

THOUGHTS

ON THE

THEISTIC CONTROVERSY.

“Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.”—Romans 1:19,20.

When I undertook to preach a series of doctrinal discourses last winter, I began with the Being of God. There were obvious reasons for this. In the first place the being of God is one of two postulates that underlie and condition all religion. Any bridge that you intend to build across the gap between this world and the next must rest upon two piers, one of them being a personal thinking, finite spirit, and the other being a personal, infinite spirit. Besides, though I did not suppose that I was addressing an atheistic audience, or that any of my audience in fact had any doubt about the divine existence, I still thought that it might not be unprofitable for me to present them with a rapid sketch of the existing controversy respecting the being of God, in order that they might know, not only what men are thinking who do not believe in God, but that they might be in possession at the same time of some material which would serve to strengthen and establish their own faith.

We are living in a time of great controversy regarding fundamental questions, and there is no controversy of more importance in the world of thought to day than that respecting the being of God. Some would say that I exaggerate in affirming that there is a tendency in certain quarters towards atheistic opinions; because the statement is made sometimes, even by cautious writers, that it is impossible for a man to be an atheist. Seriously the interrogatory is put before us sometimes: can a man be an atheist? Why, certainly. It would seem possible for a man to be an atheist if we are to credit the serious statements of men who tell us, that they do not believe in the being of God. And if statements are incautiously advanced to the effect that there are no atheists in the world, statements quite as incautious are sometimes advanced to the effect that there are whole tribes of atheists in the

world. Sir John Lubbock has undertaken to make good this statement, and Professor Flint, in his recent book on the "Antitheistic theories," has met the position of Sir John most triumphantly, so that the old idea, that men generally believe in some sort of superior beings to whom they are amenable and responsible, holds good in the spite of all the argument that has been advanced, and in spite of the crude statements that have been made by prejudiced or ill informed travellers among heathen tribes. The affirmation that a man cannot be an atheist, is sometimes backed by the averment of Mr. Huxley, to the effect that atheism is philosophically absurd. Now, Mr. Huxley did make that statement, but some who quote him seem not to understand what he meant by it. Mr. Huxley only meant that he was too good a logician to undertake the responsibility of proving the vast negative that there is no God. You know a very little evidence may convince one of a positive fact, but it would take an immense amount of evidence to prove a negative proposition. A slight testimony, the print of a human foot upon the sand will prove to me that a human being has been upon the beach, but it would be almost impossible for me to prove, that no human being had been on the beach. And when Mr. Huxley said that atheism was philosophically absurd, he meant that to prove that God has not been here is an immense negative which he would not undertake. Therefore we distinguish between dogmatic atheism and skeptical atheism—the atheism which says "there is no god, because I have proved that there is no God"—and there is nobody who takes that position—and the atheism that says "I do not believe in God because the arguments which have been advanced to prove that proposition have not carried my judgment and do not satisfy my mind." Now, there are few if any dogmatic atheists in the world, but there is a very large number of speculative atheists in the world who take the position that they are without God as a positive quantity in their creed, and that the arguments advanced in support of theistic propositions do not satisfy them or carry their judgments. Skeptical atheism is very common, and unless we greatly mistake, somewhat on the increase.

Now to what is this condition of affairs due? An interesting question, and one not altogether unanswerable. Sin is the cause of it, of course, and we must not become so philosophical or so mixed up with current literature as to forget this appalling effect of sin and transgression upon man, blinding his mind and warping his judgment so as to bias him against truth.

It is amusing to read Professor Blackie of Edinburgh, in his effort to write the "natural history of atheism," and see how he wishes to put the blame of it all upon the shoulders of the church, and hold religion responsible for this gradual discarding of faith in a personal God. It is our stupid Sundays; it is our straight laced creed about creation out of nothing; it is our doctrine of providence, and predestination and eternal punishment, and all that. Professor Blackie forgot that there was a natural history of atheism written before his book was out. The Apostle Paul wrote it, and incorporated it in a single

sentence—The carnal mind is enmity against God, and is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. And yet, there are certain movements in the history of thought which have something to do with the present tides of skepticism upon this question. And we may speak of them to night by saying, first that the estimate which has been formed of the argument for the being of God since the days of Kant, has had something to do with this atheistic tendency, and secondly, that the positive teaching of false philosophies which have come in to clamour for the suffrages of men have had something to do with this atheistic tendency. First therefore of these critical estimates which have been formed respecting the value of the arguments for the being of God.

