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THEISM FOUND WANTING

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THEISM FOUND WANTING

(New and Enlarged Edition)

BY

W. S. GODFREY

With Foreword By

THE RIGHT HON. J. M. ROBERTSON

and

A Preface by the Author explaining his journey from

BELIEF TO DOUBT



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SOME PRESS OPINIONS OF THE FIRST EDITION

The Reformer

"This weightily written pamphlet deserves from rationalists an exceptionally warm welcome, for it is quite admirably fitted no less to focus their own thinking in a definite way than to serve to theists as a challenge and a persuasive. Mr. Godfrey is clearly a man who has thought much and deeply on the great problem he handles, and it is by reason of much thinking that he is able to put it at once with quiet simplicity and conclusive force. Where a formal analytic treatise might repel, his little essay has the effect of living speech in a sympathetic voice; and in a few straight steps he has brought his reader to the moral centre of the long-waged dispute. Needless to say, the argument is not in essence new; but it is put with the attractiveness and effectiveness that belong to the ripe convictions of one who has a gift of getting at a listener's or a reader's mind. The theist who does not feel here the impact of a sincere and candid personality must have suffered much from dogmatics; and the theist who can make a semblance of a good answer to Mr. Godfrey will deserve well of his school. Mr. Godfrey has been a theist, and assuredly a reverent one; and there is a grave convincingness in his words: 'I at least thought too highly of my God to retain a belief in his existence when I found that such retention would involve a lowering of my ideal.' He was so true to himself as to come out of the Church in which he had been a minister, losing old friends, to make, let us trust, new and worthier ones. Any answer made to him will probably be the usual evasion of the issue. But for any theist who is candid enough to face it, a rationalist friend could not do better than present him with this winning little tract. It can be read in half-an-hour, and it will give food for brooding for many days."

PRESS OPINIONS—*Continued*

The Agnostic Journal

“An exceptionally acute, sane, dispassionate, and closely reasoned thesis. The argument tells for atheism ; but this results from the writer's adoption of clearly legitimate mental processes and not from any taint of preconception.”

Ethics

“In view of the enormous changes that are taking place in the conception of God, the question whether or no the word ought to be retained in religion has become very prominent. Mr. Godfrey will be read with interest as a very clear and able champion of the view that the time has come to put away the idea and the word, and make man the centre of our ethical system. He is particularly convincing when he discusses the problem of evil and its bearing on the question.”

Liverpool Review

“All but the eminently reasonable are hereby warned against reading Mr. W. S. Godfrey's little book. Although it is written in no cavilling spirit, it is far removed from what is generally known as ‘mere sentiment.’ So increasingly reasonable does the author become that before the conclusion of the book even the most stout opponent of all its findings will unerringly entertain an attitude of deep respect for the man who can write so thoughtfully, so bravely and so well. . . . Of what use is such a book? I should answer by saying that it forms a contribution to modern thought, by a man who has evidently read widely, thought deeply, and lived honestly ; and it is therefore of priceless value to others of like disposition, in that it is an appeal, splendidly voiced, to those who, shrouded in the superstition of their fathers, have given little consideration, probably, to a subject which is no less fascinating than momentous ; inviting us to seek clearer concepts and more practical principles for the guidance and conduct of life.”

FOREWORD

(BY THE RIGHT HON. J. M. ROBERTSON)

THERE are many reasons for thinking that a fresh discussion of Theism, at once simple and logical, is a valuable contribution to popular culture. Upon no theme do the mass of men do less careful thinking than upon that signified by the name so constantly represented as the index of the greatest of all human conceptions, and so constantly uttered, nevertheless, without even a semblance of seriousness. To this day the average man is quite sure—as sure as is any savage concerning his superstitions—that he has a perfectly true and irresistibly reasonable idea of “God.” When he learns that anyone rejects his idea as folly, he comments that “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God,” calls the recalcitrant thinker Atheist, and describes

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him as "denying the existence of God." That phrase, meaningless as would be the words, "denying the existence of x ," serves a multitude of thoughtless people of various degrees of education as a mental opiate. Repeating it, they disable themselves from ever knowing what the debate between Theism and any of its nominal negatives really means. The most fundamental of all theoretical opinions is held by most of its adherents with the possible minimum of circumspection. Intellectually their life is, on this side, a "dogmatic slumber."

To rouse his fellow-men gently but persistently from this state is the aim of the following treatise by Mr. W. S. Godfrey. First published seventeen years ago, it is now reissued with a preface which must have a deep interest for any man concerned about religion, and sympathetic on that side with his fellows. It should, in particular, prove interesting to the clerical class, to which Mr. Godfrey formerly belonged. It is only too

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certain that for many in that class the exposition of their creed now involves no such heart-searching as he went through ; but there must be many sincere enough to realise that the challenge he gives to the creeds ought to be met by their champions. To hold otherwise would be, in effect, to argue either that earnest concern for consistency of opinion is of no moral importance, or that a set of false and self-contradictory opinions may serve as well to live by as a consistent one, or even better.

The effect of Mr. Godfrey's quietly careful reasoning is to show not only that the old creed of salvation and damnation is a moral monstrosity—many churchgoers nowadays profess to see as much, though their fathers stoned honest men for saying it—but that all the non-Biblical Theistic arguments are philosophically as untenable as the evangelical creed. As he points out, the Design argument and the argument *a priori* merely cancel their own standing-ground. To-day, probably,

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most Theists who examine themselves at all faithfully are fain to take refuge in a simple form of the theorem that Kant took from Rousseau and sophisticated into a self-contradicting system—the theorem, namely, that the belief in a good God who governs all things is a necessary satisfaction of their moral nature. Professed thinkers cater for them (as, indeed, for those who cling to the creed of personal salvation) by the sinister doctrine that “existential” truth is one thing and “experiential” truth another; that, in short, what you “feel” to be true because it has given you comfort is “true for you.”

