

animation was necessary for its fulfilment, or as an announcement to the world that he was in a peculiar manner the object of divine regard and the subject of divine influence. The first point of view is evidently irrational, and the offspring of unregenerate and uncultivated thought. It is prompted either by the inconsiderate instincts of the natural man, or by disbelief in a future life. It implies either that there is no future world, or that this world is preferable to it, since no man, believing in another and a better state of existence, would regard it as an appropriate reward for distinguished excellence to be *reduced to this*. The second point of view is, if possible, still more unreasonable, since it assumes that God had permitted such an interference with and defeat of his plans, that he was obliged to interpose for their renewal. The third aspect in which such a fact is to be regarded alone remains, and is in effect the one in which it is commonly viewed throughout Christendom, viz., as a public announcement from the Most High, "This is my beloved Son, hear ye him." But this point of view is attended with many difficulties.

In the first place, if the Gospel narratives are to be taken as our standing-ground (and they are as valid for the one case as for the other), the restoration of the dead to life did not necessarily imply any such peculiar favour, or contain any such high announcement. The evangelists record *three* instances of such miraculous resuscitation, in none of which have we any reason for believing the subject of the miracle to be peculiarly an object of divine love or approbation, in all of which the miracle was simply one of mercy to mourning friends. The resuscitated parties were all obscure individuals, and only one of them appears to have been a follower of Christ. *Secondly*, this point of view was not the one taken by the Apostles. To them the value of Christ's resurrection consisted in its enabling them still to retain, or rather to resume, that belief

in the Messiahship of Jesus which his death had shaken. If restored to life, he might yet be, and probably was, that Great Deliverer whom, as Jews, they watched and waited and prayed for; if he were dead, then that cherished notion was struck dead with him. Now, if we are right in the conclusion at which we arrived in an earlier chapter, viz., that Jesus had nothing in common with that liberating and triumphant conqueror predicted by the Jewish prophets and expected by the Jewish nation: it follows that the especial effect which the resurrection of Christ produced upon the minds of his disciples was *to confirm them in an error*. This, to them, was its dogmatic value, the ground on which they hailed the announcement and cherished the belief. *Thirdly*, it will admit of question whether, in the eye of pure reason, the resurrection of Christ, considered as an attestation to the celestial origin of his religion, be not superfluous - whether it be not human weakness, rather than human reason, which needs external miracle as sanction and buttress of a system which may well rely upon its own innate strength, whether the internal does not surpass and supersede the external testimony to its character, whether the divine truths which Christ taught should not be to us the all-sufficient attestation of his divine mission. We have seen in the preceding chapter that miraculous power in any individual is no guarantee for the correctness of his teaching. We have seen that if the doctrines which Jesus taught approve themselves to the enlightened understanding and the uncorrupted heart, they are equally binding on our allegiance whether he wrought miracles in the course of his career or not. And if the truth that God is a loving father, and the precept, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," derive no corroboration from the resurrection of Lazarus or the Youth of Nain, neither can they from that of Christ himself. Doubtless we should sit with more prostrate submission and a deeper

reverence at the feet of a teacher who came to us from the grave, but it is probably only the infirmity of our faith and reason which would cause us to do so.¹ Rationally considered, Christ's resurrection cannot prove doctrines true that would else be false, nor certain that would else be doubtful. Therefore, considered as a reward, it is contradictory and absurd; considered as the renewal of an interrupted mission, it involves an unworthy and monstrous conception of God's providence; considered as an attestation to the Messiahship of Jesus, it is an attestation to an error; considered as a sanction and corroboration of his doctrines, it is, or ought to be, superfluous.

Is the other view which we have been accustomed to take of Christ's resurrection—viz., as the type, pledge, and foretelling of our own,—more consonant to sound reason? We believe the reverse will prove nearer to the truth. That it was regarded in this view by the Apostles is here no argument for us. For they looked for the coming of their Lord and the end of the world, if not in their own lifetime, at least in that of the existing generation,—when they who were alive would be caught up into the clouds, and those who were dead would *come forth out of their graves*, and join together the glorious company of the redeemed. They looked for a *bodily* resurrection for themselves—which on their supposition of the date might appear possible—a resurrection, therefore, of which that of Jesus *was* a prototype—a pattern—a cognate occurrence. But in *our* position the case is not only altered, but reversed. Christ's resurrection was believed, and is affirmed to have been, a reanimation of the body which he wore in life; it could, therefore, be an earnest of the resurrection of those only whose bodies still remained to be reanimated; it was an exceptional case; it refers not to us; it conveys no

hope to us;—*we are not of those whose resurrection it could typify or assure*; for our bodies, like those of the countless generations who have lived and passed away since Christ trod our earth, will have crumbled into dust, and passed into other combinations, and become in turn the bodies of myriads of other animated beings before the great expected day of the resurrection of the just. To us a bodily resurrection is impossible. If, therefore, Christ's resurrection were *spiritual*—independent of his buried body—it might be a type and foreshadowing of our own;—if, on the other hand, as the evangelists relate, it was corporeal—if his body left the grave undecayed, and appeared on earth, and ascended into glory,—then its value as a pledge belonged to the men of that time alone,—we have neither part nor lot in its signification;—it is rather an extinguisher than a confirmation of our hopes.

It will be seen that we make no scruple in negating a doctrine held *verbally* by the Church, viz., "the resurrection of the body"; since, whatever was intended by the authors of this phrase¹—the meaning of which is by no means clear to us, and was probably no clearer to themselves,—thus much is certain, that *our* "resurrection of the body" can bear no similarity to Christ's resurrection of the body;—for his body remained only a few hours in the grave, and, we are expressly told, "did not see corruption," and ours, we know, remains there for untold years, and moulders away into the original elements of its marvellous chemistry.

We conclude, then, as before:—that as we cannot hope to rise, as Christ is said to have done, with our own present uncorrupted body, his resurrection, if it were a reanimation of his earthly frame, can be no argument, proof, pledge,

¹ Jesus seems to intimate as much when he says, "If they hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead."

¹ "We can," says Pearson, "no otherwise expound this article teaching the resurrection of the body, than by asserting that the same bodies which have lived and died shall live again; that the same flesh which is corrupted shall be restored."—*Pearson on the Creed*, art. xi.

pattern, or foreshadowing of our own. If, on the contrary, his resurrection were spiritual, and his appearances to his disciples mental and apparitionary only, they would, *pro tanto*, countenance the

idea of a future state. Our *interest*, therefore, as waiters and hoppers for an immortality, would appear to lie in *disbelieving* the letter of the Scripture narratives.

CHAPTER XII

IS CHRISTIANITY A REVEALED RELIGION?