Since Kant's day there has been a disposition to undervalue one or another, if not all of the arguments which have been ordinarily used in proof of the being of God. Kant disparaged them and some who follow him went further than he. The result was that thought upon this question bifurcated. Mystics, who wanted to hold on to God, and yet had lost confidence in the arguments in support of His existence said, "Now that Kant says we cannot prove God's existence; we must get some other way of finding out about it." They accordingly fell back upon their religious consciousness—God consciousness they called it. They said they had an intuition of him that was above reason, and had no need of evidence. That is one set of men. And the other set of men—men skeptically inclined—said to the theists, "Now Kant has broken down your argument for the being of God; he has shown that the ontological argument is weak, and the cosmological argument not demonstrative, and the teleological argument has a flaw in it, and if those three arguments break down where is your evidence of the being of God?" And they discarded God because they discarded the arguments for God's existence upon Kant's reasoning.

Now we do not side with the mystic; we do side with the skeptic; nor do we share in the unqualified condemnation of Kant's criticism upon this question. What he did, when you get to the bottom of it, was to tell us something that we ought to have known before, and which, I venture to say, men did know before, to wit, that these arguments do not carry demonstration upon their face. He says, "Here is your ontological argument; what does it amount to? I have a conception of a perfect being, therefore a perfect being exists." Why, says Kant, that is not demonstration. I have a conception of an island, there the island exists; that does not follow. I have a conception of a hundred dollars, but who will take that conception of a hundred dollars in liquidation of a debt? It is one thing to have an idea in the mind, and another thing to have the objective existence beyond you. Precisely. And so, he says, this ontological argument, or endeavor to pass from a subjective conception to an objective reality is not logical and must not be regarded as demonstrative. Exactly. Who ever said that it was? But men are not obliged to dream about a hundred dollars or islands. It does seem however as though they were

obliged to dream about God. It does seem as though by some strange consentaneous act they all do struggle up into possession of this idea of a perfect being. Now the question is how they get it? Why they should have it, is the question. And that question Kant did not consider, though the point of the argument is right there. How did they all come to think about a God if there were no God to think about?

Then there is your cosmological argument. Write it down as a formula and it reads: Every effect must have a cause. The world is an effect, and therefore the world must have a cause, and Kant says, Stop, your minor premise is not true or not demonstrable. How do you know the world is an effect? How do you know that the world is not eternal? We did not say we did know. We did not say we had demonstrated that. Kant simply says: You have not demonstrated that proposition. Very well. Suppose we concede that, then we simply concede that the argument is not demonstrative. But did Kant stop to ask, whether there is not good reasons for believing that the world is not eternal; or did the people who followed him stop to consider that Kant was not trying to break down the reason for belief in God, but simply trying to show you that this was not a demonstrative proof of God's existence. Clerk Maxwell had not written then, to tell us that atoms were manufactured articles. The theory of the dissipation of energy had not come into vogue then, to give us positive proof that this world, at least this present world, has not been in existence from all eternity. But we were in possession of the fact that this world is undergoing constant change; and it was as good an argument then as it is an argument now, that a cosmos, undergoing change had to be accounted for, and the question was whether you would account for it by some fortuitous concurrence of atoms, or by some will in the thing itself, or by some external will that could produce this ordered state of changeful events. Kant did not say that there was no God, there was no demonstration of it in this syllogistical formula, and nobody dispute his proposition.