That this doctrine implies the equivalent truth of *all* creeds, all superstitions, and that accordingly there is no excuse on this view for missions to the heathen, does not seem to occur either to those who propound or to those who accept it. They do not seem to suspect that they have taken all meaning out of the word “truth,” making it signify only “comfort”; and that they are

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in effect committing themselves to the most unscrupulous of all possible forms of utilitarianism, measuring utility solely by a momentary test of emotional satisfaction. But the reasoning of Mr. Godfrey, growing out of a particularly intense experience, takes the ground from under even that form of casuistry by showing how void of comfort for the honest and earnest thinker is any form of Theism ; how desolating is the enigma that all the forms involve ; and how impossible it is to reconcile it with any consistent code of morals.

To put aside, in the name of simple honesty, the thousand times reshaped illusion, is the course taken and prescribed by Mr. Godfrey. He believes that in the life of the mind, as in that of the social organism, Honesty is the best policy. If there are those who cannot be induced to accept that doctrine, they are, at least, here shown that it does not lie in their mouths to cast aspersions upon him who does. Upon those who think that they can confute the argument which

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reduces Theism to the status of a mere cherished hallucination, there lies the onus of confutation. So far, this little pamphlet has not elicited any reply worth the name. Theism is still defended, for most Theists, by the arguments here rebutted; and new constructions which amount to treating as chimeras all the God-ideas of the past ignore the application of those rebuttals to themselves.

The pamphlet, then, remains well fitted to continue the service it has already rendered to many, of enabling men to "clear their minds of cant." It is indeed written with a force and dignity and distinction of style that raise it notably above the ordinary run of controversial treatises, and entitle it to be an enduring pronouncement upon its momentous theme. Such pregnancy of thought and phrase constitutes what we call, in a special sense, literature.

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(Explaining the Author's journey from Belief to Doubt)

THIS little treatise was first produced as a lecture and delivered at South Place Chapel, Finsbury, in 1898. It was published in book form by the Rationalist Press Association in 1908 and went through two editions. Since then it has been out of print. In the intervening years the external happenings of the world and the internal developments of my own mind have only served to underline every argument used and confirm every conviction expressed. In reissuing the little book, therefore, at the wish of my friends of the R.P.A., I am able to present the impressions of middle life with the endorsement of later years, and to offer my slender contribution on this supreme subject as the mature conclusion of at least fifty years of earnest thought.

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Here, of course, is no pretension to exhaustive or scholarly treatment. An erudite examination of the subject, based on human history and the world's records, is as unnecessary as, for me, it would be impossible. *The Evolution of the Idea of God*, to borrow Grant Allen's title, has been elaborately traced by him, by Frazer in his *Golden Bough*, and by other masters of research. These suffice for those who have the time to read and the wit to understand. By a more direct and personal route I have come at the subject—a route that is accessible to any average intelligence if only it be sufficiently independent and intent.

The incidence of my journey, however, is not without its significance. Some who hold opinions like to mine, and hold them with equal strength and sincerity, have nevertheless been led to their conclusions by favouring circumstances. Reared in an atmosphere of freedom, or happy in the accidents of books and friends, they have early learned the weaknesses of superstition

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and found the path of emancipation neither inwardly a revolution nor outwardly an embarrassment. Of such it may be argued, however incorrectly in many cases, that their scepticism is the result of faith-destroying influences. With me it has been otherwise. Born and bred in a veritable hotbed of religion, with a pious mother who agonised in prayer both with and for me, and moving in a circle of friends whose creed was no mere matter of Sunday observance, but a daily reality—a complete obsession—I grew up an unquestioning believer.

Not at first, however, a believer in my own salvation. The stern and uncompromising doctrines of Evangelical Christianity—the doctrines of “the fall,” of “total depravity,” of the Atonement, of the necessity for repentance and faith, and (weird contradiction) of “distinguishing grace”—the arbitrary election of some only to be saved—wrought in my youthful mind a fearsome realisation of my position and a gloomy dread

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that I was not one of "the elect." The further doctrine of "the Second Advent," and the immediate expectation of it, added to my terror. I was always fearing that my "saved" friends would be found gone in "the secret rapture" and I left behind for judgment. Incidentally these things robbed my boyhood of much of its natural gaiety ; but the tremendous personal stake, of which I was conscious in such eternal concerns, made religion to me in those days all the more terribly real. Presently I attained, or thought I had attained, to the assurance of faith. I made an open profession, went through the ordeal of adult baptism by immersion, and was received into "the communion of Saints." In the quaint language of this community, I was now "converted," "saved," "born again." I was accepted as one who had "found the Lord" and become "a child of God." The gratification brought by the sense of being thus marked out for Divine favour on earth, and ticketed for Heaven at last, was sadly discounted by

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the demands of religion as interpreted by the severe sect to which I belonged. The call to other-worldliness, to much prayer and study of the Scriptures, to “crucifying the flesh with its affections and lusts”—which with me meant the renouncing of many innocent pleasures—and to earnest concern for the salvation of others, conflicted strangely with the desire to lead a natural life, and leave other people and their souls alone.

Still faith triumphed, and triumphed in spite of even graver causes for misgiving. I described myself above as “an unquestioning believer.” The phrase is not quite true. Questions may have been suppressed and overborne, but they were there from very early years—not suggested by things heard or read, but growing out of the nature of the case and my own meditation. The unsatisfactoriness of the Bible as a divine revelation; the confinement of that revelation for long ages to an obscure place and people—other vast populations living and dying in ignorance of it; the late appearance in the

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world's history of "the Saviour"; the slow and capricious spread of Christianity, and over it all the bewildering enigma that all men everywhere were commanded to repent and believe the Gospel, while at the same time only certain individuals, "chosen before the foundation of the world," were predestined to be saved—these things disturbed, though without destroying, my early faith. I do not present them here as the chief stumbling-blocks to reason—they are not. I merely recall them as the perplexing concomitants of a still persisting faith.

So persistent was that faith, so ingrained as the result of my upbringing, that I remained within the fold until forty years of age, although steadily gravitating towards the outer edge. At the age of thirty-three I relinquished a business position and entered on a course of study for the Christian ministry—such was my enthusiasm for Christianity and "the Gospel" then. But this was my undoing. Not infidel lectures, not books which the devout had placed on their *index*

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expurgatorius, not evil communications with critics and scoffers, but the more sustained and intensive cultivation of religion itself—it was this that wrecked my faith. All the old disquietudes were intensified when I became the public exponent of Christianity and my office was to justify the ways of God to man.