HAVING now arrived at this point of our inquiry, let us pause and cast a summary glance on the ground over which we have travelled, and the conclusions at which we have arrived. We have found that the popular doctrine of Scriptural Inspiration rests on no foundation whatever, but is a gratuitous as well as an untenable assumption. We have seen that neither the books of Moses nor the laws of Moses, as we have them, were (at least as a whole) the production of the great Leader and Lawgiver whose name they bear. We have seen ample reason for concluding that a belief in One only supreme God was not the primary religion either of the Hebrew nation or the Hebrew priests; but that their Theism—originally limited and impure—was gradually elevated and purified into perfect and exclusive monotheism by the influence of their Poets and Sages and the progressive advance of the people in intelligence and civilisation. We have discovered that their Prophets were Poets and Statesmen, not Predictors—and that none of their writings contain a single prediction which was originally designed by them, or can be honestly interpreted by us, to foretell the appearance and career of Jesus of Nazareth. What have been commonly regarded as such are happy and *applicable quotations*: but no more. We have seen further that none of the four histories of Christ which have come down to us are completely genuine and faithful;—that while they are ample and adequate for showing us what

Christ was and what was the essence and spirit of his teaching, we yet do not possess sufficient certainty that they record, in any special instance, the precise words or actions of Christ, to warrant us in building upon those words or actions doctrines revolting to our uncorrupted instincts and our cultivated sense. We have found, moreover, that the Apostles—zealous and devout men as they were—were yet most imperfect and fallible expounders of the mind of their departed Lord. We have seen that miracles—even where the record of them is adequate and above suspicion, if any such case there be—are no sufficient guarantee of the truth of the doctrines preached by the worker of those wonders. And finally we have been compelled to conclude that not only is the resurrection of our Lord, as narrated in the Gospels, encumbered with too many difficulties and contradictions to be received as unquestionable, but that it is far from having the dogmatic value usually attached to it, as a pledge and foreshowing of our own.

But however imperfect may be the records we possess of Christ's ministry, this imperfection does not affect the nature or authority of his mission. Another great question, therefore, here opens before us:—"Was Christ a divinely-commissioned Teacher of Truth?" In other words, "Is Christianity to be regarded as a Religion revealed by God to man through Christ?"

What is the meaning which, in ordinary theological parlance, we attach to

the words, "Divine Revelation?" What do we intend to signify when we say that "God spoke" to this Prophet or to that saint?

We are all of us conscious of thoughts which *come to us*—which are not, properly speaking, *our own*—which we do not create, do not elaborate;—flashes of light, glimpses of truth, or of what seems to us such, brighter and sublimer than commonly dwell in our minds, which we are not conscious of having *wrought out* by any process of inquiry or meditation. These are frequent and brilliant in proportion to the intellectual gifts and spiritual elevation of the individual: they may well be termed inspirations—revelations; but it is not such as these that we mean when we speak of the Revelation by Christ.

Those who look upon God as a Moral Governor, as well as an original Creator,—a God at hand, not a God afar off in the distance of infinite space, and in the remoteness of past or future eternity,—who conceive of him as taking a watchful and presiding interest in the affairs of the world, and as influencing the hearts and actions of men,—believe that through the workings of the Spirit He has spoken to many, has whispered His will to them, has breathed great and true thoughts into their minds, has "wrought mightily" within them, has in their secret communings and the deep visions of the night caused His Spirit to move over the troubled waters of their souls, and educed light and order from the mental chaos. These are the views of many religious minds; but these are not what we mean when we speak of the Revelation made by God to Christ.

Those, again, who look upon God as the great artificer of the world of life and matter, and upon man, with his wonderful corporeal and mental frame, as His direct work, conceive the same idea in a somewhat modified and more material form. They believe that He has made men with different intellectual capacities; and has endowed some with brains so much larger and finer

than those of ordinary men as to enable them to see and originate truths which are hidden from the mass; and that when it is His will that Mankind should make some great step forward, should achieve some pregnant discovery, He calls into being some cerebral organisation of more than ordinary magnitude and power, as that of David, Isaiah, Plato, Shakespeare, Bacon, Newton, Luther, Pascal, which gives birth to new ideas and grander conceptions of the truths vital to humanity. But we mean something essentially distinct from this when we speak of Christ as the Teacher of a Religion revealed to him by his Father.

When a Christian affirms Christianity to be a "revealed religion," he intends simply and without artifice to declare his belief that the doctrines and precepts which Christ taught were not the production of his own (human) mind, either in its ordinary operations or in its flights of sublimest contemplation; but were directly and supernaturally communicated to him from on high.¹ He means this, or he means nothing that is definable and distinctive. What grounds have we, then, for adopting such an opinion?

It is evident that, if the conclusions to which our previous investigations have led us be correct, our only arguments for believing Christianity to be a divine revelation in contradistinction to a human conception must be drawn from the *superhumanity* of its nature and contents. What human intellect could ascertain it would be superfluous for God to reveal. The belief of Christ himself, that his teaching "was not his, but his Father's,"—even if we were certain that he used these precise words, and intended them to convey precisely the meaning we attach to them,—could not suffice us, for the reasons assigned in the first chapter of this work. The belief in communications with the Deity has in all ages

¹ Those who believe that Christ was God—if any such really exist—must, of course, hold everything he taught was, *ipso facto*, a divine revelation. With such all argument and inquiry is necessarily superseded.

been common to the most exalted and poetical order of religious minds. The fact that Christ held a conviction which he shared with the great and good of other times can be no argument for ascribing to him divine communications distinct from those granted to the great and good of other times. It remains, therefore, a simple question for our consideration, whether the doctrines and precepts taught by Jesus are so new, so profound, so perfect, so distinctive, so above and beyond parallel, that they could not have emanated naturally from a clear, simple, unsoiled, unwarped, powerful, meditative mind,—living four hundred years after Socrates and Plato—brought up among the pure Essenes, nourished on the wisdom of Solomon, the piety of David, the poetry of Isaiah—elevated by the knowledge and illuminated by the love of the one true God.

Now on this subject we hope our confession of faith will be acceptable to all save the narrowly orthodox. It is difficult, without exhausting superlatives, even to unexpressive and wearisome satiety, to do justice to our intense love, reverence, and admiration for the character and teaching of Jesus. We regard him not as the perfection of the intellectual or philosophic mind, but as the perfection of the spiritual character,—as surpassing all men of all times in the closeness and depth of his communion with the Father. In reading his sayings, we feel that we are holding converse with the wisest, purest, noblest Being that ever clothed thought in the poor language of humanity. In studying his life we feel that we are following the footsteps of the highest ideal yet presented to us upon earth. "Blessed be God that so much manliness has been lived out, and stands there yet, a lasting monument to mark how high the tides of divine life have risen in the world of man!"

But these convictions—strong, deep-seated, and well-grounded as they are—do not bring us to the conclusion that either the rare moral or mental superiorities of Jesus were supernatural en-

dowments, in the common acceptance of the word. The Old Testament contained his teaching; it was reserved for him to elicit, publish, and enforce it. A thoughtful perusal of Job, the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Isaiah will show beyond question the germs of those views which in the purer and sublimer genius of Christ rose to so high an elevation.¹ The doctrine of a future world, though not enforced, perhaps probably not found, in the Old Testament, was, we know, currently believed among the Jews before the time of Jesus, and must have been familiar to him from his infancy. We have no hesitation in concluding that a pure and powerful mind, filled with warm affections and devotional feelings, and studying the Hebrew Scriptures *discriminatively*, appropriating and assimilating what was good and noble, and rejecting what was mean and low, could and might naturally arrive at the conclusion which Jesus reached, as to the duties of men, the attributes of God, and the relation of man to God. Christianity is distinguished from Judaism rather by what it excluded than by what it added. It is an eclecticism and an expansion of the best elements of its predecessor. It selects the grand and beautiful, the tender, the true, and ignores or suppresses the exclusive, the narrow, the corrupt, the coarse, and the vindictive. It is Moses, David, Solomon, Isaiah purified, sublimated and developed. If this be so, then the supposition that Christianity was supernaturally communicated falls to the ground as needless and therefore inadmissible. What man could discover naturally God would not communicate supernaturally.

