

ARTICLE IV.

SOME PERILS OF CURRENT VIEWS OF
IMMANENCE.

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EVERY great and precious truth suffers from perversion. Unfair applications are made of it, unjustifiable conclusions are drawn from it, and sometimes it is so confused with specious error as either to lose its proper place and function, or be put under the ban of suspicion. Such is the peril that now threatens that inspiring and comforting conception of God comprehended under the term *immanence*. When the preacher refers to some aspects of this doctrine, unless he is unusually clear and discriminating, he will be misunderstood. Either he will be set down as a pantheist, or be interpreted as favoring Christian Science, Theosophy, New Thought, or some other of the current sects, most of which are propagating a jumble of subjective idealism and Hindu pantheism.

WHAT IMMANENCE IS.

1. It is a theory of the mode of the divine existence. Immanence means indwelling. It is the essential indwelling of God in the universe. Yet he is distinct *from* the universe which he has made and is superior to it. Bowne defines the doctrine thus: "God is the omnipresent ground of all finite existence . . . the world continually depends upon, and is upheld by the ever-living, ever-present, ever-working God." Illingworth, basing his view upon the analogy of the indwelling spirit of man in his body, says: "The divine presence

which we recognize in nature will be the presence of a Spirit which infinitely transcends the material order, yet indwells it." John Caird affirms: "God is not simply the Creator of the world, but the inward principle and ground of its being." Clark describes immanence as "omnipresent energy," and adds, "Immanence means that God is everywhere and always present in the universe, while transcendence means that He is not limited by it. He is a free Spirit inhabiting His universe, but surpassing it." Some one has illustrated the immanence of God in the world by a sponge filled with water. The water is in every part of the sponge. The illustration fails in that it contains no suggestion of the transcendence of God. It seems to invest God in the world in such a way as to deprive him of freedom and transcendence. Illingworth's suggestion is wiser. God is in his world as I am in my body. Yet I am greater than my body. I transcend it. I am in every part of my body, potentially. It may be convenient to aid thought with some such illustration, because it is difficult to associate our ideas of personality with that of a universal Spirit. We are accustomed to thinking in the terms of time and space. Hence we localize God. The Hebrews did the same thing. Yet the attempt to free the idea of God from spatial limitations is inevitable in the evolution of human thought. Pfeiderer says: "God is neither *in* space, nor *outside* of space, but Himself spaceless, founds space; i. e. embraces in Himself all that is in space as mutually related and connected in Himself in the articulated world." When this task of thinking God free from the categories of time and space is accomplished, the conception of immanence will be more thoroughly appreciated.

Human thought upon God's relation to the world has oscillated between two extremes; from the deistic conception, which entirely removes him from active relation to the world,

to the pantheistic, which identifies him with it, so investing him in it as to obliterate his personality and destroy his freedom. Deism denies his omnipresence; pantheism denies his omnipotence. The task of Christian thought is to find the middle ground, in a union of *immanence* and *transcendence*. The deistic notion of God persists in the pernicious and confusing distinction between "natural" and "supernatural," in our doctrine of special providences, and in much of our praying, which implies God's externality to nature and asks for his entrance into it for a special act. Pantheism, on the other hand, so identifies God with nature as to resolve him into an impersonal force virtually imprisoned within matter, and, equally with deism, makes answer to prayer impossible. God is the only reality. The world and all it contains is but a phantom. Spinoza declared: "It is only imagination that lends to things seen and temporal the appearance of reality." Thus in the Being of an absolute God disappear the freedom and personality of man. "All is God," as Mrs. Eddy says, and in her hope of being "assimilated to God," she agrees with Hinduism that salvation issues in re-absorption into the Being of God. As John Caird says: "This union with the Infinite is union with vacuity."

2. The Christian view of immanence is close to pantheism. The check is the transcendent idea. God is transcendent as well as immanent. He is in his world but is greater than the world. The universe is an organism of which he is the life and power. Its laws and processes are God's operations manifesting himself and unfolding his purpose. In the same way he indwells and sustains man. This view avoids the unnatural distinction between the natural and the supernatural, which is a relic of deism, and father of the notion of special providences as the *principal* evidences of God's presence and power in the

world. At every moment and in every place he is working in and controlling nature. "Nothing is more natural than the supernatural." Nothing so clearly evinces his presence and mastery as this regularity and beneficence.

