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ARTICLE II.

THE PLACE OF FEAR AMONG THE MOTIVES OF
RELIGION.

BY HENRY M. WHITNEY.

THERE is much objection to the use, or even the thought, of fear in connection with religion. The current talk is thus: "I like a religion that tells me of the love of God"; "I do not believe in frightening people into goodness"; "I do not believe in a religion of fear." These utterances come sometimes from people of so much real rightness of spirit, and of so much maturity of Christian character, that they are worthy of great respect and presumably contain much truth.

On the other hand, the Bible certainly appeals, and sometimes appeals strongly, to fear. We do not refer to that Old Testament "fear" which is said to be "the beginning" of both knowledge and wisdom:¹ that "fear" we understand to be a thing much larger and more complex. Nor do we refer to that New Testament "fear"² which was largely or wholly awe. We refer to a varied use, ranging from prudence to "terror." There is no doubt of the fact: the Bible makes frequent and vivid appeal to fear, a use so frequent and so vivid that even the old style of preaching could quote much of the Bible in its efforts to produce alarm.

What, then, is the right thing to do? What is the golden mean? What is the deeper spirit of the Bible? What is the usage, and what the dictate of the spirit, of Christ? Philosophically, psychologically, practically, what is the place of fear among the motives of religion?

¹ Ps. cxl. 10; Prov. i. 7.² Luke v. 26.

For a safe and well-balanced answer to this question we should naturally look first at the analogies of all human life. There is a recognized place for fear in the relations of man to himself, to his fellow-men, and to nature; we should presume that, at bottom and in the larger view, the Bible would be found to use fear in the same way as a motive in the relations of man to his own conscience, to his whole spiritual being, and to the government of God; and that the two uses of fear could be made to seem to us equally right.

For religion looks at a man in various ways: as a being who is invited to have friendship with God; and as a being who is under obligation to obey the commands of God. However much we may explain away as metaphorical the vividness of the Bible in taking these views of man, there always remains the fact that religion regards him also as a being who must be true to his own best self, if he is to make out a life worth living or get "an abundant entrance" into the life beyond.

To the first two of these views of man correspond, between man and man, the relations of intimacy, friendship, and of loyalty or citizenship in the state.

It is one of the remarkable things, it is a fundamental thing, in the Bible that it represents God as eager to be on terms of intimacy with men, eager to have them speak to him and ask favors of him, encouraging them to think of him and to treat him as a friend, taking infinite pains to disarm their suspicion and warm their indifference, preparing beyond the grave a place where it will be indescribable blessedness to have more intimate acquaintance with himself and closer likeness to himself forever. The more literal statements of this are very strong; the more figurative statements of it are very bold.

"Now," says the current sentiment of the day, "I do not

believe in frightening a man into meeting God in these advances. He should simply be appealed to by all that is noble in him to desire the friendship, and to desire to be worthy of the friendship, of God."

But what is the analogy of every-day life in this? An illustration will help to make it plain. An excellent, wise, warm-hearted man has for some reason taken an interest in the son of a neighbor, and shows a desire to make of him an intimate friend, with all the valuable results of such a relation. The neighbor is rejoiced at the thought. But he is burdened with two different fears,—that his son will through carelessness lose his hold upon the good man's regard, and that the good man will hesitate about bringing the boy into intimacy with the other young people for whom also he cares. Animated by these fears, the neighbor does not simply appeal to his son to desire and to deserve the friendship that has come within his reach; he seeks to impart his fears to his son, by showing him what a loss it would be to be dropped from the good man's regard; he seeks to awaken him to fear, and to action in view of that fear. Is there anything mistaken or wrong about this? Is there not many a young man who needs to be thoroughly stirred up in just this way?

So, let us hope, this young man, for fear of losing so great a benefit, works hard to cultivate that friendship and to become such that the good man will really take pleasure in helping him on. His fear, a genuine fear, is perhaps the force most powerful in molding his character, and all its effects are good.