But we may go further. Not only is there no necessity for supposing that Christ's views as to God and duty were

¹ A quotation of texts is scarcely the right mode of proving this. See Hennell for an exposition of how much of Christianity was already extant in Jewish teaching; also Mackay's "Progress of the Intellect," ii. 376. [Em. Deutch's paper on the Talmud, *Quart. Review*, No. 246, and Renan, "Vie de Jesus," ch. v.]

supernaturally revealed to him, but there is almost a necessity for adopting an opposite conclusion. If they were the elaboration of his own mind we may well imagine that they may contain some admixture of error and imperfection. If they were revealed to him by God this could not be the case. If, therefore, we find that Jesus was in error in any point either of his practical or his speculative teaching, our conclusion, hitherto a probability, becomes a certainty. It is evident that we could treat of this point with far more satisfaction if we were in a position to pronounce with perfect precision what Christ did, and what he did not, teach. But as we have seen that many words are put into his mouth which he never uttered, we cannot ascertain this as undoubtedly as is desirable. There must still remain some degree of doubt as to whether the errors and imperfections which we detect originated with or were shared by Christ, or whether they were wholly attributable to his followers and historians.

There are, however, some matters on which the general concurrence of the evangelical histories and their undesigned and incidental intimations lead us to conclude that Jesus did share the mistakes which prevailed among his disciples, though, in going even so far as this, we speak with great diffidence. He appears to have held erroneous views respecting demoniacal possession, the interpretation of Scripture,¹ his own Messiahship, his second coming, and the approaching end of the world. At least, if he held the views ascribed to him (and the preponderance of evidence is in favour of the assumption that he

¹ Perhaps the most singular instance of this misinterpretation of Scripture is in the sophisticated argument ascribed to Christ, concerning the supposed address of David to the Messiah. "The Lord said unto my Lord," &c. (Matth. xxii. 41, and parallel passage). It appears clear that this Psalm was not composed by David, but was addressed to David by Nathan, or some Court Prophet, on the occasion of some of his signal victories.—See "Hebrew Monarchy," p. 92. David did not call the Messiah "Lord"; it was the Poet that called David "Lord."

did), we know that on these topics he was mistaken. Now if he was so in error his teaching could not have been an infallible revelation from the God of truth, in the sense in which Christendom employs that phrase.

But we now come upon another question, which, if answered in the negative, at once closes the inquiry to which this chapter is devoted. "Is the revelation of an undiscoverable truth possible?" That is, "Can any doctrine be taught by God to man—be supernaturally infused, that is, into his mind, which he might not by the employment of his own faculties have discerned or elicited?" In other words, "Can the human mind receive an idea which it could not originate?" We think it plain that it cannot; though the subject is one which may be better illuminated by reflection than by discussion. At least it is difficult to conceive the nature and formation of that intellect which can comprehend and grasp a truth when presented to it, and perceive that it is a truth, and which yet could not, in the course of time and under favourable conditions, work out that truth by the ordinary operation of its own powers. It appears to us that, by the very nature of the statement, the faculties necessary for the one mental process must be competent to the other.¹ If an idea (and a truth is only an idea, or a combination of ideas, which approves itself to us) can find entrance into the mind and take up its abode there, does not this very fact show a fitness for the residence of that idea?—a fitness, therefore, which would have ensured admittance to the idea if suggested in any of those mental processes which we call thought, or by any of those

¹ It may be objected that external facts may be revealed which could not be discovered. We may be assured by revelation that the inhabitants of Saturn have wings or have no heads, but then we do not recognise the truth of the assurance. We may be assured by revelation of the existence of a future world; but could we receive the assurance unless our minds were already so prepared for it, or so constituted, that it would naturally have occurred to them?

a good argument—

combinations of occurrences which we call accident—a fitness, therefore, which, as the course of time and the occurrence of a thousand such possible suggesting accidents must almost necessarily have ensured the *presentation* of the idea, would also have ensured its *reception*? If, on the other hand, the idea, from its strangeness, its immensity, its want of harmony with the nature and existing furniture of the mind, could never have presented itself naturally, would not the same strangeness, the same vastness, the same incompatibility of essence incapacitate the mind from receiving it if presented supernaturally?

Further, we are at a loss to imagine how a man can *distinguish* between an idea revealed to him and an idea conceived by him. In what manner and by what sure token can it be made clear to him that a thought came to him from without, not arose within; he may perceive that it is resplendently bright, unquestionably new; he may be quite unconscious of any process of ratiocination or meditation by which it can have been originated; but this is no more than may be said of half the ideas of profound and contemplative genius. Shall we say that it was breathed into him “in a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon man”; and that, therefore, he assumes that it is not his, but God’s? Yet what is this but to declare that God chooses for his communications with the mind of man the period of its most unquestionable imperfection, when the phantasy is ascendant and the judgment is torpid and in abeyance? Shall we say that the thought was spoken to him aloud, in the ordinary language of humanity, and that, therefore, he knows it to have been a divine communication, not a human conception! But what singular logic is this! Is the voice of God, then, only, or then most, recognisable when it borrows the language of man? Is that unprecise and feeble instrument of thought and utterance, invented by man’s faulty faculties, God’s best and surest

mode of communication with the spirit he has created? Nay, is not imperfect language an *impossible* medium for the conveyance of absolute and infinite truth? And do we really mean that we feel *certain* it is God’s voice which we hear from the clouds, and *doubtful* that it is his which speaks to us silently, and in the deep and sacred musings of the Soul? We cannot intend to maintain this monstrous thesis.

Our reflections, then, bring us to this conclusion:—that the only certain proof we can have of a revelation must lie in the truths it teaches being such as are inaccessible to, and therefore incomprehensible by, the mind of man; that if they are such as he can conceive and grasp and accept, they are such as he might have discovered, and he has no means of knowing that he has not discovered them; if they are such as he could not have discovered, they are such as he cannot receive, such as he could not recognise or ascertain to be truth.

Since, then, we can find no adequate reason for believing Jesus to be the Son of God, nor his doctrines to be a direct and special revelation to him from the Most High—using these phrases in their ordinary signification—in what light *do* we regard Christ and Christianity?

