

T H E I S M.



LECTURE I.

ISSUES INVOLVED IN THE QUESTION TO BE DISCUSSED—
WHENCE AND HOW WE GET THE IDEA OF GOD.

I.

Is belief in God a reasonable belief, or is it not? Have we sufficient evidence for thinking that there is a self-existent, eternal Being, infinite in power and wisdom, and perfect in holiness and goodness, the Maker of heaven and earth, or have we not? Is theism true, or is some antagonistic, some anti-theistic theory true? This is the question which we have to discuss and to answer, and it seems desirable to state briefly at the outset what issues are involved in answering it. Obviously, the statement of these issues must not be so framed as to create prejudice for or against any particular answer. Its only legitimate purpose is to help us

to realise aright our true relation to the question. We can never in any investigation see too early or too clearly the true and full significance, the general and special bearings of the question we intend to study ; but the more important and serious the question is, the more incumbent on us is it not to prejudge what must be the answer.

It is obvious, then, in the first place, that the inquiry before us is one as to whether or not religion has any reasonable ground, any basis, in truth ; and if so, what that ground or basis is. Religion, in order to be reasonable, must rest on knowledge of its object. This is not to say that it is exclusively knowledge, or that knowledge is its one essential element. It is not to say that feeling and will are not as important constituents in the religious life as intellectual apprehension. Mere knowledge, however clear, profound, and comprehensive it may be, never can be religion. There can be no religion where feeling and affection are not added to knowledge. There can be no religion in any mind devoid of reverence or love, hope or fear, gratitude or desire—in any mind whose thinking is untouched, uncoloured, uninspired by some pious emotion. And religion includes more even than an apprehension of God supplemented by feeling—than the love or fear of God based on knowledge. It is unrealised and incomplete so

long as there is no self-surrender of the soul to the object of its knowledge and affection—so long as the will is unmoved, the character and conduct unmodified. The importance of feeling and will in religion is thus in no respect questioned or denied when it is maintained that religion cannot be a reasonable process, a healthy condition of mind, if constituted by either feeling or volition separate from knowledge. Some have represented it as consisting essentially in the feeling of dependence, others in that of love, and others in fear; but these are all feelings which must be elicited by knowledge, and which must be proportional to knowledge in every undisturbed mind. We can neither love nor fear what we know nothing about. We cannot love what we do not think worthy of love, nor fear unless we think there is reason for fear. We cannot feel our dependence upon what we do not know to exist. We cannot feel trustful and confiding dependence on what we do not suppose to have a character which merits trust and confidence. Then, however true it may be that short of the action of the will in the form of the self-surrender of the soul to the object of its worship the religious process is essentially imperfect, this self-surrender cannot be independent of reason and yet reasonable. In order to be a legitimate act it must spring out of good affections,—and these affections must be enlightened;

they must rest on the knowledge of an object worthy of them, and worthy of the self-sacrifice to which they prompt. Unless there be such an object, and unless it can be known, all the feeling and willing involved in religion must be delusive—must be of a kind which reason and duty command us to resist and suppress.

But religion is certainly a very large phenomenon. It is practically coextensive, indeed, with human life and history. It is doubtful if any people, any age, has been without some religion. And religion has not only in some form existed almost wherever man has existed, but its existence has to a great extent influenced his whole existence. The religion of a people colours its entire civilisation; its action may be traced on industry, art, literature, science, and philosophy, in all their stages. And the question whether there is a God or not, whether God can be known or not, is, otherwise put, whether or not religious history, and history so far as influenced by religion, have had any root in reason, any ground in fact. If there be no God, or if it be impossible to know whether there be a God or not, history, to the whole extent of its being religious and influenced by religion, must have been unreasonable. Religion might still, perhaps, be held to have done some good; and one religion might be regarded as better than another, in the sense of doing more good or less evil than

another ; but no religion could be conceived of as true, nor could one religion be deemed truer than another. If there be no God to know, or if God cannot be known, religion is merely a delusion or mental disease—its history is merely the history of a delusion or disease, and any science of it possible is merely a part of mental pathology.