Here is the meeting ground of philosophy, science, and theology. Philosophy, as in the teaching of Lotze, holds to the idea of a universal energy which establishes order in the universe. Physical science is approaching the same position. Behind all natural phenomena there is an unseen, immeasurable power that causes evolutions and multiplications. What is this power? The scientist may answer, "I do not know," but the *fact* he acknowledges. The Christian theist says: "This is the immanent, transcendent God." This force exhibits tokens of personality as we understand personality. It works in an orderly way. It works toward definite ends. These ends are moral. Here we come in sight of a personal, moral Being as the ground of all things. So long as science pauses with phenomena and laws, it stops just short of a sufficiently comprehensive idea to include the cause and continuance of laws and phenomena. Neither does it account for man, his freedom, moral nature, and universal religiousness. Unless science boldly seeks a ground idea broad enough to include *all* these, it is chargeable with defeat or cowardice. It is forced to the alternative, materialism or theism. As Le Conte said, "Either God operates motion, or motion operates itself." Thus science and philosophy will ultimately unite in the Christian confession of God.

DIFFICULTIES AND DANGERS.

1. Philosophical difficulties.

(1) How shall we reconcile immanence and human freedom? If God is immanent and active in man as he is in the

world, how can man's actions be free? This is the old problem, and it is unanswerable ultimately. We have to fall back upon experience rather than upon any philosophic principle. We know that we are measurably free, and yet we all realize our dependence upon God.

In the attempt to shed light upon this problem, suppose we begin with the biblical declaration that man is "made in the image of God." This likeness must be sought in the spiritual constitution of man. He has made us sharers in his nature. May this not be in reason, love, and freedom? If we were to develop normally, would it not be in the direction of the divine nature? Freedom, however, makes possible the choice of sin, which hinders the natural development of these capacities. Now while God is present within us, it is not as a coercive power, but as a persuasive moral influence, as the principle of a higher life. No one holds that he is independent of God, or that he would continue to exist if God were absent. We all depend, good and bad alike, continually upon him. That within this general dependence we have a relative independence is the conviction of experience. For, *first*, we have certain feelings and thoughts, and perform certain deeds which are our own. It is absurd to ascribe them to another. We certainly could not attribute them to God without involving more insoluble problems still. For example, if God thinks my thoughts, with all their errors and uncertainties, how can he be the Supreme Reason at the same time? Multiply this by the number of finite spirits, and we have innumerable confusions in God, which are insoluble as long as we think of him as playing both sides of the game. *Secondly*, when we reflect upon our life as a whole, we are unable to regard it as completely self-sufficient and self-centered. We do not know how these two, myself and God, are joined, how immanence

and freedom agree, yet we know we cannot abandon either without faring worse. We must agree upon the coexistence and the separateness of the finite and the Infinite, which make possible moral relations and moral government. Through moral union with Him there must be an ever-increasing immanence of God in man, which Paul has described as the "fullness of the measure of the stature of Christ." Sin is the wrong use of freedom, and, as far as it rules, hinders this immanence of God in us.

(2) There is a second difficulty. How, on the basis of a thoroughgoing immanence, can we account for the evil in the world? If God is personally present and directly acting in the forces of nature, why is he not the immediate agent of all the dreadful things that occur—storms, earthquakes, famines, plagues, wrecks—as well as the direct inspirer of all the savagery of beasts? Here again it is easier to ask than to answer. The universe is a vast organism, slowly developing according to orderly, beneficent laws. Great ends are to be served. The individual subserves the need of the whole. Many things which we deem evil, may not be so from God's point of view, or when we consider the high ends which they serve, and the progress which they inspire. Walker declares that God as he is in himself is not in the world, but only his reason is here carrying on the process of evolution. Hence God cannot be held responsible for the so-called evils.¹ But this involves an unthinkable and incredible diremption of divine personality. If God is to give rise to such an intelligible world as we see, peopled with a race of free beings, the experiences which now seem so dreadful cannot be avoided save as human progress eliminates them. God is perfect Reason, hence he works in the best possible way and this is the best possible

¹ Christian Theism and Spiritual Monism, pp. 247-250.

world. He cannot abrogate himself to spare his children the pain of progress, otherwise how would they gain dominion of nature at all? How could a race of free rational beings develop into God-likeness, if spared all hardships? God cannot always spare us and at the same time make us.

2. We note some dangers of a pantheistic interpretation of immanence.

(1) Some current views of immanence tend to obliterate the personality of God. The insistence that God is in every cell of the body, in every atom of matter, and in every portion of space, renders the conception of the divine Being nebulous and impersonal. He becomes "The Only Substance," "The All of Things." In short, we have pantheism pure and simple. Most of the religious fads are founded upon this conception of God borrowed from the East. Christian Science denies the reality of matter. All is mind. That mind is God. We are but fragments of God. Our goal is "assimilation to God." Thus disappear together the personality of God and man in the "motionless abyss of the unconditioned." The emptiness and hopelessness of such a philosophy (for it is not religion) needs no further comment.