Is not this a fair parallel to the usage of the Bible when it urges men up to the duty and the privilege of friendship with God? It says, in effect: "You do not know what you are losing, if only in this present life"; and it appeals to their fear

of losing a pearl of such price. Its figurative expressions in regard to the future life seem to point to the sense of lacking the friendship and approbation of God as being the especial "sting of death." Multitudes have that feeling now in greater or less degree; let it but become the clear, unceasing, dreary consciousness of the soul, and, whether they still walk the earth or in viewless space await the Judgment,—is it not a thing to be feared? In such a sense, under the strong hyperbole of the Scripture, even God may be said to "destroy" the soul, simply by leaving it in such a frame.¹

Indeed, why should not a man fear this? An eternity, or even an age, of alienation from God; a period, perhaps age-long, of feeling that in the great purposes that fill the heart of God there is little or nothing in common between him and us; an age of consciousness of opportunities perhaps hopelessly lost, so that now there seems to be no more room for learning to be happy with God, though we seek it diligently, with tears;—may God fill us all with the fear of this!

The Bible is not at all sentimental or dainty in the matter. Its watchmen feel that they were set upon the wall to watch,² with a trumpet in their hands, and, high above the outcry of protesting delicacy, they blow that trumpet with no gentle or uncertain sound. They are not always careful to wake the sleeping city with the soft notes of the flute; it is sometimes the hoarse trumpet-call from the watch-tower, breaking in rudely upon our slumber and rallying us instantly to the breach. They sound the alarm, as the long-roll breaks in upon the soldier's dream,—yes, even his sweet dream of home,—and

¹ Yet we hold that, as a matter of fact, in Matt. x. 28 ("Fear, rather, him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna") the reference is not to God, but to a human foe, a tempter.

² Ezek. xxxiii. 1-9.

makes him seize his rifle before he is fully on his feet. They are as much in earnest as he who makes the air quake and shudder with the rapid, heavy strokes of the fire-bell because a conflagration has burst forth.

Surely, if a man is forfeiting the good-will of all honorable men by pursuing a course of vice, any motive, not positively wrong, is proper if it will bring him to his senses and to a better life. So, if a man is forfeiting the good-will of God,—a loss that, in the nature of the case, must continue until the man changes his life,—it is proper, it is more than proper, it is necessary, it is essential, that we reach him by any motive that will help to set him right. If no higher motive will avail, we must reach him by his fears, until, if need be, he is horribly afraid of losing in this life the things that go with God's good-pleasure,¹ and of going through eternity gnawed by a hopeless regret.

A miserable comforter is he who tells us sweet stories of the love of God and does not also force upon us the fact that it is a terribly dangerous experiment to try to have the pleasures of wilfulness, of "will-worship," until we hear the sweep of the death-angel's wings, and then, in the few moments that may

¹In Luke ii. 14 "peace" is promised only to "men in whom he is well-pleased." The old, but mistaken, rendering of this verse is much more favorable to the easy-going idea of God's interest in the lives of men. Such ideas, essentially deistical, are continually breaking out, and are as continually being noted. The latest comment that we have noticed in this line is in Courthope's "History of English Poetry" (vol. v. p. 305). Speaking of Thomson, in connection with "The Seasons," Courthope says: "His sentiments are colored by the vague idea of the benevolence of God, which a loose-thinking and luxurious society regarded as His main attribute." To our thinking, deism leaves very little force in the sanctions of religion.

intervene ere the angel hurries us away, learn the great lesson that shall fit us for the future life, learn to be happy in like-mindedness with God and resulting friendship with God. Even when we look at religion simply as opportunity, we need not care how much men are excited, nor how profoundly their fears are aroused, so long as their minds are clear as to the nature of the opportunity and as to the way of making it forever their own.

And is not this really the underlying spirit of the Scripture? If the question of appeal to fear in religion belonged only in this field, we believe that there would be very little objection: it would be a question only of manner and degree.

But, as we noted at the outset, religion is at least a twofold thing: it is a matter not only of privilege as to friendship, with resulting assimilation, but of duty as to loyalty.

We hold it not merely as a bold Hebrew imagination, but as a literal fact, that we are under a moral government of which God, by the nature of his being, has to be the head. What, then, should we expect to find true in it, judging not merely from the letter of the Scripture, but from the analogy of human government and from the working of the laws of nature?

