

## "A Finite God."

IT is quite noteworthy, in reading almost every modern attack on Christianity (whether direct or casual, whether in the form of a system of Philosophy intended to replace the Gospel by something deemed more "adapted to the modern civilized world" like those of Bergson and Eucken, or in a magazine article or an up-to-date novel), to find that while the writer is denouncing "Orthodoxy" and "Christian Theology" as "obsolete, incomprehensibly narrow, and hopelessly opposed to the enlightened spirit and broad-minded liberality of the present age," he propounds a system of religion which—in the main, and apart from a few crudities and logical absurdities—is merely a somewhat clumsy restatement of some of the most vital and peculiar doctrines of the Christian Faith as held in all the ages. The propounder of such a theory fully believes himself to have made a great discovery, something never dreamt of before in the history of man. He states it sometimes in earnest terms, showing how deeply human happiness depends upon its wide acceptance. He contrasts this great new teaching of his with the absurdities of "Orthodox belief," very much to the disadvantage of the latter. But any well-read Christian believer, when he has mastered the often ill-chosen language in which the "new" discovery is set forth, finds to his amazement that it is nothing but what he has always known well. At least this is what I myself have noticed again and again.

That this should be so is a proof how ignorant even well educated people are of the real, genuine doctrines of the Gospel. For this there is absolutely no excuse. It is not even necessary to read Greek in order to be able to learn what the New Testament teaches on the most vital topics. It is quite possible to purchase an English version of the book. There still exist a few churches and chapels in England. Yet the great majority of writers, though devoid of any real knowledge of Christian Theology (which they have never taken the trouble to study), and even of the Bible itself, fancy that they know all about it, and are fully qualified not only to sit in judgment upon it but to expound its deepest doctrines and to hold them up to contempt. They would not venture to expose their ignorance by dealing in a similar way with Platonism or any other

philosophical or religious system, though their ignorance on such subjects may actually be less complete than it is regarding the teachings of the New Testament.

But the important fact to notice is that, opposed to and ignorant of Christianity as such writers often show themselves to be, they frequently insist upon certain leading doctrines of the Gospel as essential to men in order that they may in some degree understand the mysteries of existence, that they may find life worth living, that they may obtain comfort in sorrow and light on their " way to dusty death," yet all the time they have no idea that they are preaching the Gospel at all. What a testimony this is to the power of the truth and man's need of the Gospel message! If it is not irreverent to do so, we may say of the Truth what the poet says of Nature—

" Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret."

An example of this fact is afforded by what Sir Oliver Lodge and Mr. H. G. Wells have in recent years written about " A Finite God." To deal only with the latter, we may turn to a book of his written since the present War began, entitled *Mr. Britling sees it Through*. Before the War, Britling, a man utterly destitute of religion, spends his Sundays in playing hockey with his family and friends. In the War he loses his idolized son Hugh. Almost heartbroken, he speaks thus to Letty, a young woman who is described as having been " a happy Atheist " until news of the death of her young husband Teddy in battle rendered her almost crazy with grief. She " had never given religion any thought but contemptuous thought for some years." Britling himself was by no means too moral a man. In his trouble Mr. Britling naturally finds himself destitute of hope or consolation, until he makes what he thinks a great discovery, which is stated in these words :

" The theologians . . . have had silly absolute ideas that He " (God) " is all powerful. That He is omni-everything. But the common sense of men knows better. Every real religious thought denies it. After all, the real God of the Christians is Christ, not God Almighty ; a poor mocked and wounded God nailed on a cross of matter. . . . Some day He will triumph. . . . But it is not fair to say that He causes all things now. You have been misled. It is a theologian's folly. God is not absolute ; God is finite. . . . A Finite God who struggles in His great and comprehensive way—who is *with* us—that is the essence of all real religion. . . . Necessity is a thing beyond God—beyond good and ill, beyond space and time, a mystery everlastingly impenetrable. God is nearer than that. Necessity is the utter.

most thing, but God is the innermost thing. ‘ Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet.’ . . . It is, you see, so easy to understand that there is a God, and how complex and wonderful and brotherly He is, when one thinks of those dear boys who by the thousand, by the hundred thousand, have laid down their lives. . . . If there was nothing else in all the world but our kindness for each other, or the love that made you weep in this kind October sunshine, or the love I bear Hugh—if there was nothing else at all, if everything else was cruelty and mockery and filthiness and bitterness, it would still be certain that there was a God of love and righteousness ” (pp. 397, 398).