Further, whether Christianity be a reasonable creed or not obviously depends on whether or not certain beliefs regarding God are reasonable. If there be no God, if there be more Gods than one, if God be not the Creator and Upholder of the world and the Father of our spirits, if God be not infinite in being and perfection, in power, wisdom, and holiness, Christianity cannot possibly be a thing to be believed. It professes to be a revelation from God, and consequently assumes that there is a God. It demands our fullest confidence, on the ground of being His message ; and consequently assumes that He is “not a man that He should lie,” but One whose word may be trusted to the uttermost. It professes to be a law of life, and therefore assumes the holiness of its author ; to be a plan of salvation, and therefore presupposes His love ; to be certain of final triumph, and so presupposes His power. It presents itself to us as the completion of a progressive process of positive revelation, and therefore presupposes a heavenly

Father, Judge, and King. The books in which we have the record of this process—the books of the Old and New Testaments—therefore assume, and could not but assume, that God is, and that He is all-powerful, perfectly wise, and perfectly holy. They do not prove this, but refer us to the world and our own hearts for the means and materials of proof. They may draw away from nature, and from before the eyes of men, a veil which covers and conceals the proof; they may be a record of facts which powerfully confirm and largely supplement what proof there is in the universe without and the mind within: but they must necessarily imply, and do everywhere imply, that a real proof exists there. If what they in this respect imply be untrue, all that they profess to tell us of God, and as from God, must be rejected by us, if we are to judge and act as reasonable beings.¹

For all men, then, who have religious beliefs, and especially for all men who have Christian beliefs, these questions, What evidence is there for God's existence? and, What is known of His nature? are of primary importance. The answers given to them must determine whether religion and Christianity ought to be received or rejected. There can be no use in discussing other religious questions so long as these fundamental ones have not been thoughtfully studied and distinctly

¹ See Appendix I.

answered. It is only through their investigation that we can establish a right to entertain any religious belief, to cherish any religious feeling, to perform any religious act. And the result to which the investigation leads us must largely decide what sort of a religious theory we shall hold, and what sort of a religious life we shall lead. Almost all religious differences of really serious import may be traced back to differences in men's thoughts about God. The idea of God is the generative and regulative idea in every great religious system and every great religious movement. It is a true feeling which has led to the inclusion of all religious doctrines whatever in a science which bears the name of theology (discourse about God, *λόγος περὶ τοῦ θεοῦ*), for what is believed about God determines what will be believed about everything else which is included either under natural or revealed religion.

In the second place, the moral issues depending on the inquiry before us are momentous. An erroneous result must be, from the very nature of the case, of the most serious character. If there be no God, the creeds and rites and precepts which have been imposed on humanity in His name must all be regarded as a cruel and intolerable burden. The indignation which atheists have so often expressed at the contemplation of religious history is

quite intelligible—quite natural; for to them it can only appear as a long course of perversion of the conscience and affections of mankind. If religion be in its essence, and in all its forms and phases, false, the evils which have been associated with it have been as much its legitimate effects as any good which can be ascribed to it; and there can be no warrant for speaking of benefits as its proper effects, or uses and mischiefs as merely occasioned by it, or as its abuses. If in itself false, it must be credited with the evil as well as with the good which has followed it; and all the unprofitable sufferings and useless privations—all the undefined terrors and degrading rites—all the corruptions of moral sentiment, factitious antipathies, intolerance, and persecution—all the spiritual despotism of the few, and the spiritual abjectness of the many—all the aversion to improvement and opposition to science, &c., which are usually referred to false religion and to superstition,—must be attributed to religion in itself, if there be no distinction between true and false in religion—between religion and superstition. In that case, belief in God must be regarded as really the root of all these evils. It is only if we can separate between religious truth and religious error—only if we can distinguish religion itself from the perversions of religion—that we can possibly maintain that the evils which have flowed from religious error, from the perversions of

religion, are not to be traced to the religious principle itself.¹

On the other hand, if there be a God, he who denies His existence, and, in consequence, discards all religious motives, represses all religious sentiments, and despises all religious practices, assuredly goes morally far astray. If there be a God—all-mighty, all-wise, and all-holy—the want of belief in Him must be in all circumstances a great moral misfortune, and, wherever it arises from a want of desire to know Him, a serious moral fault, necessarily involving, as it does, indifference to one who deserves the highest love and deepest reverence, ingratitude to a benefactor whose bounties have been unspeakable, and the neglect of those habits of trust and prayer by which men realise the presence of infinite sympathy and implore the help of infinite strength. If there be a God, the virtue which takes no account of Him, even if it were otherwise faultless, must be most defective. The performance of personal and social duty can in that case no more compensate for the want of piety than justice can excuse intemperance or benevolence licentiousness.