Then, here is your third argument. All design implies a designer, but the world is a manifestation of design and therefore the world had a designer. Again it may be said No: some things would happen by chance; atoms would take a certain shape by chance. Logically, it is possible, though infinitely improbable, that those atoms by chance might have made this world. Precisely. Let us give you that, and if you say that the world was made by a fortuitous concurrence of atoms, you are easily satisfied; and if you will not say that it was made by a fortuitous concurrence of atoms, you must say that it immensely probable that it was made by design, which is all we ask you to believe. But, suppose these atoms, when they were put in shape to make a cosmos, were put into shape by an intelligent mind, how great a mind would it take to make a world of this sort? How great a mind does it take to make a watch. Not a very great one. And now, if the world is only a bigger watch how much bigger mind must it take to make a world than it took to

make a watch? Therefore your argument would only prove an intelligent mind at best, not an infinite mind. Exactly so. We never put infinity into that argument. We only said that the teleological argument, if it proved anything, and it did look as if it proved that, proved that this world came into existence in its present shape by some being possessed of intelligence corresponding to the vastness and magnitude of this world. Get your infinity from other sources, if you are not satisfied with it here.

That is the gist of Kant's famous criticism; and the world has made far too much of it, and attached far too much importance to it.

Once more. We say there were two causes at work to produce this present state of things; one being the critical estimate that men formed of the argument for the being of God, the other being the positive teaching of certain false philosophies. It is not easy to handle a subject like this in a popular way, and when stated in a popular way it is necessarily stated crudely. It may be possible in the short time we can devote to the subject to have some idea at least of the questions involved. Let us try. Ultimately we come to discriminate in all thinking between the substances which we call mind and matter, and we are forced to make this distinction because the attributes of matter are not applicable to mind, and the attributes of mind cannot be predicated of matter. You cannot weigh mind or measure mind; on the other hand matter does not think or feel. The absolute incompatibility of the attributes of matter and mind forces us to the assumption of two absolutely different substances, unless you take Professor Bain's hypothesis and say that there is not matter and no mind, but a double faced unity—a something which shews itself now as matter, now as mind, now thinking, and now in forms that can be weighed and measured. And if you take that hypothesis, Professor Calderwood, I think is correct, when he says it is a great deal harder hypothesis than the one you want to explain away. But that distinction lies at the bottom of your religion: it is the corner stone upon which all religion rests. Give up matter and mind, and the distinction between the two, and then God and spirit and immortality fly away. Suppose now that a philosophy comes along and tells you that what is called matter is not such; that what is called mind is not such, but that both are simply a phenomenal, passing, fleeting manifestation of a universal something or substance which is neither mind nor matter. What then? Why then your personality vanishes; then your perdurable existence passes away; then immortality is a dream; then it is useless to talk about God, for there is no distinction between God and anything else. Then there is no use in talking about the world, for there is no world as distinct from God. It is then either Pantheism or Pan-cosmism, and it makes no difference which word you use, only in the one case you define this ALL in the terms of world, and in the other case you define it in the terms of God. It makes no difference which you do, it is all over with you and me, so far as our religious life and religious worship are concerned.

Now that is one phase of philosophy which has reigned in Germany,

which is being revived in England, a school of which has its headquarters in the city of St. Louis. Nor is it strange that students of religious philosophy, Dr. McCosh for example, should feel some concern about this revival of Hegelian among thinking English speaking people at the present day, understanding as they do the relation that it sustains to historical Christianity. Suppose now that another philosophy comes along, saying, let there be atoms; let these atoms have position; let them move, and then you have the universe evolved. What follows? The distinction between the man and the brute is blotted out. The distinction between the brute and the vegetable is blotted out. Man is an automaton. Automatism is one of the competing phases of thought at the present time. The distinction between the vegetable and the piece of rock crystal is blotted out. Then what? Then chemistry is the universal science, and molecular physics the final explanation of everything. Light shined upon the sea, and it was salt. Light shined upon the salted sea, and it lived. That is the way that Oken evoked the universe and wrote the Book of Genesis, and then Herbert Spencer wrote it in less poetic phrase but in substantially the same way.

Now these two systems—pantheism, materialism: idealistic metaphysic, materialistic physics—are the two poles of philosophic thinking. They are enemies of each other and common enemies of God's word. We are living in a materialistic age, speaking from a social point of view; and never more than to day did men think so much about the material comforts of life, about this world and all that it has to give them of pleasure and luxury. The result is that the prosperous man has not time to think about God, and the man who is not prosperous, but who complains and finds fault and cavils at the fortune or misfortune that is his fate, has come to the conclusion that God is standing in the way of his prosperity; and he says to himself, to regenerate society, that is to say to revolutionize it, I must get rid of God, of religion. Simply stating a truth, the converse of which is that the moment you get rid of God, you do as a matter of fact revolutionize, though you may not regenerate society. Which brings me to make a statement now under the second head, as to what is now happening in the sphere of morals and will happen if this state of things should go on.

