your heart. It is that in man which redeems him from being a beast—for man without Love is worse than any beast which Lord God hath made; and when he Loves he becomes more than animal, more than man, I had almost said, and stands forth in the very image of God.

With the world so full as it is of real Love, if we will only look for it, illustrations would be endless. But every wish felt, every word spoken, every deed done *for the sake of others* is a witness of true Love.

Some may say this is only the function of conscience over again. But, in reply, I say that the brilliancy of Love outshines that of conscience as the sun outshines the moon. Love is conscience in an ecstasy—it is a perfect enthusiasm of goodness, because it does not stop to reason out with itself, and to balance the *pros* and *cons* of right and wrong, but with eager bound rushes to its goal and acts without reflection, the slave of inspiration. Conscience says, "Do this because it is right." Love says, "I will do this *for you*." Conscience mercifully keeps us mindful of our responsibility when

Love is absent or cool. But Love has no responsibility, and acts upon its own Divine impulse, needing no reminder, no prompting, no command. We fall back upon Conscience, only when deficient in Love.

By Love, we pass out of ourselves into our object, as it were; we seem to have merged almost our own consciousness, sympathies, and desires, in the soul of another; till we live a new life in hers, and become her saviour and her shield. When Paul said, "Love worketh no ill to his neighbour, therefore Love is the fulfilling of the law," he stated feebly and negatively the exact truth. He should have said, "Love worketh all possible good to his neighbour, therefore Love is the fulfilling of the law." It will not do to leave our neighbour alone, and do him no harm; love bids us be active and attentive, and do him all the good we can. Then Love is the fulfilling of all human obligations. If we were wholly and continually under the influence of Love, and not sometimes under the sway of selfishness, our whole lives would be blameless, sin would be no more, and human life—ah! it would be too sweet ever to lay it down.

But Love teaches us that goodness is identical with the supremest happiness of man. It is not identical with physical happiness, it is often at war with that, and its terms with our animal nature are unshrinking submission, and if need be, the self-sacrifice of life itself. Yet strange—most strange—when we suffer most for one we love, we reap our highest joys, every wound is a healing of the spirit, and as we lie on Love's altar, bleeding, gasping, dying, we reach the sublimest region of human joy.

Think what the old poets have sung, what the Bibles of all lands have enshrined, what tradition prizes as its noblest treasure. They all sing in praise of Love—Love which began by heroic self-conquest and ended in death. But one and all bear the same testimony, the joy of dying for Love was worth all that life itself could ever purchase.

In those tales of the Far West, by Bret Harte, to which I have alluded, there is unfolded a perfect gospel of this human triumph. Amidst scenes of appalling horror, of the most brutal savagery, and the most abandoned lawlessness, he brings to view this one exquisite flower of humanity, and shows how Love was at the bottom of these fierce hearts; how it stayed the murderer's hand; how it softened the impious tongue; and brought men whose lives had been fouled by the worst of crimes to die the noblest martyr death. No Christ could do more than those and hundreds and thousands of our fellow-men have done for each other, and are doing daily—and all for Love.

That fearful catastrophe to the *Northfleet*, off Dungeness, which has awakened so much sympathy throughout the land, brought out afresh the glorious powers of self-sacrifice which belong to man. To some, the touching incidents of the Captain's farewell of his wife might seem a conflict between Love and Duty. But Love and Duty are one, they can never clash. It is always a duty to do what Love desires. And Love itself is best proved by doing our Duty. Just think of those few minutes of parting agony.

Amid the roar and screaming of rough men and women, all struggling for their lives, some so fierce and frantic in their terror that they must be kept back from swamping the boats by the captain's revolver, his young wife, a bride of seven weeks, pleads to be allowed to stay and die at her husband's side. Her Love, however, made her lose herself in him, and to make him happy she would do his bidding, and live in bitter grief all her days. Her Love and duty were one. She would have stayed and died for Love; she left him for a life of woe—no less for Love. It was all she could do for him, to live because he asked it; and he, in his keen sense of duty, knew that to desert his ship even for his wife's sake would have been no act of Love to her. To bring with him into safety a soiled reputation and an honour stained would

have been far more cruel than to have bid her farewell for ever. So for Love of her, as well as for duty's sake, he stands firm as a rock; and fighting God's battle for the weak against the strong until the surging waves engulf him, he dies a hero and a martyr, and around his cross let us say in solemn reverence, "Truly this was the Son of God."