(2) One notes also the pantheistic construction of immanence that shuts God up to a prearranged order, which he cannot transgress. This denial of transcendence leaves us as helpless as under deism. Prayer concerning affairs in the physical order is futile, because the answer to such a prayer would involve disturbance in nature and changeableness in God.

The element of truth in this view is the point of departure toward false conclusions. Obviously God has an orderly method of conducting the universe. We call it law. But God, not law, is the ultimate fact. This regular and beneficent way of work-

ing is evidence of God's presence. But to affirm that he is shut up to these *observable* ways, or known laws, is quite another thing. To do so is to affirm that we have compassed the physical order and have acquired exhaustive knowledge of the divine methods and resources. For if we have *not* mastered nature and exhausted God, events which we term miraculous may occur according to laws deeper than we now know. If God is free and supreme, who dares to assert that the *visible* processes of nature include the entire range of his activities? But this is exactly what is implied in a theory of immanence which agrees with materialism in denying God's transcendence over nature. It is strange, indeed, if God cannot work in ways as much beyond *us* as our present knowledge surpasses that of the ancient Hebrews, who called many events miraculous that are not so to us. If God is really transcendent as well as immanent, then events outside the *known* order may occur. We call them "miracles" (an unfortunate term), conveying the idea that they are opposed to nature, which is impossible if God is immanent in nature. Back of the observed laws of nature is the divine causality. God works in his world freely. Uniformity and change are alike the expressions of his will, and neither can disturb the ongoing of the universe. Such an event as the resurrection of Jesus is as possible as is the revolution of the world on its axis.

Those who hold to an immanence which denies the possibility of "miracles" and the validity of prayer save as a reflex influence, endeavor to escape the logic of their position by affirming that God is free and transcendent in the spiritual sphere, but limited in the physical. Martineau said: "God may act naturally as a free cause in the spiritual sphere, communicating His grace in answer to prayer."¹ If your child is

¹ Study of Religion, II. 190-194.

ill, God can give you peace and resignation, but he cannot stay the disease. But if the physical order subserves the spiritual, and God is transcendent *and* immanent in both, why may not such an event as the restoration of your child be possible and natural as a revelation of God's presence and goodness?

(3) One of the invariable accompaniments of thoroughgoing immanence is an exaggerated emphasis upon the moral consciousness as the ultimate, if not the exclusive, organ of revelation. One hastens to affirm grateful acceptance of all the light that comes from this source. If there were no other it would be foremost. If we were sinless beings it would be perfect. We believe in the "religion of the spirit" (Sabatier), but this does not warrant an indifferent or contemptuous treatment of the Scriptures, to which we are indebted for the greatest Light, the record of Him who is "Light of the world." The declaration "You may take away the Bible and I will still have my religion," needs explanation. What kind of a religion would it be? Take the Bible out of the world, and what would be the condition in a hundred years? The heathen has a moral consciousness. He has gods. But what gods! Why do we send him the Bible? Plato acknowledged this inner light, but confessed its dimness and longed for a surer word.

Such are some of the tendencies of current views of immanence. It is the peril of pantheism, which robs God of transcendence and personality. It is the peril of religious starvation. It denies the value of prayer, save as a reflex agent. It overemphasizes the authority of the religious consciousness and minimizes the importance of the record of divine revelation contained in the Scriptures. Gladly do we

accept in *general* some theory of divine immanence. God dwells in his world. He works in every part of it, exerting his power and wisdom in sustaining its order and carrying out his beneficent purposes. But we cannot believe that he is actually invested in nature, or shut up to its *observable* order. He is greater than his world. He is *transcendent* as well as immanent.

Does not the acceptance of his *transcendence* and *immanence* in all spheres save us from pantheism and guard against the pantheistic isms rife to-day? Does it not harmonize with Jesus' teaching regarding God's Supremacy and Fatherhood? Does it not save us the reality and value of prayer for all varieties of need? The sovereign, ever-present Father, who notes the sparrow's fall and adorns the blossom of a day, will hear and answer the prayers of his children for temporal *and* spiritual blessings. No fixed, mechanical order of nature compels him to stand helpless to answer the cries of needy men. The humblest or the highest may seek him with confidence. The grounds of this faith are individual and aggregate experience, the beneficence of nature, and the character of God as exhibited in the Christ of the New Testament.