Look at the analogy of family-government. The more love there is in a family, the better, but, where love fails, as fail it will sometimes, then penalty must be the last resort. The certainty of penalty,—not necessarily of chastisement, generally not of chastisement,¹—but surely of penalty, in case of certain acts, must be before the mind of the child, or family-disci-

¹ There are children who, especially in babyhood, are simply maddened by corporal punishment; the parent who is wise enough to recognize this may not be wise enough to realize that it makes still more imperative the finding of penalties that will not madden and will control.

pline is gone. Even the love felt by children in a family where there is no fear of the parents' displeasure is lacking in depth, in permanence, and in respect.

From this we should infer that our religion, while constantly representing God as "our Father," should represent him, not as a father too tender ever to inflict a penalty, not—according to the present fashion—as an aged father living in the home of a grown-up son,—petted and called sweet names, yet not expected to rule,—but as a father, strong and wise, ruling over children who are still so foolish and wayward that they need to be checked or urged on by the thought of what he will do about their acts or their failure to act.

Look at the analogy of government in a school. The school where children learn to love to study is not simply the one where they feel that the teacher is affectionate, but where also they are quietly sure that penalty and forbearance will be wisely tempered together in the treatment of all misdeeds. There is no unnecessary display of the rod, stirring up defiance, but they know that it, or its equivalent, is there.

We should expect to find similar treatment of all those who are at school in this world to learn the lessons both of the life that is temporal and of that which is eternal. Indeed, we read expressly that it is the law that is the servant, set for the time in authority over us, to lead us,—if need be, to drive us,—to the schoolmaster, Christ, and that it was the schoolmaster, Christ, who so frankly and vividly based his instruction upon fear that the flame and the smoke and the gnawing worm of the valley of Hinnom seemed apt material for metaphor to him.¹

Look at government in an army: there must be penalties for specific acts, and the soldier must know just what he is to ex-

¹ Mark ix. 47, 48; cf. Isa. lxvi. 24.

pect, or military obedience, and with it efficiency, are gone.

Look at government in the state: the bed-rock on which to rest the conduct of the citizen is fear of the law; after that, we may cultivate in him patriotism and intelligence and piety if we can. Even those who are least willing to hear about fear in religion will admit, or even proclaim, that in human government there is only one way to reach some men and train them to love to obey the law, and that is to make them obey the law, whether they love it or not: we must make the law terrible in their eyes. Every one knows that for every murderer acquitted or pardoned, for every rascal whom a pettifogger helps to escape from justice, a dozen spring forward to copy the crime,—rascals, murderers, before in thought, but now encouraged to be such in act. There are few who ought not to be ready to confess that they themselves need sometimes to have before their eyes a distinct fear of the penalties of the law. The world believes in the enforcement of penalties for crime, and it believes in keeping those penalties before men's minds.

Look at the government of society through the fear of public sentiment. There is no one who is not continually shaping his words and his acts with a watchful regard to what his fellow-men may think or say or do.

Look at the government of us through natural law. One of the most terrible passages in all literature is Mill's account of the mercilessness with which nature strikes men down when they traverse her order. It is not true that she has far less mercy than the Gospel announces, for she has no mercy at all. Natural law is not softened by one drop of compassion. It "allows inappreciably little for good intentions." It mocks at repentance. It pays no heed to appeal. It is full of penalties that sometimes inscrutably fail, and sometimes wreak themselves upon the innocent while sparing the guilty, and some-

times sweep down with remorseless certainty, with inexorable faithfulness, upon the erring, whether they have meant to break the laws of nature or not. It is government of unmitigated fear. These things ought to be pondered by those who call the Bible a cruel book.

Conversations of companies of reclaimed drunkards have been recorded, the subject of conversation being their former vice. These men were terribly and humbly afraid of their own appetite for drink, so that they lived constantly under the lash, knowing that physical ruin hung upon so little a mistake as taking one sip, even of communion-wine. Because such a consciousness does not agitate us profoundly and constantly, we may be inclined to call our feeling prudence rather than fear: the name does not matter; whether the feeling be calm or agonizing, it, nevertheless, is fear.