Besides, if God exist—if piety, therefore, ought also to exist—it can scarcely be supposed that personal and social morality will not suffer when the claims of religion are unheeded. It has seemed to

¹ See Appendix II.

some that morality rests on religion, and cannot exist apart from it. And almost all who believe that there are religious truths which men, as reasonable beings, are bound to accept, will be found maintaining that, although morality may be independent of religion for its mere existence, a morality unsupported by religion would be insufficient to satisfy the wants of the personal and social life. Without religion, they maintain, man would not be able to resist the temptations and support the trials of his lot, and would be cut off from the source of his loftiest thoughts, his richest and purest enjoyments, and his most heroic deeds. They further maintain, that without it nations would be unprogressive, selfish, diseased, corrupt, unworthy of life, incapable of long life. They argue that they find in human nature and in human history the most powerful reasons for thinking thus ; and so much depends upon whether they are right or wrong, that they are obviously entitled to expect that these reasons, and also the grounds of religious belief, will be impartially and carefully examined and weighed.

It will not be denied, indeed, by any one, that religious belief influences moral practice. Both reason and history make doubt on this point impossible. The convictions of a man's heart as to the supreme object of his reverence, and as to the ways in which he ought to show his reverence thereof, necessarily

affect for good or ill his entire mind and conduct. The whole moral life takes a different colour according to the religious light which falls upon it. As the valley of the Rhone presents a different aspect when seen from a summit of the Jura and from a peak of the Alps, so the course of human existence appears very different when looked at from different spiritual points of view. Atheism, polytheism, pantheism, theism, cannot regard life and death in the same way, and cannot solve in the same way the problems which they present to the intellect and the heart. These different theories naturally—yea, necessarily—yield different moral results. Now, doubt may be entertained as to whether or not we can legitimately employ the maxim, "By their fruits ye shall know them," in attempting to ascertain the truth or falsity of a theory. The endeavour to support religion by appealing to its utility has been denounced as "moral bribery and subornation of the understanding."¹ But no man, I think, however scrupulous or exacting, can doubt that when two theories bear different moral and social fruits, that fact is a valid and weighty reason for inquiring very carefully which of them is true and which false. He who believes, for example, that there is a God, and he who believes that there is no being

¹ By J. S. Mill, in the very essay in which he assailed religion by trying to show that the world had outgrown the need of it.

in the universe higher than himself—he who believes that material force is the source of all things, and he who believes that nature originated in an intelligent, holy, and loving Will,—must look upon the world, upon history, and upon themselves so very differently—must think, feel, and act so very differently—that for every man it must be of supreme importance to know which of these beliefs he is bound in reason to accept and which to reject.

Then, in the third place, the primary question in religion is immediately and inseparably connected with the ultimate question of science. Does the world explain itself, or does it lead the mind above and beyond itself? Science cannot but suggest this question; religion is an answer to it. When the phenomena of the world have been classified, the connections between them traced, their laws ascertained, science may, probably enough, have accomplished all that it undertakes—all that it can perform; but is it certain that the mind can ascend no further? Must it rest in the recognition of order, for example, and reject the thought of an intelligence in which that order has its source? Or, is this not to represent every science as leading us into a darkness far greater than any from which it has delivered us? Granting that no religious theory of the world can be accepted which contradicts the results established by the

sciences, are we not free to ask, and even bound to ask—Do these results not, both separately and collectively, imply a religious theory of the world, and the particular religious theory, it may be, which is called theism? Are these results not the expressions of a unity and order in the world which can only be explained on the supposition that material nature, organic existences, the mind and heart of man, society and its history, have originated in a power, wisdom, and goodness not their own, which still upholds them, and works in and through them? The question is one which may be answered in various ways, and to which the answer may be that it cannot be answered; but be the answer that or another—be the answer what it may—obviously the question itself is a great one,—a greater than any science has ever answered—one which all science raises, and in the answering of which all science is deeply interested.