Men forget sometimes that all the light of this world is borrowed from the world above. They forget that there is a deep philosophy which tells them that all the joy of this life is simply the joys of the next life discounted, and when they have blotted out the prospect of a future life they have made this life absolutely wretched. Therefore they are their own worst enemies; they are putting more bitterness into their cup than they think of when they try to cast discredit upon God's truth. Take your poor man, who is striving hard to keep body and soul together, and who finds it difficult even then to put bread into the mouths of his children; what is he going to do when he finds himself baffled at every turn? You know what the Frenchman does. He jumps into the Seine and drowns himself, not because he is a French-

man, but because he is an atheist, because he has lost all fear of the future, and sees no brightness in the present.

What is your rich man to do, who has tasted every joy, and become sated as to every appetite, and who passes through the world blasé, disgusted, tired out with pleasure, what will he do? Drown himself? Shoot himself? Put himself out of the way? Why not? It is the most philosophical thing he can do. And what will become of morals, when you have put God out of the world? Now you see how concatenated thought is. Do you know there never was a time before this present century, if I am correctly informed, when men so seriously argued, "Is life worth living." That is a present day question. And do you know that there has been another question just as seriously argued, and it has reference to the same problem. Could morality survive the death of religion? That question is not put by religious men; it is put by men who do not believe in God, and the philosophy of it is this:—Men feel that though they may get along without God, they cannot well dispense with morals. They want, even if there be no future life, some tolerable decency in this. They want a pure home; they want honest trade; they want the rights of property to be regarded, accordingly they have raised this serious question, whether morality could survive when the death blow had been given to religion. And the answer they get when they are logical and pin themselves down to the proper consequences of their premises is not far to seek. Mr. Mallock is sometimes guilty of offenses against good taste, if not good morals, in his popular volume. But he has given the true answer to this question and given it with a delicacy of touch and a cogency and keenness of argument which I cannot imitate. I advise you to read him. Again and again I said it in this pulpit, until it must sound like a common place, that bereave the world of God and you do away with morality. Very well; what are we to do? Least of all let us say that this is a question we have nothing to do with. As little let us go through this world with our eyes shut and our ears stopped, indifferent to the movements of thought, and careless with respect to what men are thinking about. Moreover let us not make the mistake of supposing that we can afford to look with entire disfavor upon any man who believes in a personal God. Understand what I say:—let us not make the mistake of counting him as an enemy, and when this controversy is so rife, who believes in a personal God, and will stand shoulder to shoulder with you in fighting materialism. He is a valued ally in this great nineteenth century debate. You may have theological controversy with him on other points, and vital points, but deal tenderly with him, keep as near to him as you can, and do not forget that you may have need of his services when you come to debate with the materialist and the infidel. Let us not forget to give credit where credit is due. Let us not hesitate to say that one of the foremost thinkers in Great Britain to-day, and one who has done yeoman's service in defense of theism, is not a Trinitarian, and is far from holding orthodox belief in regard to some important and even vital doctrines. I need not say that I refer to James Martineau.

Lut us state the question in a form which it seems to me ought to command easy comprehension. We will not say that all men believe in a God such as you believe in. Will not say that all men believe in one God, but we will say that men somehow, and with great unanimity believe in some being or beings to whom they are responsible. And now the question is, Given this belief, can it be justified? Given this belief, can the atheist prove that it is a superstition, or can the theist show that there is good reason for maintaining it, and such good reason as that he who denies it assumes great responsibility and incurs great risk? I am perfectly satisfied, so far as the theistic position is concerned, when I have shown to myself that there is such reason for my believing in the existence of a God who will hold me accountable for my action, that not to believe Him would impose upon me great responsibility and subject me to enormous risk. And I do not think that there it any great difficulty in making good, at least that proposition.