The Bible, so noble and beautiful in many of its parts when accepted as a collection of human documents and read in relation to the ages to which it belongs, became more and more of a perplexity and an impossibility when treated as a Divine Revelation, consistent and complete and applicable to all times and peoples.

Prayer, always to me an irksome enigma, became, when engaged in as a public exercise, more than ever a disappointment and a foolishness—a disappointment because our requests, even when most in accord with what we imagined to be the Divine Will, remained, as to their major contents, so largely unanswered; a foolishness because of the obvious contradiction

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between our theory of God and the implications of prayer. We believed God to be the Omniscient who was ordering all things wisely and well—the Unchanging Will, too, “with whom there was no variableness neither shadow of turning,” yet we prayed as if our supplications could affect the Divine mind and influence the Divine purposes; while our earnest beseeching for the very things which God, if He were really the God we believed Him to be, would be most willing to bestow, seemed a dishonouring reflection on His character.

The central doctrine of the Atonement, after continual presentation, passed from a glory to a distress—not only because of the tardy advent of the Saviour and the partial dissemination and poor success of the Gospel, to say nothing of its insincerity by reason of a secret “election”; nor yet merely because of the semi-barbarous idea of vicarious sacrifice—an idea unknown and certainly unacceptable to modern jurisprudence—although it became increasingly difficult to uphold and

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proclaim a justice which could demand such a victim and be appeased in such a way ; but chiefly, and above all else, because of the gratuitous character of the whole thing, and therefore of its hollowness. If a man sets up a dummy merely to knock it down, we count him a fraud ; and, although many will regard it as blasphemous to use such a figure in such a connection, it is simple fact that this is what is presented to us in the Christian cosmogony.

For the doctrine of Atonement has to be taken together with the doctrine of Creation and the whole Christian conception of God. It is not an H. G. Wells's God, an " Invisible King," limited alike in ability and responsibility. It is a God infinite in power and knowledge and in all the perfections—the *fons et origo* of all things—the Sovereign Will which from all eternity to all eternity is everywhere and always fulfilling itself. This God, possessed of these high attributes, voluntarily creates a world and a people thus and thus. He was

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under no necessity to create, yet He did create. He was under no necessity to create on this wise, yet He did create on this wise. He foreknew everything that would happen, and therefore He willed everything that would happen. This position is unescapable, for if we say anything happened which God did not intend, we compromise foreknowledge, and if we say that while He knew what would happen as the result of His creation He yet disapproved of some of it, we produce a contradiction in terms—He willed what was contrary to His Will! All the evil, therefore, as well as all the good, was deliberately predestined to be—all planned and purposed, designed and decreed. Then the good and the evil, both projections from the creative mind, having been set going, this God poses as pleased with the good and pained by the bad. He blames the creature for being and doing what he was made to be and do. He visits him with punishments here and threatens him with hell hereafter. Then, with a lofty show of magna-

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nimity, He proposes and provides a way of salvation and calls upon man to avail of it. But again, it is only pretending, for response to the call is governed by sovereign grace which is only partially bestowed—"Whom He did foreknow He also did predestinate: whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified."

It is all either (as I came to believe it to be) the unsubstantial fabric of a fond but confused human dream, or a monstrous and monumental farce. I am perfectly familiar with the old argument that God made man a free agent with power of choice, and that therefore, though God foreknew and foreordained the sin, man was responsible for it—and further, that God created man thus in order that He might display His power and magnify His grace in the redemptive scheme. But I doubt whether in any comprehensive view of causes and effects the first contention can for a

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moment be sustained, and as for the second, it fails utterly from the orthodox standpoint, only exhibiting a God of unspeakable caprice and cruelty—a God creating untold millions for a destiny of damnation in order that a remnant might be saved !

The result with me was an abandonment of doctrinal preaching and a concentration on ethical exhortation. But this would not do for the orthodox diehards of my congregation. They missed the familiar formulas, the faithful dealing with sinners, the precious truths of the Gospel. In vain were all appeals to a loftier life, a worthier world. I could no longer say “Shibboleth,” and, like the Ephraimite of old who “could not frame to pronounce it right,” I was, metaphorically, “taken and slain at the passages of Jordan.”

I retired then into a private life of contemplation. For a while I took refuge in a sort of nebulous Theism. I attended the ministries of that robust Unitarian, the

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Rev. John Page Hopps, and of the refined and eloquent, though heterodox, prophet of Norwood, the Rev. S. A. Tipple; but I found no rest. Mr. Hopps was very severe on the Bible as a Divine Revelation. He ridiculed the idea of the tribal god of the Old Testament, who instigated and sanctioned such abominations, being the true God and worthy of our worship; but he forgot that wider and worse abominations were writ large on the page of human history which was the record of *his* God's designs and decrees. Mr. Tipple on Sunday mornings carried us into an empyrean of wonderful speculation and suggestion—an exalted realm of thought where all the discords of earth found their proper and perfect harmonies; but Monday morning brought us to ground again, and the newspaper provoked afresh the perplexed and oft-repeated query: "Why does God permit such things?" *Such things!* This was the rock on which my faith finally split. All creeds and doctrines apart, here was the outstanding, the baffling,

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problem—the postulate of a God infinite in power, wisdom, and love, who in the working out of His high purposes did not scruple to use means so revolting, so appalling, so terrible, that did any *man* employ them for any conceivable end whatever, they would brand him with indelible shame.

So my faith vanished, and I became fully convinced that this impossible “God,” in all the variety of His presentations from the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, to the God of the latest Theist or Theosophist, was but a projection from the human brain—a reflection of the diverse but always futile efforts of wondering man to interpret the mystery which, after all, we do but “make darker with a name.” As a child I had learned the Psalmist’s pronouncement: “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.” By slow degrees and at long last, in the way I have described, I was brought to doubt the aspersion and to ask:

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Was it "the fool" who "said within his heart
There is no God"? He saw the unquiet earth
In travail and in trouble from its birth,
He heard the sighing, and he felt the smart.
He saw, as well, the fairer, sweeter part—
The sunshine and the health, the weal and worth;
He saw the dance, and heard the song of mirth;
He knew the thrills that life and love impart.
He weighed it all—the blessing and the bane,
Assayed the joy, and plumbed the deep of tears.
He called its name "confusion"—held it vain
To read high purpose in the vagrant years.
He saw a mystery of loss and gain,
But never proof of "God" in what appears.