We do not believe that Christianity contains anything which a genius like Christ’s, brought up and nourished as his had been, might not have disentangled for itself. We hold that God has so arranged matters in this beautiful and well-ordered, but mysteriously-governed universe, that one great mind after another will arise from time to time, as such are needed, to discover and flash forth before the eyes of men the truths that are wanted, and the amount of truth that can be borne. We conceive that this is effected by endowing them, or (for we pretend to no scholastic nicety of expression) by having arranged that Nature and the course of events shall send them into the world endowed with that superior mental and moral organisation, in which grand truths, sub-

lime gleams of spiritual light, will spontaneously and inevitably arise. Such a one we believe was Jesus of Nazareth, the most exalted religious genius whom God ever sent upon the earth; in himself an embodied revelation; humanity in its divinest phase, "God manifest in the flesh," according to Eastern hyperbole; an exemplar vouchsafed, in an early age of the World, of what man may and should become, in the course of ages, in his progress towards the realisation of his destiny; an individual gifted with a grand clear intellect, a noble soul, a fine organisation, marvellous moral intuitions, and a perfectly balanced moral being; and who, by virtue of these endowments, saw further than all other men—

"Beyond the verge of that blue sky
Where God's sublimest secrets lie";

an earnest, not only of what humanity may be, but of what it will be, when the most perfected races shall bear the same relation to the finest minds of existing times, as these now bear to the Bushmen or the Esquimaux. He was, as Parker beautifully expresses it, "the possibility of the race made real." He was a sublime poet, prophet, moralist, and hero; and had the usual fate of such—misrepresented by his enemies,—misconstrued by his friends; unhappy in this, that his nearest intimates and followers were not of a calibre to understand him; happy in this, that his words contained such undying seeds of truth as could survive even the media through which they passed. Like the wheat found in the Egyptian Catacombs, they retain the power of germinating undiminished, whenever their appropriate soil is found. They have been preserved essentially almost pure, notwithstanding the Judaic narrowness of Peter, the orthodox passions of John, the metaphysical subtleties of Paul. Everything seems to us to confirm the conclusion that we have in the Christianity of Scripture, not a code of law, still less a system of dogma, but a mass of beautiful, simple, sublime, profound, *not perfect* truths, obscured by

having come down to us through the intervention of minds far inferior to that of its Author—narrowed by their uncultivation—marred by their misapprehensions—and tarnished by their foreign admixtures. It is a collection of grand truths, transmitted to us by men who only half comprehended their grandeur, and imperfectly grasped their truth.

In grasping after a certainty, which can be but a shadow, ordinary Christianity has lost the substance—it has sacrificed in practical more than it has gained in dogmatic value. In making Christ the miraculous Son of God, it has destroyed Jesus as a human exemplar. If he were in a peculiar manner "the only begotten of the Father," a partaker in his essential nature, then he is immeasurably removed from us; we may revere, we cannot imitate him. We listen to his precepts with submission, perhaps even greater than before. We dwell upon the excellence of his character, no longer for imitation, but for worship. We read with the deepest love and admiration of his genius, his gentleness, his mercy, his unwearying activity in doing good, his patience with the stupid, his compassion for the afflicted, his courage in facing torture, his meekness in enduring wrong; and then we turn away and say, "Ah! he was a God; such virtue was not for humanity, nor for us." It is useless by honeyed words to disguise the truth. If Christ were a man, he is our *pattern*; "the possibility of our race made real." If he were God—a partaker of God's nature, as the orthodox maintain—then they are guilty of a cruel mockery in speaking of him as a type and model of human excellence. How can one endowed with the perfections of a God be an example to beings encumbered with the weaknesses of humanity? Adieu, then, to Jesus as anything but a Propounder of doctrines, an Utterer of precepts! The *vital* portion of Christianity is swept away. His *Character*—that from which so many in all ages have drawn their moral life and strength—that which so irresistibly enlists our deepest sympathies,

and rouses our highest aspirations—it becomes an irreverence to speak of. The character, the conduct, the virtues of a God!—these are felt to be indecent expressions. Verily, orthodoxy has slain the life of Christianity. In the presumptuous endeavour to exalt Jesus, it has shut him up in the Holy of Holies, and hid him from the gaze of humanity. It has displaced him from an object of imitation into an object of worship. It has made his life barren, that his essence might be called divine.

“But,” it will be objected, “what, on this system, becomes of the religion of the poor and ignorant, the uneducated and the busy? If Christianity is not a divine revelation, and therefore entirely and infallibly true—if the Gospels are not perfectly faithful and accurate expositors of Christ’s teaching and of God’s will,—what a fearful loss to those who have neither the leisure, the learning, nor the logical habits of thought requisite to construct out of the relics that remain to them and the nature that lies before them a faith for themselves!”

To this objection we reply that the more religion can be shown to consist in the realisation of great moral and spiritual truths, rather than in the reception of distinct dogmas, the more the position of these classes is altered for the better. In no respect is it altered for the worse. Their *creeds*, i.e., their collection of dogmas, those who do not or cannot think for themselves must always take on the authority of others. They do so now: they have always done so. They have hitherto believed certain doctrines because wise and good men assure them that these doctrines were revealed by Christ, and that Christ was a Teacher sent from God. They will in future believe them because wise and good men assure them of their truth, and their own hearts confirm the assurance. The only difference lies in this,—that, in the one case, the authority on which they lean vouches for the truth; in the other, for the Teacher who proclaimed it.

Moreover, the Bible still remains;

though no longer as an inspired and infallible record. Though not the word of God, it contains the words of the wisest, the most excellent, the most devout men, who have ever held communion with him. The poor, the ignorant, the busy, need not, do not, will not, read it critically. To each of them it will still, through all time, present the Gospels and the Psalms,—the glorious purity of Jesus, the sublime piety of David and of Job. Those who read it for its spirit, not for its dogmas—as the poor, the ignorant the busy, *if unperverted*, will do—will still find in it all that is necessary for their guidance in life, their support in death, their consolation in sorrow, their rule of duty, and their trust in God.

A more genuine and important objection to the consequences of our views is felt by indolent minds on their own account. They shrink from the toil of working out truth for themselves, out of the materials which Providence has placed before them. They long for the precious metal, but loathe the rude ore out of which it has to be extricated by the laborious alchemy of thought. A ready-made creed is the Paradise of their lazy dreams. A string of authoritative dogmatic propositions comprises the whole mental wealth which they desire. The volume of nature, the volume of history, the volume of life, appal and terrify them. Such men are the materials out of whom good Catholics—of all sects—are made. They form the uninquiring and submissive flocks which rejoice the hearts of all Priests. Let such cling to the faith of their forefathers—if they can. But men whose minds are cast in a nobler mould and are instinct with a diviner life, who love truth more than rest, and the peace of Heaven rather than the peace of Eden, to whom “a loftier being brings severer cares,”—

“Who know Man does not live by joy alone

But by the presence of the power of God,”—

such must cast behind them the hope of any repose or tranquillity save that which

is the last reward of long agonies of thought; they must relinquish all prospect of any Heaven save that of which tribulation is the avenue and portal; they must gird up their loins and trim their lamp for a work which

cannot be put by, and which must not be negligently done. "He," says Zschokke, "who does not like living in the *furnished lodgings of tradition*, must build his own house, his own system of thought and faith, for himself."¹

CHAPTER XIII

CHRISTIAN ECLECTICISM

CHRISTIANITY, then, not being a revelation, but a conception—the Gospels not being either inspired or accurate, but fallible and imperfect human records—the practical conclusion from such premises must be obvious to all. Every doctrine and every proposition which the Scriptures contain, whether or not we believe it to have come to us un-mutilated and unmarred from the mouth of Christ, is open, and must be subjected, to the scrutiny of reason. Some tenets we shall at once accept as the most perfect truth that can be received by the human intellect and heart;—others we shall reject as contradicting our instincts and offending our understandings;—others, again, of a more mixed nature, we must analyse, that so we may extricate the seed of truth from the husk of error, and elicit "the divine idea that lies at the bottom of appearance."¹

I. I value the Religion of Jesus, not as being absolute and perfect truth, but as containing more truth, purer truth, higher truth, stronger truth, than has ever yet been given to man. Much of his teaching I unhesitatingly receive as, to the best of my judgment, unimprovable and unsurpassable—fitted, if obeyed, to make earth all that a finite and material scene can be, and man only a little lower than the angels. *The worthlessness of ceremonial observances, and the necessity of essential righteousness*—"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord! Lord!

but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in Heaven;" "By their fruits ye shall know them;" "I will have mercy, and not sacrifice;"—*The enforcement of purity of heart as the security for purity of life, and of the government of the thoughts as the originators and fore-runners of action*—"He that looketh on a woman, to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart;" "Out of the heart proceed murders, adulteries, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: these are the things which defile a man;"—*Universal good-will towards men*—"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself;" "whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, that do ye also unto them, for this is the Law and the Prophets:"—*Forgiveness of injuries* "Love your enemies; do good to them that hate you; pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you;"—"If ye love them only that love you, what reward have ye? do not even publicans the same?"—*The necessity of self-sacrifice in the cause of duty*—"Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake;" "If any man will be my disciple, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me;" "If thy right hand offend thee cut it off and cast it from thee;" "No man having put his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God;"—*Humility*—"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth;"

¹ Zschokke's "Autobiography," p. 29. The whole section is most deeply interesting.