Now we may make good that proposition. How are we to defend Theism? In three ways: First, by those arguments which grew out of an attempt to construct a theory of the universe. Secondly, by those arguments which grow out of the constitution of our nature, and thirdly by those arguments of an historical character, which are more particularly associated with the life and word of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us go back again to that old question about the universe, how it got here, and what it is for. Adopting for the moment a very commonly accepted philosophy, let us suppose that atoms "are the foundation stones of the universe," and starting with that principle of our nature, that teaches us to believe that every effect must have a cause, that every change must have come about by some power, you notice that atoms move. Never mind how atoms came into being; how did they move? that is the question. Here is your billiard ball, and it moves because the other billiard ball struck it, and that other billiard ball moves because the billiard before it struck it. And so you see things going on in this world, and you say this moves because something behind it pushed it, and it must occur to you that ultimately you have to come back to a will power that imparted the first motion. You have to come back ultimately to some will, whose mandate moved the first billiard ball, which moved the second, which moved the third, which moved the rest, and you must therefore account for motion, if the laws of your mental process are correct, by a mandate of some will. Put the will now where you please. You can put it in the atom or out of the atom; you have not gone very far, but you have got outside of materialism, and that is something. Very well. Now these atoms come together, and by some sort of an arrangement they make worlds, and these worlds move around in their orbits with mathematical exactness. Now the question is, how does that happen? You can say that it happened by chance. Then you are easily pleased. You can say that there is a will residing in each atom. Very well. Then each atom must have had a wonderful acquaintance with the

will of every other atom; or they must all have come together and consulted, and still you are easily satisfied; or there must be some will outside of all these atoms, controlling, shaping, ordering all things and making the mathematics of sidereal astronomy, and that is Theism. Which is the most reasonable? Take your choice.

Again, these atoms come together and they make the material organism which have some reference to other material organisms. Now we are living in a day when a certain school of thinkers do not like to hear theologians talk about final causes and teleology; they do not like to hear a man say that the eye was made to see with. They like to say: "there is the eye, therefore you see. There is the stomach, therefore you put food into it. They do not like to say that your stomach is made to digest with, but we will say it. We cannot help it. Now it is a curious thing, a wonderful thing that a set of atoms should make an eye, but it is another wonderful thing that a set of atoms should make this world of sky and sea and color. But the third wonderful thing is that a set of atoms, working independently here should make this wonderful world of earth and sky and sea, and working independently there should make an eye, and that the two should fit each other, that there should be absolute conformity, the one to the other, as though the one were made for the other. It is a singular thing that a set of atoms should make a chicken in a shell, with organs that it could not use, and that it should come into a world as though it had been made for that world, with organs that were ready for use, and an habitat suited thereto, and an environment demanding just those organs with which it had been provided. How are you going to explain it? You can take your choice. You can say that there was an intelligence in each atom and that made the organism; then you are adrift, you don't know why this will in this atom should have been able to make this state of things outside to suit it. Let me take a blind workman and put him in a cellar and tell him to make a lock; then let me take another blind workman and put him in another cellar and tell him to make a key; and when the blind workman in one cellar has made his lock, and the other blind man, without concert, has made his key, let us bring the lock and key together and find that they fit each other. That is the way the world was made; blind atoms working without concert have made this lock and key. Take it if you prefer it, but we prefer to say that the lock and key were not made by blind workmen working apart, but by a great artificer who adapted means to ends and whose wisdom is seen in the harmony of the two. That is Paul Janet's illustration somewhat modified and used with a little license, but I think it a very good one.

Now there is the constitution of my nature. I am born so that I cannot help asking after God. We have a religious nature. How did we get it. It is certainly a fact to be explained as well as any other fact. Theism will explain it. Will any thing else? We have the distinction between right and wrong, so that we say right must be right under all circumstances, and will

never change places with expediency. How did you get it? What does it mean? Theism will give you the answer. Will any thing else? We have a hungering and thirsting after an infinite being, a perfect being, an unconditional being. How did you get it? Theism will explain it. If there is a God seated on the throne of the universe it is not strange that I should be raising the scaling ladders of my logic, and, climbing to the top, find the ladder too short, and still looking towards that unreachd height, cry out for God,—it is not strange. But why this longing and looking, and why this raising of scaling ladders, if there be no God?