The pathos of this scene is moving, and the truth of the argument for the existence of a loving and righteous God founded upon the very existence of such attributes, in a limited degree, among men, though by no means new, is obvious. The absurdity of postulating a blind Necessity in order to get rid of the idea of an Almighty Ruler of the Universe is not less clear. So is the apparent ignorance of the fact that Christianity absolutely *denies* (instead of teaching, as Mr. Britling fancies) that God is responsible for all moral and physical evil. The Book of Job, if it stood alone, would demonstrate this. The Bible ascribes all evil, even physical death itself, to the Devil, not to God. Our Lord’s miracles of healing are described as “ destroying the works of the Devil.” Christ “ groans in anger ” (as the Greek denotes) at Lazarus’ death, when approaching his tomb with the weeping sisters. Regarding evil in the world He says in a parable, “ An enemy hath done this.” Christ is to reign until “ He hath put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is Death.” Of course it is the fashion—or was before the War—to deny the Devil’s existence; but that is not the fault of Christianity, nor is it one of “ the silly absolute ideas ” of the theologians. By negating what not only Scripture but reason and common sense, and even experience, teaches, men have got into a terrible moral difficulty, which they are incapable of solving.

But the main point to which we wish to call attention here is the “ discovery ” that God is “ finite,” not Infinite and not Almighty. By the latter term Mr. Wells seems to mean responsible for all moral and physical suffering. Leaving this aside as already dealt with, it should be observed that God’s Infinity is a philosophic rather than a Biblical doctrine. We have no reason to doubt its abstract truth, but it is not taught, or at least is not insisted on, in those Books which form the literary foundation and authoritative

expression of the Christian Faith.<sup>1</sup> But what the Bible does insist upon is that God is the Living God, that He is Personal, and that He may be known to men, if not fully, at least very really. Now a Person by virtue of his personality is necessarily conceived of as finite. True, Herbert Spencer has clearly seen that God must be " *at least* personal," though doubtless as far superior to mere personality as the personal is superior to the mineral. But, looking at the matter from a philosophical point of view, the greater must include the less. The infinite must include the finite. Hence it is not necessary to prove that God is not infinite in order to prove His Personality, which is one of the things on which Mr. Wells most earnestly insists, and rightly, in the passage we have quoted above. It suffices to show, as the Fact of Christ does show most convincingly, that God has revealed Himself to us as a Person, as one that understands us, feels for us, loves us. This is just what is imperatively needed to satisfy the earnest yearnings of the human heart in such times of trouble, anxiety, sorrow, as those in which we live. *Now* at least, if never before, the Gospel is able, and alone is able, to give us what all of us are longing for. Without in the least intending to do so, Mr. Wells has produced a very strong argument in favour of the Faith at which he rails.

Reason teaches us that Almighty God *must* limit Himself, so to speak, in order to reveal Himself to His finite creatures. For instance, He must limit His might, if He does not wish to destroy their freedom of will and action. But that He should wish to destroy this freedom is unthinkable. For He would not have created man's will free had He had the intention of depriving him of such liberty. By destroying freedom of will, He would be destroying not merely the possibility of vice, cruelty, vileness, but also that of virtue, kindness, purity, goodness, self-devotion for the good of others, fidelity to one's plighted word at whatever cost to oneself, the laying down of one's own life to save that of a friend, or even of a helpless foe. There could be no good if there were no liberty to choose and do evil. Scripture, though not teaching this in so many words, distinctly does so in the whole history of God's dealings with the human race. Not only is evil prohibited and revealed in its true hideousness, but it is forbidden in the clearest

<sup>1</sup> Apart from quotations from the Septuagint, the title Πατοκράτωρ is applied to God only once in the New Testament. In the Old Testament "Almighty" is hardly a correct rendering of the Hebrew *Shaddai*.

and sternest language. Every noble feeling in man is appealed to in order to induce him to choose good and be a “ worker together with God ” in doing it.

As man’s being is finite, so too is his understanding. As one has to become a child, so to speak, in order to understand a child, and still more in order to make a child feel that you understand and sympathize with him, so God, in order to be able to reveal Himself helpfully to man, must in the nature of things—owing to the limitations of man’s nature—reveal Himself as a man, *become a man*, in what is the true essence of man’s nature as originally created. God must therefore in a measure and for a time in relation to man limit His own infinitude and become finite. This He did in the Incarnation.