¹ Fichte.

"He that humbleth himself shall be exalted;" "He that is greatest among you, let him be your servant;"—*Genuine sincerity: being, not seeming*—"Take heed that ye do not your alms before men to be seen of them;" "When thou prayest enter into thy closet and shut thy door;" "When thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face, that thou appear not unto men to fast;"—all these sublime precepts need no miracle, no voice from the clouds, to recommend them to our allegiance, or to assure us of their divinity; they command obedience by virtue of their inherent rectitude and beauty, and vindicate their author as himself the one towering perpetual miracle of history.

II. Next in perfection come the views which Christianity unfolds to us of God in his relation to man, which were probably as near the truth as the minds of men could in that age receive. God is represented as Our *Father* in Heaven—to be whose especial children is the best reward of the peace-makers—to see whose face is the highest hope of the pure in heart—who is ever at hand to strengthen his true worshippers—to whom is due our heartiest love, our humblest submission—whose most acceptable worship is righteous conduct and a holy heart—in whose constant presence our life is passed—to whose merciful disposal we are resigned by death. It is remarkable that, throughout the Gospels, with the exception, I believe, of a single passage,¹ nothing is said as to the *nature* of the Deity:—his *relation* to us is alone insisted on:—all that is needed for our consolation, our strength, our guidance, is assured to us:—the purely speculative is passed over and ignored.

Thus, in the two great points essential to our practical life—viz., our feelings towards God and our conduct towards man—the Gospels, relieved of their unauthentic portions, and read in an understanding spirit, not with a slavish and

unintelligent adherence to the naked letter, contain little about which men may differ—little from which they can dissent. He is our Father, we are all brethren. This much lies open to the most ignorant and busy, as fully as to the most leisurely and learned. This needs no Priest to teach it—no authority to endorse it. The rest is Speculation—intensely interesting, indeed, but of no practical necessity.

III. There are, however, other tenets taught in Scripture and professed by Christians, in which reflective minds of all ages have found it difficult to acquiesce. Thus:—however far we may stretch the plea for a liberal interpretation of Oriental speech, it is impossible to disguise from ourselves that the New Testament teaches, in the most unreserved manner and in the strongest language, the doctrine of *the efficacy of Prayer* in modifying the divine purposes and in obtaining the boons asked for at the throne of grace. It is true that one passage (John xi. 42) would seem to indicate that prayer was a form which Jesus adopted for the sake of others; it is also remarkable that the model of prayer which he taught to his disciples contains only one simple and modest request for personal and temporal good¹; yet not only are we told that he prayed earnestly and for specific mercies (though with a most submissive will) on occasions of peculiar suffering and trial, but few of his exhortations to his disciples occur more frequently than that to constant prayer, and no promises are more distinct or reiterated than that their prayers shall be heard and answered. "Watch and pray;" "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye shall receive them, and ye shall have them;" "Verily, verily, I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he will give it you;" "Ask, and it shall be given you."

¹ "It is a curious fact that the Lord's prayer may be reconstructed," says Wetstein, "almost verbatim out of the Talmud, which also contains a prophetic intimation that all prayer will one day cease, except the prayer of Thanksgiving." (Mackay's "Progress of the Intellect," ii. 379.)

¹ God is a spirit.

No one can read such passages, and the numberless others of a similar character with which both Testaments abound, and doubt that the opinion held both by Christ and his disciples was that "Jehovah is a God that heareth and answereth prayer;"—that favours are to be obtained from Him by earnest and reiterated entreaty; that whatever good thing His sincere worshippers petition for, with *instance* and with faith, shall be granted to them, if consonant to his purposes, and shall be granted in *consequence* of their petition; that, in fact and truth, apart from all metaphysical subtleties and subterfuges the designs of God can be modified and swayed, like those of an earthly father, by the entreaties of His children. This doctrine is set forth throughout the Jewish Scriptures in its coarsest and nakedest form and it reappears in the Christian Scriptures in a form only slightly modified and refined.

Now, this doctrine has in all ages been a stumbling-block to the thoughtful. It is obviously irreconcilable with all that reason and revelation teach us of the divine nature; and the inconsistency has been felt by the ablest of the Scripture writers themselves.¹ Various and desperate have been the expedients and suppositions resorted to, in order to reconcile the conception of an immutable, all-wise, all-foreseeing God, with that of a father who is turned from his course by the prayers of his creatures. But all such efforts are, and are felt to be, hopeless failures. They involve the assertion and negation of the same proposition in one breath. The problem remains still insoluble; and we must either be content to have it so, or we must abandon one or other of the hostile premises.

The religious man, who believes that all events, mental as well as physical, are pre-ordered and arranged according to the decrees of infinite wisdom, and the philosopher, who knows that, by the wise and eternal laws of the universe, cause and effect are indissolubly chained to-

gether, and that one follows the other in inevitable succession,—equally feel that this ordination—this chain—cannot be changeable at the cry of man. To suppose that it can is to place the whole harmonious system of nature at the mercy of the weak reason and the selfish wishes of humanity. If the purpose of God were not wise, they would not be formed:—if wise, they cannot be changed, for then they would become unwise. To suppose that an all-wise Being would alter his designs and modes of proceeding at the entreaty of an unknowing creature, is to believe that compassion would change his wisdom into foolishness. It has been urged that prayer may render a favour wise, which would else be unwise; but this is to imagine that events are not foreseen and pre-ordered, but are arranged and decided *pro re natâ*: it is also to ignore utterly the unquestionable fact, that no event in life or in nature is isolated, and that none can be changed without entailing endless and universal alterations. If the universe is governed by fixed laws, or (which is the same proposition in different language) if all events are pre-ordained by the foreseeing wisdom of an infinite God, then the prayers of thousands of years and generations of martyrs and saints cannot change or modify one iota of our destiny. The proposition is unassailable by the subtlest logic. The weak, fond affections of humanity struggle in vain against the unwelcome conclusion.

It is a conclusion from which the feelings of almost all of us shrink and revolt. The strongest sentiment of our nature, perhaps, is that of our helplessness in the hands of fate, and against this helplessness we seek for a resource in the belief of our dependence on a Higher Power, which can control and will interfere with fate. And though our reason tells us that it is inconceivable that the entreaties of creatures as erring and as blind as we are can influence the all-wise purposes of God, yet we feel an internal voice, more potent and persuasive than reason, which assures us

¹ "God is not a man that he should lie, nor the son of man, that he should repent."

that to pray to him in trouble is an irrepressible instinct of our nature—an instinct which precedes teaching—which survives experience—which defies philosophy.