Are there no more like him? Yea! thousands on thousands. The earth is full of such heroes, though we know them not, and their lives and deaths have been done in secret—no plaudits to give them courage; no eulogies spoken over their graves. Ask the generals who lead armies, the captains who carry their vessels all over the world, search the records of the Royal Humane Society, look into the hospitals, the theatres, and the homes of the poor. Enquire at the police stations; yes, and search the gaols and the galleys. Everywhere you find such Love as makes men and women Divine; raises them above themselves, *i.e.*, above all that selfish nature would make them. If you will only look for it, I believe every one you meet can show it, or has some heavenly story to tell of how it was shown to them. Let us not say, then, that God has deserted his world, while he has given us love. "He left not himself without witness in that he did us good," says the Apostle. But he goes on to say, "in giving us rain and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness." I will not question the general benevolence of the arrangements of nature; but they are not worth looking at by the side of the marvellous gift of Love which God has given to men to make them fruitful in all virtue, triumphant over all appetites and passions, and full of joy unspeakable, and full of glory. This great gift, I say, is so antagonistic to the laws and forces of nature that it cannot have had its origin in the visible universe whose laws it sets at defiance. It cannot be "of the earth, earthy," it must be "the Lord from Heaven," it must be an *afflatus* which is Divine. We

cannot deny the influence which it wields. To see and hear of any noble act of Love warms and melts the most frozen nature, and breaks the heart of stone. All mankind, in various ways, bears testimony to the supremacy of Love. Just as we admire a conscientious fool more than a clever rogue, so do we admire him who is impelled by Love more than one who is only guided by a cold sense of duty. Among the faculties of man, then, Love holds the very highest place. It is the instinct of doing the best possible good. While conscience is our authority for doing it, Love leaps into the act without needing any sanction at all. To do anything for Love is to justify the deed without any further plea.

I have only then to urge once more, that as man is the noblest work in the universe, and as Love is the noblest part of man, so we must infer that God cannot be a Being inferior to the most Loving of men. He may be, and to our adoring eyes of faith He really is, far and high exalted over his noblest creature ; but less than that He cannot be. Whenever, therefore, we would conceive of Him, we must make the noblest part of the noblest man's character our starting point, or else we shall do violence to the first principles of Reason, and contradict the universal testimony of the human Consciousness.

I believe it can be shown that, with the light of human Love shed upon the scene, all that is most dark, and sad, and dismal in the world can be reconciled with the existence of a Perfectly Holy and Loving God ; and more than that, the miseries of the world become *proofs* and tokens of what God is, and unfold to us His nature in a more complete and intelligible manner than had we been living in a fairyland, or had we been all our lives happy citizens of some Golden Jerusalem. If you shut out sorrow you shut out the highest, purest, forms of Love. And if you shut out Love you shut out God. So we come back, out of our clouds of sorrow, to praise His glorious Name for every wounded heart, for every scalding tear, for every last farewell !



# “ A T H E I S M . ”

V.—ON

“ THE MARTYRDOM OF MAN . ”

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

FEBRUARY 16TH, 1873, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

*From the EASTERN POST, February 22nd, 1873.*

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On Sunday (Feb. 16th) at St. George's Hall, the Rev. C. Voysey took his text from Hebrew xii, 11, “ Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous but grievous ; nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.”

He said :—In my last sermon I endeavoured to describe what true Love is ; how it differs from merely animal attachment, how complete is its triumph over the natural desires, and how it raises us into the highest happiness in the supreme act of self-sacrifice. It is my purpose now to point out the process by which Love is generated or brought out into manifestation ; to show that Love cannot be developed at all except under the conditions of suffering or sin, and therefore that that which we deem the most beautiful flower of humanity is the result of those very conditions on which the Atheist bases his strongest arguments against the existence of a Good God. The Atheist, as represented by Mr Winwood Reade in his *Martyrdom of Man*, argues thus :—

“ The conduct of a father towards his child appears to be cruel but it is not cruel in reality. He beats the child but he does it

for the child's own good; he is not omnipotent; he is therefore obliged to choose between two evils. But the Creator is omnipotent; He therefore chooses cruelty as a means of education or development; He therefore has a preference for cruelty, or He would not choose it; He is therefore fond of cruelty, or He would not prefer it; He is therefore cruel, which is absurd."