No scientific man can be credited with much insight who does not perceive that religious theory has an intimate and influential bearing on science. There are religious theories with which science cannot consistently coexist at all. Where fetichism or polytheism prevails, the scientific spirit cannot be actively engaged in the pursuit of general laws. A dualistic religion must, with all the strength it possesses, oppose science in the accomplishment of its task—the proof of unity and universal order

Even when the conception of One Creative Being is reached, there are ways of thinking of His character and agency which science must challenge, since they imperil its life and retard its progress. The medieval belief in miracles and the modern belief in law cannot be held by the same mind, and still less by the same society.

We have no reason, however, to complain at present that our scientific men are, as a class, wanting in the insight referred to, or that the truth just indicated is imperfectly realised by them. Perhaps such complaint was never less applicable. It is not long since it was the fashion among men of science to avoid all reference to religion—to treat religious theory and scientific theory as entirely separate and unconnected. They either cared not or dared not to indicate how their scientific findings were rationally related to current religious beliefs. But within the last few years there has been a remarkable change in this respect. The attitude of indifference formerly assumed by so many of the representatives of science towards religion has been very generally exchanged for one of aggression or defence. The number of them who seem to think themselves bound to publish to the world confessions of their faith, declarations of the religious conclusions to which their scientific researches have led them, is great, perhaps, beyond example in any age. They are

manifesting unmistakably the most serious interest in the inquiry into the foundation of religion, and into the relationship of religion to science. The change is certainly one for the better. It is not wholly good only because scientific men in their excursions into the domain of religion are too frequently chargeable with a one-sidedness of view and statement which their scientific education might have been hoped to make impossible—only because they too seldom give to religious truths the patient and impartial consideration to which these are entitled. But most deserving of welcome is every evidence on their part of the conviction that when science goes deep enough it cannot but raise the questions to which religion professes to be an answer; so that the mind, instead of getting free from religious reflection by advancing in scientific inquiry, finds such reflection only the more incumbent on it the farther it advances—a conviction which falls short of, indeed, but is closely allied to, the belief so aptly expressed by Lord Bacon, “that while a slight taste of philosophy may dispose the mind to indifference to religion, deeper draughts must bring it back to it; that while on the threshold of philosophy, where second causes appear to absorb the attention, some oblivion of the highest cause may ensue, when the mind penetrates deeper, and sees the dependence of causes and the works of Providence, it will easily

perceive, according to the mythology of the poets, that the upper link of nature's chain is fastened to Jupiter's throne." Men of science are simply exercising a right to which they are fully entitled when they judge of religion by what they find to be ascertained in science; and no class of men is more likely than they are to open up the way to points of view whence religious truth will be seen with a clearness and comprehensiveness greater than any to which professional theologians could hope of themselves to attain. He can be no wise theologian who does not perceive that to a large extent he is dependent on the researches of men of science for his data, and who, firm in the faith that God will never be disgraced by His works, is not ready to accept all that is truly discovered about these works, in order to understand thereby God's character.

The greatest issues, then, are involved in the investigation on which we enter. Can we think what these are, or reflect on their greatness, without drawing this inference, that we ought, in conducting it, to have no other end before us than that of seeking, accepting, and communicating the truth? This is here so important that everything beside it must be insignificant and unworthy. Any polemical triumphs which could be gained either by logical or rhetorical artifices would be unspeak-