“For sorrow oft the cry of faith
In bitter need will borrow.”

It would be an unspeakable consolation to our human infirmity could we, in this case, believe our reason to be erroneous and our instinct true; but we greatly fear that the latter is the result, partly of that anthropomorphism which pervades all our religious conceptions, which our limited faculties suggest, and which education and habit have rooted so fixedly in our mental constitution, and partly of that fond weakness which recoils from the idea of irreversible and inescapable decree. The conception of subjection to a law without exception, without remission, without appeal, crushing, absolute, and universal, is truly an appalling one; and, most mercifully, can rarely be perceived in all its overwhelming force, except by minds which, through stern and lofty intellectual training, have in some degree become qualified to bear it.

Communion with God, we must ever bear in mind, is something very different from *prayer for specific blessings*, and often confers the submissive strength of soul for which we pray; and we believe it will be found that the higher our souls rise in their spiritual progress, the more does entreaty merge into thanksgiving, the more does *petition* become absorbed in communion with the “Father of the spirits of all flesh.” That the piety of Christ was fast tending to this end is, we think, indicated by his instructions to his disciples (Matt. vi. 8, 9): “When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, for your father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask him. After this manner, therefore, pray ye,” &c.; and by that last sublime sentence in Gethsemane, uttered when the agonising struggle of the spirit with the flesh had terminated in the complete and final victory of the

first, “Father, if this cup may not pass from me except I drink it, thy will be done.”

Prayer may be regarded as the form which devotion naturally takes in ordinary minds, and even in the most enlightened minds in their less spiritual moods. The highest intellectual efforts, the loftiest religious contemplations, dispose to devotion, but check the impulses of prayer. The devout philosopher, trained to the investigation of universal system—the serene astronomer, fresh from the study of the changeless laws which govern innumerable worlds—shrinks from the monstrous irrationality of asking the great Architect and Governor of all to work a miracle in his behalf—to interfere, for the sake of *his* convenience, or *his* plans, with the sublime order conceived by the Ancient of Days in the far Eternity of the Past; for what is a special providence but an interference with established laws? And what is such interference but a miracle?

IV. Remotely connected with the doctrine of an interposing and influencible Providence is the fallacy, or rather the imperfection, which lies at the root of the ordinary Christian view of *Resignation* as a duty and a virtue. Submission, cheerful acquiescence in the dispensations of Providence, is enjoined upon us, not because these dispensations are just and wise—not because they are the ordinances of His will who cannot err,—but because they are ordained for our benefit, and because He promised that “all things shall work together for good to them that love Him.” We are assured that every trial and affliction is designed solely for our good, for our discipline, and will issue in a blessing, though we see not how; and that *therefore* we must bow to it with un murmuring resignation. These grounds, it is obvious, are purely self-regarding; and resignation, thus represented and thus motivated, is no virtue, but a simple calculation of self-interest. This narrow view results from that incorrigible egotism of the human heart which makes man prone to regard him-

self as the special object of divine consideration, and the centre round which the universe revolves. Yet it is unquestionably the view most prominently and frequently presented in the new Testament and by all modern divines.¹ It may be that the prospect of "an exceeding, even an eternal weight of glory," may be needed to support our frail purposes under the crushing afflictions of our lot; it may be that, by the perfect arrangements of omnipotence, the sufferings of all may be made to work out the ultimate and supreme good of each; but this is not, cannot be, *the reason why* we should submit with resignation to whatever God ordains. His will must be wise, righteous, and we believe beneficent, whether it allot to *us* happiness or misery: it *is* His will; we need inquire no further. Job, who had no vision of a future compensatory world, had in this attained a sublimer point of religion than St. Paul:—"Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him." "What! shall we receive good at the hands of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job xiii. 15; ii. 10.)

To the orthodox Christian, who fully believes all he professes, cheerful resignation to the divine will is comparatively a natural, an easy, a simple thing. To the religious philosopher, it is the highest exercise of intellect and virtue. The man who has *realised* the faith that his own lot, in all its minutest particulars, is not only directly regulated by God,—but is so regulated by God as unerringly to work for his highest good,—with an express view to his highest good—with such a man, resignation, patience,

may, cheerful acquiescence in all suffering and sorrow appears to be in fact only the simple and practical expression of his belief. If, believing all this, he still murmurs and rebels at the trials and contrarieties of his lot, he is guilty of the childishness of the infant which quarrels with the medicine that is to lead it back to health and ease. But the religious Philosopher,—who, sincerely holding that a Supreme God created and governed this world, holds also that He governs it by laws which, though wise, just, and beneficent, are yet steady, unwavering, inexorable;—who believe that his agonies and sorrows are not specially ordained for *his* chastening, *his* strengthening, *his* elaboration and development,—but are incidental and necessary results of the operation of laws the best that could be devised for the happiness and purification of the species,—or perhaps not even that, but the best adapted to work out the vast, awful, glorious, eternal designs of the Great Spirit of the universe; who believes that he ordained operations of Nature, which have brought misery to him, have, from the very unswerving tranquillity of their career, showered blessing and sunshine upon every other path,—that the unrelenting chariot of Time, which has crushed or maimed him in its allotted course, is pressing onward to the accomplishment of those serene and mighty purposes, to have contributed to which—even as a victim—is an honour and a recompense:—he who takes this view of Time, and Nature, and God, and yet bears his lot without murmur or distrust, because it is portion of a system, the best possible, *because ordained by God*,—has achieved a point of virtue, the highest, amid passive excellence, which humanity can reach;—and his reward and support must be found in the reflection that he is an unreluctant and self-sacrificing co-operator with the Creator of the universe, and in the noble consciousness of being worthy and capable of so sublime a conception, yet so sad a destiny.

¹ The sublimest and purest genius among modern divines goes so far as to maintain that, apart from the hope of future recompense, "a deviation from rectitude would become the part of wisdom, and should the path of virtue be obstructed by disgrace, torment, or death, to persevere would be madness and folly." ("Modern Infidelity," p. 20, by Robert Hall.) It is sad to reflect how mercenary a thing duty has become in the hands of theologians. Were their belief in a future retribution once shaken, they would become, on their own showing, the lowest of sensualists, the worst of sinners.

In a comparison of the two resignations, there is no measure of their respective grandeurs. The orthodox sufferer fights the battle only on condition of surviving to reap the fruits of victory:—the other fights on, knowing that he must fall early in the battle, but content that his body should form a stepping-stone for the future conquests of humanity.

Somewhat similar remarks may be made with reference to the virtues of action as to those of endurance. It is a matter suggestive of much reflection, that, throughout the New Testament, the loftiest and purest motive to action—love of duty, *as* duty, obedience to the will of God *because* it is His will—is rarely appealed to; one or two expressions of Christ and the 14th chapter of John forming the only exceptions. The almost invariable language—pitched to the level of ordinary humanity—is, “Do your duty at all hazards, for your Father which seeth in secret shall reward you openly.” “Verily, I say unto you, ye shall in no wise lose your reward.”