W. S. GODFREY.

BLACKHEATH, *May* 1920.

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AMONG people who think—think earnestly and at all independently upon chief themes—there is a large number, perhaps an increasing number, in spite of the reactionary wave which is now upon us, who desire for various reasons—reasons of a perfectly honest, honourable, and worthy kind—to be rid of the God-idea. They feel that conception in all its forms to be unnecessary and in the way—unnecessary (at any rate for the present) to man's best progress in thought, and in the way of his best development of life. Such people are ever to be distinguished from the so-called “ungodly” of the old Scriptures, or of such writings as Carlyle's—the ungodly whose antipathy to God simply stands for antipathy to goodness, and whose only object in endeavouring to banish the remembrance of God from their own and the world's thought is to gain thereby greater freedom for indulgence in folly or in sin. The exact opposite is the actuating principle

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with those to whom I have referred, for it is their very eagerness to extirpate evil that moves them against those theistic theories which, rightly or wrongly, they conceive as sheltering evil in many of its more subtle phases, throwing the whole question of evil into confusion, and making it the harder to get at and overcome.

But these people are as yet in an almost hopeless minority, and have therefore to face the difficulty—the great difficulty—not only of standing up against the tremendous influences of hereditary tendencies and traditional authorities, but also of keeping a steady mind and remaining true to conviction in spite of the pressure of present-day usage, and of the obloquy and scorn which are cast upon them—indiscriminately cast by those who cannot or will not make the distinction I just now suggested, but ruthlessly bracket these intellectual secessionists from the God-idea with those low types of humanity who simply “forget God” to run riot in transgression.¹ It may not be unfitting,

¹ “We feel that the difference between ourselves and those who hold this doctrine [that Faith is a duty] is even more moral than intellectual. If our clerical opponents were clearly aware of the real state of the case, there would be an end of the curious delusion,

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therefore, that a word should be spoken again on behalf of this minority by one belonging to it, and an effort made to show, as has often been shown before, that the theistic majority is in no better case, though it professes to be, as regards supplying a rational explanation of things ; and in much worse case as regards the provision of clear concepts and practical principles for the guidance of conduct and of life.

The Problem of Causation

I say Theism is in no better case in regard to giving a satisfactory account of things, a satisfying answer to the riddle of creation and causation, though it is just here that the Theist, whether the most ignorant or the most erudite, generally takes his stand in repudiating and ridiculing Atheistic suggestions of every kind. Your man in the street, confronted with the postulate of "no God," explodes at once with contemptuous

which often appears between the lines of their writings, that those whom they are so fond of calling 'Infidels' are people who not only ought to be, but in their hearts are, ashamed of themselves. It would be discourteous to do more than hint the antipodal opposition of this pleasant dream of theirs to facts."—*Huxley*.

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inquiry as to how the universe or man came to exist without a God first of all to cause them to exist, to make them. In brief, he falls back consciously or unconsciously on the old argument, "a watch bespeaks a watch-maker, and a world-maker is implied in the very phenomenon of a world." And when we pass from the street to the study or the lecture-room it is precisely the same objection that we meet with. I listened to it not so very long ago from the free platform of South Place Chapel. One of the most distinguished representatives, and one of the most charming exponents, of a liberal and lofty Theism, triumphantly presented the audience with this dilemma, and evidently thought that it effectually silenced his opponents. The Comtist philosophy was under criticism. It was acknowledged that that philosophy with wonderful skill had exhibited or suggested a complete chain of causes and effects, so related and so joined as to ensure indefinite continuity and progression. "But even so," exclaimed the lecturer in effect, "though the chain *is* complete showing no ragged end that asks yet another cause, but self-contained as it were and automatic—even so,

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how came the chain itself to exist at all ? If no *single* effect still requires an explanatory cause, how about the whole thing, causes and effects together ? The *chain* still has to be accounted for, and an intellectual necessity is shown for what Theists name as 'God.' ” Exactly so. I entirely admit the soundness of the argument, from our “ cause and effect ” point of view, and should be sorry for anyone who did otherwise. But why leave it there ? Is “ intellectual necessity ” now satisfied ? Not at all—not in the least. *It has but travelled one stage further back to confront exactly the same problem over again.* Apply to the something you call “ God ” the same order of ideas, the same demands of reason, that you applied just now to the something called “ a chain,” and where are you intellectually ? There is the chain, with its forces and effects, a marvellous existence. It must have a “ cause,” we say. We at once supply a “ cause,” and call it “ God.” But in doing so we have only imagined another “ marvellous existence.” How came *this* to be ? Answer : “ We don't know ; we suppose it never came to be, but always was, or else that it was self-

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originated ”—a phrase which, while fine sounding, is of course a blank absurdity to us. It thought about itself before it was, it decided to make itself, and when it was finished it began to be ! No ! “ self-originated ” will not do, and “ never originated but always existing ” is to us absolutely unthinkable—as unthinkable, as intellectually baffling, when applied to the merely imagined God, as when applied to the observed and actually existing chain—the forces and phenomena of Nature and of Life.

Dr. Conan Doyle,¹ among other advanced thinkers, falls into this strange confusion of reasoning, this notion of explaining one inexplicable with another. In that fascinating book, *The Stark Munro Letters*, so fearless in its heterodoxy, so splendid in its honesty, so noble in its ideals, he turns aside again and again to utter this saving clause of Theistic belief. “ What should we say of a man,” in one notable passage he exclaims, “ who

¹ Since this was written Dr. Doyle has become a knight and a spiritualist—one might almost say, a knight-errant in defence of the spook. Though interesting and charming as ever, I doubt whether either the spurs or the spirits have added to his fame in the realms of thought.