"Again, either sin entered the world against the will of the Creator, in which case He is not omnipotent, or it entered with His permission, in which case it is His agent, in which case He selects sin, in which case He is fond of sin, in which case He is sinful, which is an absurdity again."—(pp, 518-519.)

It would be easy to dispose of this argument by at once disputing the hypothesis that God is omnipotent. The so-called "omnipotence" of God has assumed the most extravagant shapes in the human imagination. We could name a score or two of things inherently impossible, which God Himself has no power to do. He cannot make the phenomena of noon and midnight to coincide. He cannot so alter the nature of a thing as to make it at the same moment both a cube and a sphere. He cannot confound the parts of a thing with each other, or put any part for the whole. God could not make my hand to be my eye; nor my eye to be my hand. Never could a single limb *be* a whole human body. Never can God undo the past or break the sequence of time. God Himself could not make any material thing to be in two places at once. God's power is limited—by what, we do not know—possibly by His own will; *i.e.*—if he wills a thing to be such and such, He cannot at the same time make it to be absolutely different. We have no difficulty whatever in giving up the notion of God's omnipotence, when the idea of that omnipotence is stretched beyond the limits of common sense. But this is not quite the point in the passage quoted from Mr. Reade's book which I desire to take up. He manifestly assumes and elsewhere affirms, that if there be a God, He cannot be either cruel or sinful. Mr. Reade

calls it "an incontrovertible maxim in morality that a God has no right to create men except for their good." We would go further still, and say, "God has no right to create any self-conscious creatures at all, except for their good." The author then turns to man and nature, and finds visible tokens of suffering and sin; from which he draws the conclusion that there is no God. It is perfectly logical, because his suppressed premiss is, "that suffering and sin are evils *per se*, and what is more, they are *unnecessary evils*."

If this were true, then with the facts before us, we could draw no other conclusion than that an evil God caused the unnecessary evils; but when we confront this conclusion with the axiom that an evil God is a contradiction in terms; or more plainly, that "if there be a God, He must be good," it follows at once that if suffering and sin are unnecessary evils, there is no God at all.

What, then, we have to dispute is the assumption that suffering and sin are *evils, per se*, and *unnecessary evils*.

If we can show that suffering and sin are not evils, *per se*, but only relatively evils compared with other conditions; and further, that they are not *unnecessary*, but absolutely indispensable to our highest good, then, instead of going to prove that there is no God, suffering and sin will go far to prove that there is a God; and moreover, a good and holy God, who would not create any creature except for its good. Now, as I must not attempt too many things at once, I must leave on one side for the present the sufferings of the lower orders of animals, and confine myself only to the subject of the sufferings and sin which are endured by man.

Of the various functions which suffering and sin serve in the economy of the moral world, I have elsewhere written at some length; I now only desire to dwell upon one function, the chiefest of all, viz.,—they are the agents by which the purest Love is called forth. If they do originate or call into activity this noblest, most beautiful part of man's nature, they cannot be evils *per se*; and if,

as far as we know, such Love could never have birth apart from suffering and sin, then they are *necessary*.

You will remember that true Love is the very opposite of selfishness—it makes us do sometimes the most painful things ; it is most exalted and supreme in a perfect self-sacrifice.

Now, what do we find, *e.g.*, in the relations between husband and wife. Granted that there has been much animal attachment between them, and that true Love has not been yet elicited. Let one or the other be in sickness or pain, or in any trouble of mind, body, or estate, and then, if there be a germ of Love in the other, it will come forth in thoughts, words, and deeds, of exquisite sympathy and self-devotion. We need not lift the sacred veil which covers wedded life, but surely all husbands and wives must know that their real Love first made itself heard and seen in some season of suffering and pain ; they know what holy sacrifices it has demanded and received. Suffering is the cradle of Love.