ably paltry. Nothing can be appropriate in so serious a discussion but to state as accurately as we can the reasons for our own belief in theism, and to examine as carefully and impartially as we can the objections of those who reject that belief, and their reasons for holding an opposite belief. It can only do us harm to overrate the worth of our own convictions and arguments, or to underrate the worth of those of others. We must not dare to carry into the discussion the spirit of men who feel that they have a case to advocate at all hazards. We must not try to conceal a weakness in our argumentation by saying hard things of those who endeavour to point it out. There is no doubt that character has an influence on creed—that the state of a man's feelings determines to a considerable extent the nature of his beliefs—that badness of heart is often the cause of perversity of judgment; but we have no right to begin any argument by assuming that this truth has its bright side—its side of promise—turned towards us, and its dark and threatening side turned towards those who differ from us. If we can begin by assuming our opponents to be wicked, why should we not assume them at once to be wrong, and so spare ourselves the trouble of arguing with them? It will be better to begin by assuming only what no one will question—namely, that it is a duty to do to others as we would have others

do to us. When a man errs, it is a kindness to show him his error—and the greater the error the greater the kindness ; but error is so much its own punishment to every ingenuous nature, that to convince a person of it is all that one fallible person ought to do to another. The scoff and the sneer are out of place in all serious discussion ; especially are they out of place when our minds are occupied with thoughts of Him who, if He exist, is the Father and Judge of us all, who alone possesses the full truth, and who has made us that we might love one another.¹

II.

Theism is the doctrine that the universe owes its existence, and continuance in existence, to the reason and will of a self-existent Being, who is infinitely powerful, wise, and good. It is the doctrine that nature has a Creator and Preserver, the nations a Governor, men a heavenly Father and Judge. It is a doctrine which has a long history behind it, and it is desirable that we should understand how we are related to that history.

Theism is very far from coextensive with religion. Religion is spread over the whole earth ; theism only over a comparatively small portion

¹ See Appendix III.

of it. There are but three theistic religions—the Jewish, the Christian, and the Mohammedan. They are connected historically in the closest manner—the idea of God having been transmitted to the two latter, and not independently originated by them. All other religions are polytheistic or pantheistic, or both together. Among those who have been educated in any of these heathen religions, only a few minds of rare penetration and power have been able to rise by their own exertions to a consistent theistic belief. The God of all those among us who believe in God, even of those who reject Christianity, who reject all revelation, is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. From these ancient Jewish fathers the knowledge of Him has historically descended through an unbroken succession of generations to us. We have inherited it from them. If it had not thus come down to us, if we had not been born into a society pervaded by it, there is no reason to suppose that we should have found it out for ourselves, and still less that we should merely have required to open our eyes in order to see it. Rousseau only showed how imperfectly he realised the dependence of man on man, and the extent to which tradition enters into all our thinking, when he pretended that a human being born on a desert island, and who had grown up without any acquaintance with other beings, would naturally, and without assist-

ance, rise to the apprehension of this great thought. The Koran well expresses a view which has been widely held when it says, "Every child is born into the religion of nature; its parents make it a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian." The view is, however, not a true one. A child is born, not into the religion of nature, but into blank ignorance; and, left entirely to itself, it would probably never find out as much religious truth as the most ignorant of parents can teach it. It is doubtless better to be born into the most barbarous pagan society than it would be to be born on a desert island and abandoned to find out a religion for one's self.

The individual man left to himself is very weak. He is strong only when he can avail himself of the strength of many others, of the stores of power accumulated by generations of his predecessors, or of the combined forces of a multitude of his contemporaries. The greatest men have achieved what they have done only because they have had the faculty and skill to utilise resources vastly greater than their own. Nothing reaches far forward into the future which does not stretch far back into the past. Before a tragedy like 'Hamlet,' for example, could be written, it was requisite that humanity should have passed through ages of moral discipline, and should be in possession of vast and subtle conceptions such as could

only be the growth of centuries, of the appropriate language at the appropriate epoch of its development, and of a noble style of literary workmanship. "We allow ourselves," says Mr Froude, "to think of Shakespeare, or of Raphael, or of Phidias as having accomplished their work by the power of their individual genius ; but greatness like theirs is never more than the highest degree of perfection which prevails widely around it, and forms the environment in which it grows. No such single mind in single contact with the facts of nature could have created a Pallas, a Madonna, or a Lear." What the historian has thus said as to art is equally true of all other forms of thinking and doing. It is certainly true of religious thought, which has never risen without much help to the sublime conception of one God. It is, in fact, an indisputable historical truth that we owe our theism in great part to our Christianity,—that natural religion has had no real existence prior to or apart from what has claimed to be revealed religion—and that the independence which it now assumes is that of one who has grown ashamed of his origin.