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has a . . . beautiful picture submitted to him, and who, having satisfied himself that the account given of the painting of the picture is incorrect, at once concludes that no one ever painted it, or at least asserts that he has no possible means of knowing whether an artist has produced it or not ? That is, as it seems to me, a fair statement of the position of some Agnostics. Is not the mere existence of the picture in itself a proof that a skilful artist has been busy upon it ? ” His argument, you see, is that, even though all cosmogonies are in error, all accounts of the great world-picture hopelessly wrong, still the cosmos must have had a creator, the picture must have had a painter. “ Very well, Dr. Doyle,” we might reply ; “ granted, on your theory, that because pictures and tables are always, in our observation, made, therefore everything else must be made in a corresponding manner—granted. Your picture had a painter. And now, what of the painter himself ? Who made him ? ” “ Oh, God made him,” the Doctor might reply. “ No, but the painter *is* God in your analogy,” we should answer ; “ who made the painter ? ” And, of course, the Doctor could not

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say. He thinks it fine sport to make the Agnostic suggest, "It is possible the picture produced itself by the aid of certain rules." But is it not equally absurd to our ears to say, "It is possible the painter produced himself by the aid of certain rules, or was not produced at all"? This riddle that emerges further back is really the same riddle as that which confronts us when attempting to account for the nearer existences. The Theist theory in this connection is nothing more than the old Hindoo device revised and brought up to date. The ancients could not understand an unsupported world, so they supplied an elephant to uphold it. To narrow the issue still further, they placed the elephant on a tortoise, and then discreetly left the problem alone. But the question inevitably arises, "What supported the tortoise?" It is the same dilemma still. *There is absolutely nothing to choose between the position of Theist or Atheist on the mere score of supplying a rational explanation, a satisfying suggestion of how things came to be.*

But this breakdown in our thinking, this confronting of the unthinkable, need not surprise or depress us,

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for it is really a very common experience with intellectual explorers, with all serious travellers in the realms of thought. There are limits to our perceptions and comprehensions, and, though the greatening mind of man may be ever pushing these limits further back, they are soon reached, even by the most adventurous—the enigmas, the obscurities, the contradictions which still leave the wisest baffled and compel the acknowledgment that we do *not* know. To take one example of many for a moment, think of the mystery of space. We are constantly being told that time and space are not realities at all, but only terms accommodated to our restricted faculties. Yet, still we talk of infinity as if it were a something we roughly understood. But we do not understand it in the very least. However far we project our thought, we cannot get away from the idea of a great whole with a circumference somewhere, a kind of magnified world, just as “God” is always in human thought a kind of magnified man. Even great astronomers like Sir Robert Ball try to impress the popular mind with a sense of the vastness of space by the use of comparisons—comparisons which themselves

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of necessity imply a limit. Suppose we say that the distance from here to the sun is as a foot-rule to the rest ; or, if that is not bold enough, let the diameter of a million solar systems be as the millionth of an inch to all the remainder. That should carry us pretty far. But what do we mean by “the rest,” “the remainder” ? If we traverse it, what then ? A boundary ? An outermost rim ? Nay, but what then upon the other side ? We both want an end, and don’t want it. Our very terms, “size,” “magnitude,” “vastness,” to mean anything, imply a limit somewhere ; but infinity has none, and in the mere contemplation of it thought dissolves. Boundlessness completely baffles us. The only infinity we can think of is *not* infinity at all. An unbounded universe is as unthinkable to us as an un-created world.¹ What wisdom, then, is there in Dr.

¹ Present-day readers will naturally recall here the recent discoveries of Eckstein, which are said to have revolutionised scientific thought in regard to space and time. Whether that be so or not, it makes no difference to the perplexed lay mind when contemplating these mysteries. The bent line of light that returns to the point whence it started, still seems to have an outer rim, and after that there still seems to be a “beyond” where thought will wander, where it must lose itself, and from which it must return completely baffled.

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Sullivan's appeal to "the first deduction from the canons of thought" as conclusive proof that the cosmos could not have been produced in a particular way? What is "the first deduction from the canons of thought"? Is it the final deliverance of consummate wisdom, or only the fundamental idea of infinitesimal flies? How far humbler and worthier is Mr. Herbert Spencer's frank acknowledgment that our "fleeting states of consciousness are as yet quite unequal to the task of grasping the ultimate reality as to causation," of saying what could or could not be. It is one thing to deduce from our canons of thought principles for the guidance of our own lives, another thing by such deductions to decide the problems of the spheres. In showing, therefore, that Theist and Atheist are alike at a loss to supply any rational account of how things came to be, any satisfactory explanation of the origin of existence, I am not suggesting an absurd *impasse*—a ridiculous dead-lock; but only that which, after all, is common to thinkers, and necessarily so at present, in many departments of thought.

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The Problem of Evil

But further. Theism is not only found wanting in these respects, in these purely speculative regions, but also in the far more momentous matter of providing wholesome and workable concepts in regard to the present condition of things, and the attitude we should adopt towards the problems of to-day, the facts which face us now. It is, indeed, just here that I derive my chief justification for bringing these much-vexed questions once again under review ; for there is a whole world of difference as to poise of mind and resulting action between the most advanced Theist, whose Theism compels him to say with Browning :

“God’s in His Heaven,
All’s right with the world,”

and to regard, therefore, with some measure of complacency even the most calamitous things ; and the man who, knowing nothing of gods or their ways, simply takes life as he finds it and feels it, labels the good “ good ” and the bad “ bad ” just as they appeal to him and impress him, without any reservations or

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qualifications whatsoever, and thinks of improvement as his own and his brother's concern rather than that of a superintending Providence—as depending not so much upon unseen supernatural forces as upon his own and his friend's right arm. If Theism is helpless—as helpless quite as Atheism or Agnosticism—when confronting the mystery of origins, it is worse than helpless, it is (as to its teaching) positively harmful—where the others are at least harmless—when facing the mystery of evil. That profound mystery, it always seems to me, is thrown into the most bewildering confusion of all by the conception, which Theism demands, of an all-wise, all-good, and all-powerful Being (the only kind of God that modern Theism asks us to believe in) having caused—gratuitously caused—not only the beauty in which we delight, but the bane which we deplore: having deliberately devised and maintained this system of unnumbered horrors, if also of varied joys—this “scheme,” as one has described it, “of fangs and claws, war and terror, cancer and cruel plague, even though the sun shines and the lark sings over all the anguish and the misery.” If there were no evil

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in the world, I am free to confess that I should find it much less difficult to believe in a God, should at any rate regard the question as purely academical, and no longer compromising or painfully perplexing our interpretation of Nature and of Life. But as there *is* evil in the world, I am equally free to confess that, though completely in the dark as to whether there be God or no God, my earnest *hope* is that the ultimate solution of our riddle will show anything rather than this : a Supreme Omnipotence, who *could* have ordered otherwise or not have ordered at all, having all along, for any conceivable or inconceivable end, been ordering *thus* ; thus according to the sad strange page of history, thus according to the grim dark features of the world to-day. As Jean Ingelow so truly says, "It is not reason makes faith hard, but *life*."