Yet this is scarcely the right view of things. The hope of success, not the hope of reward, should be our stimulating and sustaining might. Our object, not ourselves, should be our inspiring thought. The labours of philanthropy are comparatively easy, when the effect of them, and their recoil upon ourselves, is immediate and apparent. But this it can rarely be, unless where the field of our exertions is narrow, and ourselves the only or the chief labourers. In the more frequent cases where we have to join our efforts to those of thousands of others to contribute to the carrying forward of a great cause, merely to till the ground or sow the seed for a very distant harvest, or to prepare the way for the future advent of some great amendment; the amount which each man has contributed to the achievement of ultimate success, the portion of the prize which justice should assign to each as his especial production, can never be accurately ascertained. Perhaps few of those who have laboured, in

the patience of secrecy and silence, to bring about some political or social change which they felt convinced would ultimately prove of vast service to humanity, may live to see the change effected, or the anticipated good flow from it. Fewer still of them will be able to pronounce what appreciable weight their several efforts contributed to the achievement of the change desired. And discouraging doubts will therefore often creep in upon minds in which egotism is not wholly swallowed up by earnestness, as to whether, in truth, their exertions had any influence whatever—whether in sad and sober fact they have not been the mere fly upon the wheel. With many men these doubts are fatal to active effort. To counteract them we must labour to elevate and purify our *motives*, as well as sedulously cherish the conviction—assuredly a true one—that in this world there is no such thing as effort thrown away—that “in all labour there is profit”—that all sincere exertion in a righteous and unselfish cause is necessarily followed, in spite of all appearance to the contrary, by an appropriate and proportionate success—that no bread cast upon the waters can be wholly lost—that no good seed planted in the ground can fail to fructify in due time and measure; and that, however we may in moments of despondency be apt to doubt, not only whether our cause will triumph, but whether we shall have contributed to its triumph,—there is One who has not only seen every exertion we have made, but who can assign the exact degree in which each soldier has assisted to gain the great victory over social evil. The Augean stables of the world—the accumulated uncleanness and misery of centuries—require a mighty river to cleanse them thoroughly away: every drop we contribute aids to swell that river and augment its force, in a degree appreciable by God, though not by man;—and he whose zeal is deep and earnest will not be over anxious that his individual drop should be distinguishable amid the mighty mass of

cleansing and fertilising waters, far less that, for the sake of distinction it should flow in effective singleness away. He will not be careful that his name should be inscribed upon the mite which he casts into the treasury of God. It should suffice each of us to know that, *if* we have laboured, with purity of purpose, in any good cause, we *must* have contributed to its success; that the degree in which we have contributed is a matter of infinitely small concern; and still more, that the consciousness of having so contributed, however obscurely and unnoticed, should be our sufficient, if our sole, reward. Let us cherish this faith; it is a duty. He who sows and reaps is a good labourer, and worthy of his hire. But he who sows what shall be reaped by others who know not and reckon not of the sower, is a labourer of a nobler order, and worthy of a loftier guerdon.

V. The common Christian conception of the pardon of sin upon repentance and conversion seems to us to embody a very transparent and pernicious fallacy. "Who can forgive sins but God only?" asked the Pharisees. There is great confusion and contradiction in our ideas on this subject. God is the only being who can *not* forgive sins. "Forgiveness of sins" means one of two things:—it either means saving a man from the consequences of his sins, that is, interposing between cause and effect, in which case it is *working a miracle* (which God no doubt can do, but which we have no right to expect that He will do, or ask that He shall do); or it means *an engagement to forbear retaliation*, a suppression of the natural anger felt against the offender by the offended party, a *foregoing of vengeance* on the part of the injured—in which meaning it is obviously quite inapplicable to a Being exempt and aloof from human passions. When we entreat a fellow-creature to forgive the offences we have committed against him, we mean to entreat that he will not, by any act of his, punish us for them, that he will not revenge nor repay them, that he will retain no rancour in his breast

against us on account of them; and such a prayer addressed to a being of like passions to ourselves is rational and intelligible, because we know that it is natural for him to feel anger at our injuries, and that, unless moved to the contrary, he will probably retaliate. But when we pray to our Heavenly Father to "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us," we overlook the want of parallelism of the two cases, and show that our notions on the subject are altogether misty and confused; for God cannot be *injured* by our sins, and He is inaccessible to the passions of anger and revenge. Yet the plain expression of the Book of Common Prayer—"Neither take Thou vengeance of our sins"—embodies the real signification attached to the prayer for forgiveness, by all who attach any definite signification to their prayers. Now, this expression is an *Old Testament* or a *Pagan* expression, and can only be consistently and intelligibly used by those who entertain the same low ideas of God as the ancient Greeks and Hebrews entertained—that is, who think of Him as an irritable, jealous, and avenging Potentate.

If, from this inconsistency, we take refuge in the other meaning of the Prayer for forgiveness, and assume that it is a prayer to God that he will exempt us from the natural and appointed consequences of our misdeeds, it is important that we should clearly define to our minds what it is that we are asking for. In our view of the matter, punishment for sins by the divine law is a wholly different thing and process from punishment for violations of human laws. It is not an infliction for crime, imposed by an external authority and artificially executed by external force, but a natural and inevitable result of the offence—a child generated by a parent—a sequence following an antecedent—a consequence arising out of a cause.

The punishment of sin *consists* in the consequences of sin. These form a penalty most adequately heavy. A sin without its punishment is as impossible,

as complete a contradiction in terms, as a cause without an effect.

To pray that God will forgive our sins, therefore, appears in all logical accuracy to involve either a most unworthy conception of His character, or an entreaty of incredible audacity—viz., that He will work daily miracles in our behalf. It is either beseeching Him to renounce feelings and intentions which it is impossible that a Nature like His should entertain: or it is asking Him to violate the eternal and harmonious order of the universe, for the comfort of one out of the infinite myriads of its inhabitants.

It may, perhaps, be objected, that Punishment of sins may be viewed, not as a vengeance taken for injury or insult committed, nor yet as the simple and necessary sequence of a cause—but as *chastisement*, inflicted to work repentance and amendment. But, even when considered in this light, prayer for forgiveness remains still a marvellous inconsistency. It then becomes the entreaty of the sick man to his Physician not to heal him. "Forgive us our sins," then means, "Let us continue in our iniquity." It is clear, however, that the first meaning we have mentioned, as attached to the prayer for forgiveness of sins, is both the original and the prevailing one; and that it arises from an entire misconception of the character of the Deity, and of the feelings with which He may be supposed to regard sin—a misconception inherited from our Pagan and Jewish predecessors; it is a prayer to deprecate the just resentment of a Potentate whom we have offended—a petition which would be more suitably addressed to an earthly foe or master than to a Heavenly Father. The misconception is natural to a rude state of civilisation and of theology. It is the same notion from which arose sacrifices (*i.e.*, offerings to appease wrath), and which caused their universality in early ages and among barbarous nations. It is a relic of anthropomorphism; a belief that God, like man, is *enraged* by neglect or disobedience, and can be *pacified* by submission

and entreaty; a belief consistent and intelligible among the Greeks, inconsistent and irrational among Christians, appropriate as applied to Jupiter, unmeaning or blasphemous as applied to Jehovah.