Such is the government of man by man, and such is the government of man through natural law. Now, what do these analogies teach us to expect as to the place of fear in such government of man as the Bible especially announces?

In the first place, because there is among men no government which does not at the bottom rest upon fear of the law, we should expect to find the Bible holding up before man a fear of the law which God has made. Just such, after all allowances for hyperbole and anthropomorphism, is the position of the Bible: "As many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law"; the strongest appeals of the Bible are appeals to the fear of that judgment.

Again, because many, not only children but adults, can be kept from disobedient or injurious behavior only by fear of the penalties of family, social, civil, or natural law, the written or the unwritten law of man, we should expect to find men who can be kept from breaking what seems more expressly or

immediately the law of God—only by having its penalties brandished before their eyes. As a matter of fact, we often find that even this is not enough to deter men from wickedness. Many of us can recall moments in our own lives when we seemed tottering upon the edge of some headlong sin, when the brute that is in us was struggling mightily for victory over that which is spiritual and divine, that it might fling us over the brink into a gulf of vileness of heart and life; and nothing but the lightning of the wrath of God, flashing into our faces, prevented us from plunging down. If we could have been sure that death made an end of man, or even that the pains of our penalty would gradually wear themselves out, we might have dared; but, no! we were not sure; we did not dare. We were saved by a horrible fear. It is Shakespeare's knowledge of these stormy depths of the human heart that has made him one of the greatest preachers of all time.

Two rough men were once discussing the preaching of a certain man,—Bunyan would have called him "the Flatterer,"—and one of them said, with the evident approbation of the other: "If there is no hell, what's the use of trying to have religion?" It is easy to answer that this is a very low idea of religion, and the answer is right; it is a horribly low idea of religion, but, if experience has ever shown anything, it has shown that the doctrine that grapples with such men on the plane of their ideas, however gross, is the only doctrine that can curb their madness for the indulgence of the present passion and can set them on the road toward living by higher ideas. Is it inconceivable that men should flock to hear a preacher deny that there is any penalty attached by the Almighty to the breaking of his law, and, while he is laboring to show thus the goodness of God, they should be gathering courage to mock the goodness of God by yet more flagrant sins? A religion without

fear of penalty has slight power to hold men against a strong current of temptation to sin. Said Sainte-Beuve: "Are there not in the soul of man emotions, in human destiny mysteries and depths, which call for and justify the thunders of the Divine Word?" Literature abounds in expressions like this. Said Peter Bayne: "Perhaps in no other case does the power of Christianity to lay its hand on the heart of the race contrast so boldly with the fine-spun, flattering, but evanescent theories of a haughty philosophy," or, we may add, with the frivolousness of what men happen to think that they think.

And what is thus true of the low is true in its measure of us all. He has seen little of temptation who has not sometimes felt the fear of judgment holding him back from what in his deeper heart he knew to be evil, holding him back as though it were the visible hand of God.

In this point also the Scripture bears us out. It flashes the lightnings of the wrath of God into the faces of whole classes of people who pass with their associates for a fair sort of men, and it does not hesitate to hold up before them "the goodness and the severity of God." It persuades them as "knowing the fear of the Lord."

We see by analogy that fear of the penalties of law is not necessarily slavish or degrading. On the contrary, it is like the strong remedy for a violent disease; it helps to set men free. The paralysis can sometimes be broken only by a treatment that sets every nerve to leaping. Sometimes when one seems to be physically dead, he can be brought back to life by a treatment too vigorous for any but the most desperate case. The present writer sat once in a beautiful family-circle and heard them tell with bated breath how the center of that circle, the mother, lay once so evidently dead that the council of physicians went their ways to the living; and then the husband,

himself a physician, laid upon her tongue a medicine of terrific power. It was a desperate resort, too terrible to be used in any save such a case, but it brought her back to life. Years afterward her glance rested lovingly upon the face of her husband as he told the tale.