Now, I observe that, whenever Theists talk about their God revealing himself in his works, it is almost always to some pleasing phenomena that they point. I would not for a moment accuse them of disingenuousness ; but fatally disproportionate, if not actually disingenuous, such pointing is. The beauties and

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bounties of Nature—her exquisite scenery, marvellous processes, and stately laws ; the varied and entrancing sights of earth and sky and sea ; the wonderful provision of springing pastures, dropping fruits, and waving harvests ; the wizard workmanship of plant, or insect, or human organism ; the orderly procession of seasons and systems ; the precision with which tides and stars retire and return ; the glories of the mind and heart of man, the soaring intellect of poet and philosopher, the glowing love of mother and of friend—these are the things which too exclusively engross their thoughts, fill their imagination, and furnish the suggestions with which they construct their God ; just as it was of old when they enthusiastically exclaimed : “ His work is honourable and glorious, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein ” ; “ O Lord, how manifold are thy works ! in wisdom hast thou made them all.” But what of the *other* things that are hideous rather than honourable, gruesome more than glorious, suggestive rather of ignorance than of wisdom, of devilry more than of goodness or grace ? What of Nature’s ugliness and blackness of look, her bleakness and bitterness of

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mood ? What of her contortions and convulsions, of devouring earthquake and pitiless storm, of blight and blizzard, drought and famine, pestilence and poison, fire and flood, disease and death itself ? What of the horrible spectacle presented by the animate world in its predatory ways—of so vast a proportion of living things ruthlessly preying upon smaller or weaker orders, turning even the dreamy loveliness of summer air and murmuring stream into one huge theatre of strife—of pursuit, flight, capture, struggle, pain and death ? A spectacle which caused Tennyson to exclaim :

“ For nature is one with rapine, a harm no preacher can heal,
The mayfly is torn by the swallow, the sparrow is speared by
the shrike,
And the whole little wood where I sit is a world of plunder and
prey.”

What of the great human tragedy, of our own struggles and sorrows and sins, of this brave but blind wrestling with forces which in the end are ever too much for us, of a race experience which wrung from Theodore Parker the complaint : “ A mystery is gathered about our little life. We are limited and hemmed in on all sides.

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Our schemes fail. Our plans miscarry. One after another our lights go out. Our realities prove dreams. Our hopes waste away. We are not where we would be, or what we would be " ? What of the wrongs we have inflicted as well as suffered, of our tyrannies and brutalities towards the animal world and lower forms of life, of " man's inhumanity to man " ? What of war and crime, of oppressions and rebellions ? What—to cite the fresh illustrations in our time of the grim happenings of all history—what of India, of Armenia, of Cuba, of Crete, of Africa's blood-soaked desolations and distraught and ruined peoples ? ¹ What, even in more favoured lands, of slums with their hideous squalor, prisons with their black disgrace, dissecting-rooms with their callous cruelty, slaughter-houses with their brutalisings of the butcher and ceaseless outrage upon innocent but helpless life ? What of the so-called

¹ So ran one's thought at the close of last century. The illustrations of that time, convincing enough in themselves, have since paled into comparative insignificance, before the lurid terror of the GREAT WAR with its unparalleled sacrifices and sufferings. It is a vast underlining of the argument—1914 to 1918 have supplied a huge *a fortiori* to the contention of 1898.

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“ mishaps ” attendant upon our civilisation—of railway accidents, mining disasters, wrecks, and burnings, and the myriad miseries which somewhere or other with every tick of time are starting sighs and prompting tears, and making it—all hopes and efforts notwithstanding—a “ groaning and travailing creation ” still ? ¹ These, too, are *effects* which must be read into the *cause*. These, if you will have a Creator-God, are also (all of them) “ parts of his ways ” with which you must construct your idea of him. The Bible itself supports this necessity. “ Without him was not anything made that was made.” “ Shall there be evil in the City and the Lord not have done it ? ” And I say, when this is honestly recognised, and the whole outlook proportionately surveyed, any possible presentation of Theism only “ makes confusion worse confounded ” in regard to the riddle of existence and the mystery of evil. It matters

¹ “ I have thought about and about these problems all my life, and am no nearer a solution. . . . Before the wrongs and follies . . . I stand defeated and dismayed ; nor can any religion or any philosophy . . . afford me the faintest light or the least encouragement. The whole mystery is inscrutable—unthinkable ! *I do not know.*”—*Robert Blatchford.*

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not in the least for the point of my argument whether you take the more ancient or the more modern view—whether your creed is that of the most rigid Calvinist or the most generous Optimist. In either case, and apart from all subsidiary questions of sin and salvation, you have, back of the whole complication, the one supreme, independent, omnipotent Will purposing and planning the whole thing, not only in its vast outlines, but in all the minutiae of its detail—conceiving and arranging every enormity, every abortion, every pain, every weird and wicked thing, as surely as every beauty, every glory, every gladness, inspiration, or perfection.