We have, in fact, come to regard sin, not as an injury done to our own nature, an offence against our own souls, a disfiguring of the image of the Beautiful and Good, but as a personal affront offered to a powerful and avenging Being, which, unless *apologised* for, will be chastised as such. We have come to regard it as an injury to *another* party, for which atonement and reparation can be made and satisfaction can be given; not as a deed which cannot be undone, eternal in its consequences; an act which, once committed, is numbered with the irrevocable past. In a word, Sin *contains* its own retributive penalty as surely, and as naturally, as the acorn contains the oak. Its consequence is its punishment, it needs no other, and can have no heavier: and its consequence is involved in its commission, and cannot be separated from it. *Punishment* (let us fix this in our minds) *is not the execution of a sentence, but the occurrence of an effect.* It is ordained to follow guilt by God, not as a Judge, but as the Creator and Legislator of the Universe. This conviction once settled in our understandings, will wonderfully clear up our views on the subject of pardon and redemption. Redemption becomes then, of necessity, not a saving but a regenerating process. We can be saved from the punishment of sin only by being saved from its commission. Neither *can* there be any such thing as a vicarious atonement or punishment (which, again, is a relic of heathen conceptions of an angered Deity, to be propitiated by offerings and sacrifices). Punishment, being not the penalty, but the result of sin, being not an arbitrary and artificial annexation, but an ordinary and logical consequence, cannot be borne by other than the sinner.

It is curious that the votaries of the doctrines of the Atonement admit the correctness of much of the above reason-

ing, saying (see "Guesses at Truth," by J. and A. Hare), that Christ had to suffer for the sins of men, because God could *could not* forgive sin; He must punish in some way. Thus holding the strangely inconsistent doctrine that God is so just that He could not let sin go unpunished, yet so unjust that He could punish it in the person of the innocent. It is for orthodox dialects to explain how Divine Justice can be *impugned* by pardoning the guilty, and yet *vindicated* by punishing the innocent!

If the foregoing reflections are sound, the awful, yet wholesome, conviction presses upon our minds, that *there can be no forgiveness of sins*; that is, no interference with, or remittance of, or protection from their natural effects; that God will not interpose between the cause and its consequence¹;—that "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." An awful consideration this; yet all reflection, all experience, confirm its truth. The sin which has debased our soul may be repented of, may be turned from, but the injury is done: the debasement may be redeemed by after efforts, the stain may be obliterated by bitterer struggles and severer sufferings, by faith in God's love and communion with His Spirit; but the efforts and the endurance which might have raised the soul to the loftiest heights are now exhausted in merely regaining what it has lost. "There must always be a wide difference (as one of our divines has said) between him who only ceases to do evil, and him who has always done well; between the man who began to serve his God as soon as he knew that he had a God to serve, and the man who only turns to Heaven after he has exhausted all the indulgences of Earth."

¹ Refer to Matt. ix. 2-6. "Whether it is easier to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee! or to say, Arise, take up thy bed and walk?" Jesus seems here clearly to intimate that the view taken above (of forgiveness of sins, namely, involving an interference with the natural order of sequence, and being therefore a *miracle*) is correct. He places the two side by side, as equally difficult.

Again, in the case of sin of which you have induced another to partake. You may repent—you may, after agonising struggles, regain the path of virtue—*your* spirit may re-achieve its purity through much anguish, and after many stripes; but the weaker fellow-creature whom you led astray, whom you made a sharer in your guilt, but whom you cannot make a sharer in your repentance and amendment, whose downward course (the first step of which you taught) you cannot check, but are compelled to witness, what "forgiveness" of sins can avail you there? *There* is your perpetual, your inevitable punishment, which no repentance can alleviate and no mercy can remit.

This doctrine, that sins may be forgiven, and the consequences of them averted, has in all ages been a fertile source of mischief. Perhaps few of our intellectual errors have fructified in a vaster harvest of evil, or operated more powerfully to impede the moral progress of our race. While it has been a source of unspeakable comfort to the penitent, a healing balm to the wounded spirit, while it has saved many from hopelessness, and enabled those to recover themselves who would otherwise have flung away the remnant of their virtue in despair; yet, on the other hand, it has encouraged millions, *feeling what a safety was in store for them in ultimate resort*, to persevere in their career of folly or crime, to ignore or despise those natural laws which God has laid down to be the guides and beacons of our conduct, to continue to do "that which was pleasant in their own eyes," convinced that nothing was irrevocable, that however dearly they might have to pay for re-integration, repentance could at any time redeem their punishment, and *undo the past*. The doctrine has been noxious in exact ratio to the baldness and nakedness with which it has been propounded. In the Catholic Church of the middle ages we see it perhaps in its greatest form, when pardon was sold, bargained for, rated at a fixed price; when one hoary sinner,

on the bed of sickness, refused to repent, because he was not *certain* that death was close at hand, and he did not wish for the trouble of going through the process twice, and was loth, by a premature amendment, to lose a chance of any of the indulgences of sin. Men would have been far more scrupulous watchers over conduct, far more careful of their deeds, had they believed that those deeds would inevitably bear their natural consequences, exempt from after intervention, than when they held that penitence and pardon could at any time unlink the chain of sequences; just as now they are little scrupulous of indulging in hurtful excess, when medical aid is at hand to remedy the mischief they have voluntarily encountered. But were they on a desert island, apart from the remotest hope of a doctor or a drug, how far more closely would they consider the consequences of each indulgence, how earnestly would they study the laws of Nature, how comparatively unswerving would be their endeavours to steer their course by those laws, obedience to which brings health, peace, and safety in its train!

Let any one look back upon his past career—look inward on his daily life—and then say what effect would be produced upon him, were the conviction once fixedly embedded in his soul, that everything done is done irrevocably—that even the Omnipotence of God cannot *uncommit* a deed—cannot make that undone which has been done; that every act *must* bear its allotted fruit according to the everlasting laws—must remain for ever ineffaceably inscribed on the tablets of universal Nature. And then let him consider what would have been the result upon the moral condition of our race, had all men ever held this conviction.

Perhaps you have led a youth of dissipation and excess which has undermined and enfeebled your constitution,

and you have transmitted this injured and enfeebled constitution to your children. They suffer, in consequence, through life; suffering, perhaps even sin, is *entailed* upon them; your repentance, were it in sackcloth and ashes, cannot help you or them. Your punishment is tremendous, but it is legitimate and inevitable. You have broken Nature's laws, or you have ignored them; and no one violates or neglects them with impunity. What a lesson for timely reflection and obedience is here!

Again,—You have broken the seventh commandment. You grieve, you repent, you resolutely determine against any such weakness in future. It is well. But “you know that God is merciful, you feel that he will forgive you.” You are comforted. But no—there is no forgiveness of sins: the injured party may forgive you, your accomplice or victim may forgive you, according to the meaning of human language; *but the deed is done*, and all the powers of Nature, were they to conspire in your behalf, could not make it undone: the consequences to the body, the consequences to the soul, though no man may perceive them, *are there*, are written in the annals of the Past, and must reverberate through all time.

But all this, let it be understood, in no degree militates against the value or the necessity of repentance. Repentance, contrition of soul, bears, like every other act, its own fruit, the fruit of purifying the heart, of amending the future, not, as man has hitherto conceived, of effacing the Past. The commission of sin is an irrevocable act, but it does not incapacitate the soul for virtue. Its consequences cannot be expunged, but its course need not be pursued. Sin, though it is ineffaceable, calls for no despair, but for efforts more energetic than before. Repentance is still as valid as ever; but it is valid to secure the future, not to obliterate the past.

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