We can learn a lesson here from Æschylus, that Isaiah of the Greeks, as indeed the tragedies of Æschylus and his compeers were in so many respects the prophecy of the uninspired and yet almost inspired Greek mind. He says:¹ "It is good that fear sit as the guardian of the soul, forcing it into wisdom;—good that men should carry a threatening shadow in their hearts, even under the full sunshine; else, how shall they learn to revere the right?" It is such sayings that insure to Greek literature a permanent hold on the attention of men.

There is no shame in being afraid; the shame lies in needing the application of motives that appeal to fear. The facts being what they are, there is dignity, there is even nobleness, in moving with all speed to a position where fear will naturally be transfigured into faith, and hope, and love.

For we judge by analogy that the proper work of fear is to prepare men for motives of a higher kind. In civil life it certainly gets hold of men where patriotism, gratitude, love, admiration for examples of good citizenship, sense of honor, love of fair play, or principle of any kind, cannot stir them in the least, and it keeps at work upon them until they are able to respond to motives that are nobler than fear. It is thus in the family, the school, the state. Domestic affection, scholarly enthusiasm, love of country, are powerless sometimes, and then we are held by fear while these higher motives are getting their hold. How hungrily many a teacher or parent watches for the first evidence of the awakening of this higher life!

¹ *Eumenides.*

So it is in religion. The Scripture evidently regards love, toward God or man, as the highest motive on its list, but it expects, in a multitude of cases, to be able to commit the man to the guidance and tutelage of love only after he has been caught and conquered by fear.

Further, we judge by analogy that an advancing Christian character will depend less and less upon fear. When a family grows up as it should, the children forget whether or not they fear their parents, in the glow of a filial, docile, obedient, solicitous love. It is the same in the school and the state: the good scholar loves order; the good citizen "has at heart,"—in other words, loves,—that public welfare which is the aim of the law.

It is, indeed, true that fear alone does degrade. It is also true, and it is a truth that often needs much more to be insisted on, that love alone softens men into weakness or lets their passions grow strong for rebellion by-and-by. But fear, wrapped about by love as the warm flesh wraps the sinew and the bone,—this makes the tender and obedient and yet strong Christian man. The love, to be sure, because giving us pleasure, will be so much more in our thought that we shall almost lose the recollection of the fear, as in the man it is the glowing flesh that we see and remember, and not the sinew or the bone. In this sense we understand the Scripture: "Fear hath torment," but with advancing Christian character "perfect love" comes at last to "cast out" even the consciousness of fear. So we learn to say with Eckhart: "He who serveth God with fear, it is good; he who serveth him with love, it is better; but he who in fear can love, that is the best of all."

Again, from analogy we expect to find that the need of fear as an incentive will not often be altogether outgrown. With the best Christian there are moments when he needs to be

afraid of God. He ought always to remember that "God is love," but at times it may be necessary for him to remember that which is written: "Our God is a consuming fire."

It remains, then, to ask from what proceeds the current sentiment against the use of fear in religion.

With some it surely proceeds from the turbulence of human self-will, anxious to throw off the authority of God or to maintain some disapproved manner of life. But these people are restive under human laws that bear upon their favorite misdeeds.

With others it seems to proceed from an overwrought delicacy, which cannot bear to remember that God, because he is "our Father," must sometimes chastise. But such people cannot bear to have any one suffer under human or natural law; for the criminal they have only a gentle deprecation of his acts; they live on, amid the results of sin in pain and death, only by carefully shutting their eyes.

The Bible, with its stern determination that God shall rule, and that righteousness shall prevail, has no parley with protesting wilfulness; with its adaptation to the wants of men of every class in every age and under every phase of temptation, it does not talk merely of the excellence of virtue or of the love of God, much as it dwells upon these themes. It says plainly: "God is angry with the wicked, every day." It puts into the mouth of the gentle Jesus those fearful metaphors of the gnawing worm and the torturing fire. It has even that extraordinary expression, "the wrath of the Lamb."

With many, no doubt, the objection is to the practice of appealing only to fear. But this, certainly, is not the Bible-way of treating men. The Bible is continually shifting over from motives of fear to motives of faith and hope and love.

Yet we must remember that hope and fear are essentially the same: when we hope, there stands in the shadow the fear that the hope may not be attained. So George Eliot¹ speaks of even terror as the obverse of hope. All winning of men, all cheering of men on, by hope is in effect a gentle or a disguised way of driving them by fear.