This is absolutely inevitable unless you adopt the old dualist idea of *two* eternal principles of good and evil, independent of each other, and ceaselessly warring against each other—a far more rational theory, be it observed, than that in vogue to-day. But the modern Theist does not speak of Duality, but of Unity; and his own contention for the necessity of tracing all things back to *one* originating and creating cause forbids us to attribute these ills to either man or devil, and compels us to regard them ultimately as the conception and the

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work of God. Now, even if we adopt, in respect of this, the sunniest view of all—the view set forth by Tennyson of a “far-off divine event” which shall gloriously consummate, and, as he would say, justify, the present process—even if we try with him to believe

“That nothing walks with aimless feet,
That not one life shall be destroyed
Or cast as rubbish to the void
When God has made the pile complete,”

still we find ourselves shut up to the fact that God is working this great good by evil means ; and I ask, can this, in our thinking, be justified ? As Dr. Moncure Conway so truly says : “It is *not* ethically defensible to say that men must not do evil that good may come, and at the same time maintain that such is just what is done by God.” As to *methods*, therefore, we must either condemn God or justify the Jesuit who in this matter is so inconveniently careful to imitate his God. To say that that is wrong in us—and wrong just because it is obnoxious to God—which yet at the same time is so little obnoxious to him as to be the very thing he has devised, and by means of which he works, is, as I have

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said, to throw all our thinking into worse confusion than before. But this idea of God compassing good ends by evil means involves this further dilemma : either we must think of him as *unable* to work in any other way, in which case Omnipotence itself of course stands compromised, for, to quote Dr. Conway again, "Omnipotence" (the very term surely implies it) "*could* secure all the good by good means"; or else we must think of God as *able* to do differently, but *choosing* to do thus—able to work his good ends by purely beneficent forces, but preferring to use the maleficent (in their present effects) as well—in which case, while we save the Omnipotence we sacrifice almost everything else which is held most dear in the popular conception of the Deity, we put God further off than ever, and destroy henceforth all possibility of parallels between the best in man and the probable in God ; such parallels, for example, as "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him." It is *not* like that at all ; it is the very reverse of that ; it is like something not known to us and not countenanced by us, for if father or friend, be his motives and

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his objects what they might, attempted to adopt measures towards us such as the supposed God adopts, or anything comparable thereto, he would be universally execrated and condemned.¹

This God, therefore, retires behind the thick darkness, and becomes to us for to-day an absolutely incalculable force. As John M. Robertson says: "It is obvious that there is no rational presumption to be made from our moral sense to the moral sense of the surmised Omnipotence, since the processes of Nature are such as no good man would dream of carrying on." The Theist's idea, therefore, of a being of supreme

¹ In an article on the Newfoundland ice disaster (1898) *The Daily Chronicle* remarked: "In the presence of the mighty elements of storm and sea and crushing and crashing ice, all human efforts were of no avail. The great forces of Nature, as in earthquakes, in landslips, in avalanches, so also among the 'thick-ribb'd ice,' have no ruth. The human lives, on which we set more and more store as civilisation advances, are not as an atom of dust in the balance. The mystery of the why and wherefore of these disasters is brought home to us by one of such dimensions as this befalling men hardened to the utmost endurance by the nature of their avocations, and yet in some instances flying into the arms of an easier death to avoid one more dreaded."

Richard Jefferies, in *The Story of my Heart*, puts the matter in the following arresting and uncompromising words:—

"How can I adequately express my contempt for the assertion

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wisdom and supreme love brings him no scintilla of assurance in regard to to-day and to-morrow. He can reckon roughly as to his friend, but he cannot as to his God. The shark, the snake, the flame, the sword, may be his next messenger to him for all he knows. He knows nothing. *He is perforce, in spite of all his Theism, as Agnostic as any of us in practice with reference to what may happen next.* He is, with us, wholly in the dark, but with the additional disadvantage that he has continually to be justifying in his God the things which in themselves he condemns. And who shall say that this pitiable attempt to reconcile irreconcilables does not

that all things occur for the best, for a wise and beneficent end ! It is the most utter falsehood, and a crime against the human race . . . Human suffering is so great, so endless, so awful, that I can hardly write of it. . . . The whole, and the worst, the worst pessimist can say is far beneath the least particle of the truth, so immense is the misery of man. It is the duty of all rational beings to acknowledge the truth. . . . Anyone who will consider the affairs of the world at large . . . will see that they do not proceed in the manner they would do for our happiness if a man of humane breadth of view were placed at their head with unlimited power. A man of intellect and humanity could cause everything to happen in an infinitely superior manner. But that which is . . . credited to a non-existent intelligence [or cosmic "order," it is just the same] should really be claimed and exercised by the human race. We must do for ourselves what superstition has hitherto supposed an intelligence to do for us."

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inflict on the Theist himself serious moral damage ? I believe it does. I believe that his theory not only outrages needlessly his reason—his intellect—but that it also fatally interferes with his ethical development. He may admit himself bound by a moral code which does not bind his God, but the very thought that his God is not so bound—that he, whose propriety is unquestionable, does all these things, works by all these means—cannot fail to have a disturbing and weakening effect upon his sense of right and wrong. I am deeply convinced that the disposition abroad to-day to condone cruelty and injustice in a thousand forms, to wink at or indulge in many kinds of iniquity, derives its sanction to an enormous extent from the subtle idea—the idea so paralysing to the true moral sense—that evil is only good in disguise ; the idea that a perfect God is behind it all, a God who employs himself these methods, knows what he is about, and will bring all right in the end. Remove the notion of divine permission and intention from this seething mass of evil, and less composedly should we look upon it, less recklessly ourselves tamper with it.

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What then?

But now, if we drop Theism, what have we ? Simply an Emergence—unexplained, remember, in its beginnings any way, whether we be Theist or Atheist—an Emergence starting, so far as our current guesses go, in independent, unrelated atoms, taking shape presently in worlds, developing in wondrous growths with ever more and more of vital energy, bursting at last into conscious life, advancing through countless stages of animal existence, at length evolving man—man with his powers of thought, contrivance, speech, but man still profoundly ignorant of himself and his environment—man experimenting, adventuring, often dangerously far in advance of his solid attainments in knowledge, getting thus into multitudinous difficulties and distresses, and getting out again with infinite pain and loss. Learning and forgetting and re-learning his lessons in the school of stern experience, taking wrong roads, following false ideals, retracing his steps, beginning over again, forming and reforming societies and civilisations, full of fault but full of hope—hope that some day and in some way, if the physical earth lasts

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long enough and the race persists, he will find out fully how to “use the world as not abusing it,” learn completely “how to live.” A mystery indeed still—a mystery which, if bright in its picturesqueness and promise, is also dark in its miseries and mishaps, but a mystery the misadventures of which are at least such and nothing more, the blundering mistakes of those who know no better, who have yet to learn, the conflicts and collisions of forces which have not yet found their proper harmonies ; *not* the inscrutable decrees of one who, while professing all the perfections, including love, empties upon the objects of his affection, along with his good things, a perfect Pandora’s box of every kind of woe.