Then there is the historical argument. What is history? The recorded testimony of men. The statements of what they saw or heard to somebody else who believes that statement. Why do they believe that statement? Because it is a constituent part of our nature that men speak the truth. Is testimony worth anything? That is a fundamental question. Not in the sphere of religion alone, but in the sphere of jurisprudence, in the sphere of everyday life, in the sphere of history, in trade and in the domestic circle. If testimony is worthless everything goes. If testimony be true history is true, and history certifies that there was a man whose name was Jesus Christ, born in this wise, living this life, setting this example, working these miracles, dying this death, predicting his resurrection, rising again in accordance with his prediction, and ascending into heaven. Now you cannot tear the miracle out of the life of Christ and leave the historical fabric intact; and these things be true, they demonstrate, as near as human testimony can demonstrate anything—I am not speaking now on the plane of divine inspiration—that there is a God. So you have the theory of the universe demanding God; the constitution of your nature calling for God; the historical circumstances in the life of Christ explained only by reference to God, and what is more? You have this fourth argument *from congruity*, in this fact, that if Theism be true then all these things harmonize and fit each other. Therefore I consider that theism does not rest on one argument alone, but rather on an accumulation of arguments; and the weakness of atheism consists in the immense work that it has to do, in order that it shall make a clear case. See what it has to do. It has to explain the movements in the physical world among the atoms without any reference to a will, or, if it have reference to a will it is an unconscious impersonal will. It has to say that all these ordered events that take place in the world, occur by chance, or if not, that they were brought about by an unconscious intelligence, an intelligence that did not know what it was about. It has to say that all these adaptations of means to ends took place by chance. It has to say that this religious nature of man was an accident. It has to say that this idea of right and wrong means nothing. It has to say that these aspirations of man after a perfect being have no fulfilment. It has to say that history is a wholesale cheat; and that the word of God respecting Jesus Christ is not true. It has to make all that good in order to make good the proposition that there is not reasonable ground for belief in an extra-mundane personal God.

Once more. This argument in behalf of God's existence is cumulative. The doctrine that force means will is a small part of it. The doctrine that the world was made by an intelligent will is an advance upon that position. The doctrine that this intelligent will was an infinite will is an advance upon that. The doctrine that this infinite will is a person is an advance upon that. The doctrine that this infinite, intelligent person is a person of goodness, affection and love, is an advance upon that, and the culmination of the argument is reached in the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore he who will take his stand by the cross of Jesus Christ, or by the empty grave of Jesus and preach the doctrine of the resurrection, must conserve in so doing all that is valuable in the theistic proof, and give that theistic proof in its completest form. Therefore let us remember that the strongest opposition you can make to atheistic criticism is a strong presentation of the claims of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God. Men know this. Why, it is German thinkers who say that theism holds its own in England because of the 'reverends' there; because of the church; because of the Universities; because of the Boyle and Bampton lectures; because of the books on the "evidences of christianity" which are being written there and which hold the people to a belief in God because they hold the people to a belief in Christ. Ye believe in God, believe also in me, and if you do not believe in me (in Christ) you have taken the first step towards a discarding of the belief in God. Mr. Bradlaugh says we cannot ignore Christianity we must fight the men who preach Christ and the Gospel and the being of God and immortality. It is foolishness, he says to his brethren, to tell us to ignore these people. Why, he says, "We cannot ignore St. Paul's, it is too high." Precisely. "We cannot ignore St. Paul's, it is too high." To give that admission of a leading atheist its widest possible application and on the largest possible area, that is the duty of a Christian man to day, who would defend his faith and stand up for the existence of God, and especially a God incarnate. To make men see that they cannot ignore this cathedral of christian truth; because it looms too high, occupies too much space in the vision of men. And to carry that out upon the broader scale, to make men know that christianity means something; not simply as a doctrine but a life. To make men feel that they cannot afford to ignore the power of christianity in its effect upon conduct. That is the duty of this hour. "Christians," says Christlieb, "are the world's bible." They may not go within the cathedral to echo its litanies, but St. Paul's is too high: they must see it. Christian life must be seen. It cannot be ignored. And when they can make that statement of you and of christians generally, then will have come to pass in the world the fulfillment of God's word which says that the Gospel is the power of God and the wisdom of God unto salvation.