With many the sentiment against the use of fear is a recoil from appeals to an unintelligent or a paralyzing fear. Such a fear there should never be. Coleridge never spoke more wisely than when he said that no emotion is valuable that does not exist in view of some truth. All fear should be intelligent and clear-headed, that our resulting action may be wise. First, the path of duty must be clearly seen; then the wrong of being out of it; then the fearful danger of such unrighteousness and unrighteousness; and, all along, the cross, the cross, as the emblem of man's hope of deliverance from the power and the penalties of sin. Long and patient must often be the work of opening the man's eyes to the facts of his duty, the precise nature of his guilt, the extent of his peril: in the startling expression that the recent revisions of our English Bible have given us, he may be in danger of "an eternal sin."² Then should be heard the voice of Christ telling of the love and mercy of God. Such a use of fear is the Bible-use of fear, and it has been the means of redemption, "the way of salvation," to millions.

The scientific habits and temper of the times have raised up another kind of objection: we have come to think of God as farther back from immediate or direct activity than we had been wont to suppose. In that respect we take the Bible less literally now: the impulse of creation, of causation, of providence, seems now to work itself out through natural or spiritual law.

¹ *Romola*, lxvii. ² *Mark* iii. 29: *αιωνιον διασθηματος*.

Hence many feel an inward protest when God is spoken of as directly active in any way, and especially as putting penalty on man. The penalty is thought of as following naturally in the wake of the sin. The warnings, it is felt, should be along this line.

It is not only interesting but important to notice that some of the most impressive warnings of the Bible are couched in terms that are altogether in harmony with these ideas; they make no mention of God: "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth unto his own flesh shall [will?] of the flesh reap corruption"; "Whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he thinketh he hath"; "Every one that committeth sin is the bond-servant [slave] of sin"; or, more passionately, the mighty metaphors of James and Jude.¹ Rightly considered, are not these words as terrible as anything else that the Bible contains?

Doubtless, too, there should be a larger recognition of the fact that the Bible often attributes to the immediate action of God that which really works itself out through the laws of nature or the forces of character. If a man only has an adequate sense of what spiritual ruin is and how it comes about, we are quite willing that he should think that even the great and general "Judgment," "at the last day," stands chiefly or even wholly for our own verdict, and the verdict that we shall give each other, upon the final outcome of what we have been.

But, whether we emphasize this side of the matter, or think of it and talk of it as the writers of the Bible put it in their most exalted moments,—back of all stands God. To go far back in causation, natural, moral, spiritual, is to come at

¹ Gal. vi. 7, 8; Luke viii. 18; John viii. 34; Jas. v. 3, etc.; Jude 11-13, 23.

last to him. And, either way, "sin, when it is full-grown, bringeth forth death."¹ Whatever that may stand for, it is a lesson of fear.

As the central thing, is it not true that the most reasonable part of the current sentiment as to fear in religion is a protest against that use of fear which makes God seem unmerciful, inconsiderate of human weakness, exultant at human suffering, a stranger to pity and love? It is useless to deny that, literally taken, such are many parts of the Old Testament and an occasional one of the New: we listen to them quietly because we interpret them from the Hebrew standpoint. But such also was much of the preaching and the writing of a century and a half ago, at least as it now falls upon men's minds; and it is not so easy to bear. There are in the sermons of Jonathan Edwards passages that to the man of to-day seem worthy only of a priest of Moloch, passages that make us wonder how they failed to scorch and shrivel every one of the tendrils by which the human soul should lay hold on God.

To-day our errors are likely to be of the opposite kind: some preachers and popular writers rarely suggest that there can be such a thing as sin or spiritual harm.

Between the two lies the truth. The dominant note of the Bible is not threatening, but mercy. Sin still blights the soul. And yet God is "not willing that any should perish." "A bruised reed will he not break, and a smoldering wick will he not quench." He urges the weary and the heavy-laden to roll off upon Christ their burden of sin and of fear. He stoops to hear the first murmur of repentant prayer.

¹ Jas. i. 15.