Summing up

Theism, therefore, I maintain, is valueless, save to those who are willing to be self-deceived. The mystery of origins it leaves unchanged ; the mystery of evil it changes for the worse, and only complicates. What good, then, is it ? It is *not* true—as I think I have sufficiently shown—that Theism affords reasonable

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ground for a sense of protection, of relief in having someone higher than ourselves to appeal to in extremity, to pray to in need. It may afford that sense to those who, as I say, are willing to be self-deceived, to picture to themselves a God different from that which all phenomena and all events declare ; but to those who recognise the awful meaning of the words, " His ways are not as our ways, nor his thoughts as our thoughts," who realise that any moment he may do what to us would be the worst and unkindest thing—spite of all our pleadings—and still be justified, Theism (in this world, at any rate) suggests no sense of protection, and prayer ensures no gain. Said a poor Irishwoman, in the course of a dreadful famine : " Sure God is good, and he won't see the poor children die of starvation before his face." It was a most natural conclusion, but it was a verdict, alas, contrary to the evidence. *That is precisely what he does do if there be a God.* But even if this sense of protection *were* a reasonable deduction from Theistic belief, is it not one which belongs rather to the child than to the man ? It may be that the race has needed the illusion in its infancy and

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adolescence, but equally needs to be freed from it ere it can attain to full maturity—to the manhood which in the individual we associate with self-reliance and self-help. It is the same with that other sense, thought to be so invaluable by Theists, the sense at once of irresponsibility and responsibility—irresponsibility in respect of the management of the world, responsibility in respect of our own course and conduct as creatures answerable to a Creator. The sense of irresponsibility, becoming in childhood, is felt to sit ill upon the man and to be unworthy and detrimental then ; and the sense of responsibility towards parent or pedagogue, proper in youth, is universally regarded as one which should afterwards give place to higher and wider conceptions of duty, of the obligations imposed by Nature, Society, and Life. It cannot, therefore, be always good for man to maintain the childish attitude in the higher realm, to shift the onus and the blame of things on to imaginary shoulders, and say, “It is not my concern” ; nor can it be good—as Isabel Esmond, writing in *The Humanitarian*, suggested—for man “to doubt his power to do the right, not in fear of any God, but because in it

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alone he may find the true harmony and meaning and purpose of his life." The whole Theistic notion, therefore, I cannot but believe, is—as man progresses—becoming increasingly unfit and absurd. Lowell sings :

"Each age must worship its own thoughts of God
More or less earthly, clarifying still
With subsidence continuous of the dregs."

That is very true, but perhaps the clarifying is destined to clear away not only the dregs, but eventually the "thought of God" itself altogether.¹ Surely it is even now seen to be a decaying superstition. Just look at it. Once everything was a god—Sun, Moon, Stars, Winds, Streams, Storms, all personified. Then came the two great personalities, representing the great twin forces, God = Good, Devil = Evil; now it is common for thinkers everywhere to smile at the weird, old-world spectre of a personal Devil, while yet retaining as a still reasonable belief the idea of a personal God. But if the

¹ "Men are growing to be seriously alive to the fact that the historical evolution of humanity, which is generally, and I venture to think not unreasonably, regarded as progress, has been, and is being, accompanied by a co-ordinate elimination of the supernatural from its originally large occupation of men's thoughts."—*Huxley*.

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one has to go, is not the other bound logically to follow suit ? It may be a wonderfully refined and exalted notion of a personal Deity that is now suggested to us, cleansed of all the coarser concepts ; but it is, and it cannot help being, absurdly anthropomorphic still, invested (as Mr. Clarence Seyler puts it) “ with the common trappings of the human mind ”—“ the mystery ” which William Watson so finely says “ we make darker with a name.” Better, far better, that the name, and all the bewilderments that gather round it, should be let go—abandoned with the rest of our superstitions—and the mystery bravely faced, without complicating theories of either above or beneath, before or after, God or Devil.

In conclusion, I should like to express the hope that no one will think that I have undertaken lightly, still less with any relish, this task of discrediting belief in the God whom I was taught to revere, as probably many of my readers also were, at a mother’s knee, and whom I also, in my maturer years, have sought to serve as a minister of his religion. I do not take kindly to this iconoclastic work, though at times I feel impelled to it.

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I am far from indifferent to the loss of the consolations (however ill-founded they may have been) that I once enjoyed. But better than these consolations, better than the heart's-case of those who have remained unprogressively consistent and unthinkingly complacent—mere echoes of a dead past—all their days ; better by far than this is the consciousness that one is voicing to some extent, however small, the new gospel of to-day, and heralding, however poorly, the still better gospel of to-morrow which even now is trembling into being.¹ Answering the charge which one's own heart—not to speak of the outside world—at times prefers of irreverence towards the God I once worshipped, comes the, to me, sufficient assurance that I at least thought too

¹ By "the new gospel of to-day" and "the still better gospel of to-morrow" (phrases which have been criticised) I merely refer to the nearer approximation, as time goes on, of thought to fact. Emerson believed in the survival of the fittest in the world of ideas—that those ideas only would survive and propagate which were truly related to their environment of eternal fact. I believe this too, and believe that this survival must mean thought emancipated at last from a terrifying, emasculating, and confusing Theology, "duty to God" so exacting and embarrassing giving place entirely to "duty to man," and Humanity set free and stimulated to work out its own salvation if it can.

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highly of my God to retain a belief in his existence when I found that such retention would involve a lowering of my ideal. So long as he was to me infinitely just, wise, great, and good, I could love and follow. But when that had to go, *everything* had to go, and now I stand alone, suspected indeed and sighed over by many who once were not unwilling to learn from me ; but here, as William Watson again so sanely and courageously expresses it :

“ Here, where perhaps alone
I conquer or I fail ;
Here, o’er the dark Deep blown,
I ask no perfumed gale ;
I ask the unpanpering breath
That fits me to endure
Chance, and victorious Death,
Life, and my doom obscure,
Who know not whence I am sped.
nor to what port I sail.”

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