It does not in the least follow that we are to regard theism as merely or even mainly a tradition—as a doctrine received simply on authority, and transmitted from age to age, from generation to generation, without investigation, without reflec-

tion. It does not follow that it is not a truth the evidence of which has been seen in some measure by every generation which has accepted it, and into the depth and comprehensiveness and reasonableness of which humanity has obtained a constantly-growing insight. There have, it is true, been a considerable number of theologians who have traced all religious beliefs to revelation, and who have assigned to reason merely the function of passively accepting, retaining, and transmitting them. They have conceived of the first man as receiving the knowledge of God by sensible converse with Him, and of the knowledge thus received as transmitted, with the confirmation of successive manifestations, to the early ancestors of all nations. The various notions of God and a future state to be found in heathen countries are, according to them, broken and scattered rays of these revelations; and all the religious rites of prayer, purification, and sacrifice which prevail among savage peoples, are faint and feeble relics of a primitive worship due to divine institution. This view was natural enough in the early ages of the Christian Church and in medieval times, when the New World was undiscovered and a very small part of either Asia or Africa was known. It was consonant also to the general estimate of tradition as a means of transmitting truth, entertained by the Roman Catholic Church; but it is not consist-

ent with the Protestant rejection of tradition, and it is wholly untenable in the light of modern science, the geography, ethnology, comparative mythology, &c., of the present day. A man who should thus account for the phenomena of the religious history of heathen humanity must be now as far behind the scientific knowledge of his age regarding the subject on which he theorises, as a man who should still ascribe, despite all geological proofs to the contrary, the occurrence of fossils in the Silurian beds to the action of the Noachian deluge.¹

Theism has come to us mainly through Christianity. But Christianity itself rests on theism. It presupposes the truth of theism. It could only manifest, establish, and diffuse itself in so far as theism was apprehended. The belief that there is one God, infinite in power, wisdom, and goodness, has certainly not been wrought out by each one of us for himself, but has been passed on from man to man, from parent to child: tradition, education, common consent, the social medium, have exerted great influence in determining its acceptance and prevalence; but we have no right to conceive of them as excluding the exercise of reason and reflection. We know historically that reason and reflection have not been excluded from the development of theistic belief, but have been con-

¹ See Appendix IV.

stantly present and active therein; that by the use of his reason man has in some countries gradually risen to a belief in one God; and that where this belief existed, he has, by the use of his reason, been continuously altering, and, it may be hoped, extending and improving his views of God's nature and operations. We know that in Greece, for example, the history of religion was not a merely passive and traditional process. We know as a historical fact that reason there undermined the polytheism which flourished when Homer sang; that it discovered the chief theistic proofs still employed, and attained in many minds nearly the same belief in God which now prevails. The experience of the ancient classical world is insufficient to prove that a purely rational philosophy can establish theism as the creed of a nation; but it is amply sufficient to prove that it can destroy polytheism, and find out all the principal arguments for theism. We know, further, that in no age of the history of the Christian Church has reason entirely neglected to occupy itself in seeking the grounds on which the belief of God can be rested. We know that reason is certainly not declining that labour in the present day. The theistic belief, although common to the whole Christian world, is one which every individual mind may study for itself, which no one is asked to accept without proof, and which multi-

tudes have doubtless accepted only after careful consideration. It comes to us so far traditionally, but not nearly so much so as belief in the law of gravitation. For every one who has examined the evidences for belief in the law of gravitation, thousands on thousands have examined the evidences for the existence of God.