See, too, how the mother's love, even as a mere animal affection, surpasses the Love which first made her a bride; and how it quickens her into activity of devotion ; giving, and toiling, and watching ; watching, and toiling, and giving, day and night, to her own cost of health, rest, and ease ; and why ? because her infant is feeble, dependent, suffering. Its cries lacerate the mother's heart, and fill her eyes with tears ; but the same sting kindles a Love which is Divine, making her ready to give her life for her babe.

You see the same thing in the family. How selfish, how quarrelsome, children often are ; till the hour comes when there is an accident, a terrible bruise, or a broken bone ; and up the little wranglers run and are like ministering angels to the sufferer. Toys that were once fought for are now heaped on the sick-bed without being asked for, and the dreariness of the sick-chamber is willingly endured by sturdy ruddy boys who would ten times rather have been out at play. But Love has made them stay by the sick-bed, drawn thither by her handmaid—Suffering. It is

almost invariable that the weakest, sickliest, member of a family receives the most love, and is served with the greatest self-sacrifices. And it often happens that a son who has brought the family into trouble, or a daughter who has put it to shame, is the object of the parent's tenderest, most anxious, self-denying Love. The old story of the Prodigal Son is not only exquisitely true to nature, but a most powerful illustration of the theory that suffering and sin are the very cradle of the Highest Love.

By very instinct we look on sin as a terrible kind of suffering—a fearful moral disease—and it has a tendency to call out Love, in spite of its first tendency to call out hatred. We are angry and indignant if any injury be done to ourselves it is true, but the highest and rarest forms of Love—viz., mercy and forgiveness, are very often developed by the wrong doing of others. What sight more pretty among children than the making up of some quarrel, the sweet overtures of tiny arms around tiny necks, and the smothering kisses all wet with tears, which tell of the birth of the highest Love in their little souls!

Indomestic life it often happens that sin, as well as sorrow, calls forth this noblest virtue. Neglected duties, careless accidents, even want of fidelity and honesty on the part of servants, have been overlooked, or forgiven and forgotten out of true pity and charity, which “hopeth all things.” In like manner loving servants have borne long and patiently with the provocations of their masters, forgiving their harsh and inconsiderate treatment and their surly tempers, and covering with a sacred privacy their worst failings. Old and young, all around in turn, have to bear and forbear, *i.e.*, to bear gently the injuries of others and to forbear from revenge, to return good for evil, and thus to rise into man's most exalted condition because of the *sin* which is being continually committed. Love cannot rise higher than this—to render good for ill, to overcome all evil with good. And where, we ask, would such Love be but for the evil which calls it into exercise?

But go abroad and look on men and women beyond the home which is but a microcosm, and you will see the same beautiful sights if you knew how to look for them. Sin and sorrow every-

where—but sin and sorrow followed by the holiness and joy of Heaven-born love. What man or woman who had ever felt the bliss of it would wish it had never been?

To have received an injury, and yet to have pardon freely, and to have turned our foe into a friend, is unspeakably better than to have received no injury at all. To have kindled Love—true Love in the breast of another, is worth doing at the cost of much suffering. And although no one would be so mad as to incur disease on purpose to arouse sympathy, or so idiotic as to commit an injury for the sake of being forgiven; yet, for all that, the suffering and the sin do raise the hearts of those who come in contact with them, and teach them what they could not otherwise learn. As Miss Cobbe says in her *Intuitive Morals*. “Instead of an evil nature, our lower nature is a necessary postulate of all our virtue.” Every word you use to denote the highest human qualities implies the conditions of pain and sin. You speak of patience? How could you be patient if there were no trials to bear, no cruel suspense to undergo, no provocation to irritate your temper, or to prompt your revenge? You speak of mercy and forgiveness? How could you be merciful to those who have done you no wrong, or forgive those who have never sinned? You speak of generosity of heart and hand? What generosity of heart could you feel for those who never failed in duty, who never transgressed the exact limits of their own rights? What generosity of hand could you show to those who never needed your bounty, and what happiness was already full? You speak of sympathy, but sooner could the light be severed from the sun than sympathy be detached from suffering. How could you know what this perfectly holy feeling is, had there been no suffering to feel for, no pains to lament, no sin to degrade and distress? And you speak of Love—the word which gathers up patience, mercy, forgiveness, generosity, sympathy, and surpasses them all? How could you have known the bliss of it unless human feeling had been, as it were, bruised and trampled on, to spread its fragrance, and to shed its life-giving wine? Humanity has indeed been martyred. Its flesh has been given for the life of the world. Its sacrifice was needed before men could grow out of the human into the Divine. Sin and sorrow must rend it, pain and shame must

tread it down, before Love can grow out of it. Your animal affections, mis-called Love, are only the products of physical ease, of undisturbed selfishness ; but you had to mortify the flesh with its affections and lusts before true Love could take its throne in your soul. You must see and feel what sin and suffering are ; you must feel them in your own proper person that you may know what they mean in others, and then you shall enter by that gate through which all must pass who would fain be Divine. As fast as one set of sins and sufferings are overcome, new ones arise in their place. Generation succeeding generation finds the martyrdom of man taking new shape ; but this is only that man may not die eternally, but share the life which is endless and divine. Each age must bear and be hung upon its own cross, that everyone may learn how to love and be loved.

Evils, you call them ? Well ! so they are, if, by evil, you mean that which makes one uncomfortable. The rod, the medicine, and the surgeon's knife, are, in this sense, evils. But not so do I define evil. I call that an evil which works only for harm and incurable misery ; and of such kind of evil I do not know one single specimen in the whole universe. Relatively, many things are evil, nay, almost all things but Love, because they are imperfections, and constantly under the correction of something better ; but so long as they are working for final good, all things are good, and to dispense with any one of them while it thus works would be our bitter loss.

But granting that sin and suffering are evils—not absolute but relative, we must admit that they are *necessary* to the development of that which is highest and most lovely in man's nature. Because, as I have tried to show, Love in its highest and purest forms has no existence apart from the conditions of sin and sorrow which call it into exercise.

I do not say that this, therefore, proves the existence of God, but it removes one of the most common and powerful arguments against it. It destroys the objection of the Atheist which is based on the sin and misery of the world.

There remains one more objection to meet, and that is contained in Mr. Reade's question, " If God is Love, why is there any bad at all ?" Because, I answer, there would have been no more love in

God than love in man, but for the bad. Had there been no conditions like ours in the universe, the Creator's heart could have known nothing of that feeling which we call *Love*.

Rightly or wrongly, we ascribe to the Divine Being a divine conquest of Love over what are to us the difficulties and obstacles in nature. We believe He is taming and subduing all things to His purposes, and making all things work together for good to every creature which He has made. Our own highest attitude in our difficulties of sin and sorrow is that of patient, untiring Love; and this it is, only in its supremest exaltation that we ascribe to Him when we say "God is Love."

To do the final good *at once*, instead of to prolong the process through painful stages, even if it were possible, would be to achieve something quite foreign to our best conceptions of *good*. But it is a begging of the whole question to imply that it *could* be done! To make men good at once, without the intermediate processes of pain and sin, would be to make another kind of creature altogether, of whom and of whose happiness we have neither experience nor conception. As well might you try to imagine a man who had never been a child, as a man made perfect without the discipline of sin and sorrow.

I rejoice in it all, as I have often said, with unspeakable and glowing delight. My frail flesh would fain escape some of its dreadful pangs, would fain lay the heavy burden of its cross upon the shoulders of others. I shudder when I see and think of the martyrdom of pain, and the worse crucifixion of shame, which have been the portion of some, and might have been my own; but I would not have one grain of the world's burden lightened by evasion, or one pang dulled by the deadly anodyne,\* so as to miss the Heaven-sent blessing which comes to us in disguise, or to interfere even in thought with the perfect arrangements of the most Loving Will. I would still say of it all,

"It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good."

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\* In the present controversy about *Euthanasia*, I wish it to be understood that the term "deadly anodyne" has no reference to the humane and perfectly justifiable methods of preventing or alleviating physical suffering. I have been for years an earnest advocate of *Euthanasia*, and I deem it right to use all means in our power to diminish or prevent pain. Pain and sin are things to be conquered and got rid of by all means short of injury to others, or to our higher nature; but not to be considered *unnecessary* when they are inevitable.