Tradition, then, does not necessarily exclude private judgment, and private judgment does not necessarily imply the rejection of tradition—that is, of transmitted belief. The one does not even necessarily confine or restrict the activity of the other. They are so far from being essentially antagonistic, that they may co-operate, may support and help each other ; nay, they must do so, if religious development is to be natural, easy, peaceful, and regular. This is but saying, in another form, that religious development, when true and normal, must combine and harmonise conservatism and progress. All development must do that, or it will be of an imperfect and injurious kind. In nature the rule of development is neither *revolution* nor *reaction*, but *evolution*—a process which is at once conservative and progressive, which brings the new out of the old by the continuous growth and elaboration of the germs of life into organic completeness. All that is essential in the old is retained and perfected, while the form is altered to accord with new circumstances and to respond

to new wants. It should not be otherwise in the moral and social worlds. The only true progress there, also, is that continuous and consistent development which can only be secured through true conservatism—through retaining, applying, and utilising whatever truth and goodness the past has brought down to the present; and the only true conservatism is that which secures against stagnation and death by continuous progress. Therefore it is that, alike in matters of civil polity, of scientific research, and of religious life, wisdom lies in combining the conservative with the progressive spirit, the principle of authority with the principle of liberty, due respect to the collective reason in history with due respect to the rights of the individual reason. The man who has not humility enough to feel that he is but one among the living millions of men, and that his whole generation is but a single link in the great chain of the human race—who is arrogant enough to fancy that wisdom on any great human interest has begun with himself, and that he may consequently begin history for himself,—the man who is not conservative to the extent of possessing this humility, and shrinking from this arrogance, is no truly free man, but the slave of his own vanity, and the inheritance which his fathers have left him will be little increased by him. The man, on the other hand, who always accepts what is as what ought to be;

who identifies the actual with the reasonable; who would have to-morrow exactly like to-day; who would hold fast what Providence is most clearly showing ought to pass away, or to pass into something better,—the man, in a word, who would lay an arrest on the germs of life and truth, and prevent them from sprouting and ripening—is the very opposite of genuinely conservative—is the most dangerous of destructives. There is nothing so conservative against decay and dissolution as natural growth and orderly progress.

The truth just stated is, as I have said, of universal application. But it is nowhere more applicable than in the inquiry on which we are engaged. The great idea of God—the most sublime and important of all ideas—has come to us in a wondrous manner through the minds and hearts of countless generations which it has exercised and sustained, which it has guided in darkness, strengthened in danger, and consoled in affliction. It has come to us by a long, unbroken tradition; and had it not come to us, we should of a certainty not have found it out for ourselves. We should have had to supply its place, to fill “the aching void” within us caused by its absence, with some far lower idea, perhaps with some wild fiction, some fowl idol. Probably we cannot estimate too humbly the amount or worth of the religious knowledge which we should have acquired, sup-

posing we acquired any, if we had been left wholly to our own unaided exertions—if we had been cut off from the general reason of our race, and from the Divine Reason, which has never ceased to speak in and to our race.

While, however, the idea of God has been brought to us, and is not independently wrought out by us, no man is asked to accept it blindly or slavishly ; no man is asked to forego in the slightest degree even before this the most venerable and general of the beliefs of humanity, the rights of his own individual reason. He is free to examine the grounds of it, and to choose according to the result of his examination. His acceptance of the idea, his acquiescence in the belief, is of worth only if it be the free acceptance of, the loving acquiescence in, what his reason, heart, and conscience testify to be true and good. Therefore, neither in this idea or belief itself, nor in the way in which it has come to us, is there any restriction or repression of our mental liberty. And the mere rejection of it is no sign, as some seem to fancy, of intellectual freedom, of an independent judgment. It is no evidence of a man's being freer from incredulity than the most superstitious of his neighbours. "To disbelieve is to believe," says Whately. "If one man believes there is a God, and another that there is no God, whichever holds the less reasonable of these two opinions is chargeable with credulity.

For the only way to avoid credulity and incredulity—the two necessarily going together—is to listen to, and yield to the best evidence, and to believe and disbelieve on good grounds.” These are wise words of Dr Whately. Whenever reason has been awakened to serious reflection on the subject, the vast majority of men have felt themselves unable to believe that this mighty universe, so wondrous in its adjustments and adaptations, was the product of chance, or dead matter, or blind force—that the physical, mental, and moral order which they everywhere beheld implied no Supreme Intelligence and Will; and the few who can believe it, have assuredly no right, simply on the ground of such ability, to assume that they are less credulous, freer thinkers, than others. The disbelief of the atheist must ever seem to all men but himself to require more faith, more credulity, than the beliefs of all the legends of the Talmud.¹

¹ See Appendix V.