Hence we see that Reason demands what Orthodox Christianity teaches. It is, of course, well known that such a thing was never even thought of in pre-Christian religious or philosophical systems. Had it been, it would have been of no practical avail. For what men needed then, and what they need now, was not and is not a theory, however beautiful, but a fact : the “ Fact of Christ.” This is what Holy Scripture presents to us as promised, as foreshadowed, as fulfilled.

From this point of view, at any rate, Christian Theology is by no means irrational or obsolete. On the contrary, it is thoroughly reasonable and up to date, in the sense of being in complete accordance with human requirements to-day, as in all ages. This we must admit, even though it teaches the “ old, old story,” the “ faith once for all delivered unto the saints.” It does not require to be modified or “ modernized ” ; much less does it deserve to be scoffed at or rejected. But it does deserve and require to be carefully and reverently studied in the authoritative books in which it is so clearly taught, and above all in the life and character of Him Who alone can reveal, and has revealed, His Father to us men, in as far as He can be understood and known by finite human beings. For, as Orthodox Theology teaches and has always taught, the Lord Jesus Christ actually is “ Immanuel, *God with us.*” As St. Paul writes, He, “ being ” (originally and essentially) “ in the form of God, thought it not a thing to be grasped at to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, and, being found in fashion as a man, humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the

death of the Cross." That is why Christ is "the real God of the Christians," not as being another God, but as being one with His Father. That is why "there is none other Name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved," if we are willing to know God and to be saved at all. Therefore it is that He Himself declared, "No man cometh unto the Father but by Me."

As God limits His infinite power in order to enable man to possess freedom of will, and to a large extent of action, so there is nothing illogical in holding that He has also limited His power in order to permit something of the same kind to other beings higher than man in their spiritual nature, as Scripture asserts. The Bible does not fully explain the origin of Evil, nor is it necessary (or probably even possible) for us to understand it completely. What in fact *can* we fully understand? Even such an ordinary matter as the method in which our will affects our own movements is far from having been clearly discovered. But, though not explaining the origin of Evil, Holy Scripture reveals at least enough to enable us to perceive that Evil does not originate in God, that He is not its Author; on the contrary, that He is so far from willing or causing it that He hates it and offers us help to overcome it, without in any way constraining our freedom of will in the matter. He warns us, and helps us, if we will, because He cares for us infinitely. Evil is opposed to our original nature as made in His image, just as it is to His. Moral evil is, in the long run, if persisted in, fatal to us. Hence it must be overcome. Therefore it is that we are warned, nay entreated, to shun it. At least this is what Orthodox Christianity teaches. Surely it is easier to grasp and believe this than to hold that God is responsible for all the evil in the world, that He is the Author of Evil as well as of Good, which is the only alternative to accepting the Christian doctrine on the subject. The latter is not only God's own revelation but also commends itself to the reason with which He has endowed us. Hence St. Paul well says, "Since God is with us, who can be against us?"—effectively, that is.

In the extract above quoted from Mr. Wells, God is represented as sharing in our struggle against "Necessity." As, however, Necessity is but a bogey, we do not find the suggestion very helpful. But the Christian Revelation teaches us that there is a real struggle going on with a very real foe—Evil in its many forms. Against that foe Scripture tells us that we are not left to struggle alone. God

Incarnate is with us in the stern and painful contest, sharing our human nature once and for ever, uniting it indissolubly with His own Divine Nature, so that He styles Himself the Son of Man, while at the same time revealing Himself by every act and word as also most truly the Son of God, One with His Father. So “ we have not an high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmity, but one who was in all points tried like as we are, yet without sin.” Of Him it is said that “ His goings forth are from of old, from everlasting,” that He is “ The First and the Last and the Living One,” Who, though He once was “ nailed on a cross of matter ” and there died for us all, can say, “ Behold, I am alive again for evermore,” being “ Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.”

In time of peace and comfort men used too often to scoff at this “ dogmatism,” as they called it. Now many are beginning to feel that such teaching must in the very nature of things be true, everlastingly true, because so much needed. Yet some seem to fancy that they have themselves evolved the doctrine from their inner consciousness, and that it is a new and true religion, far better than the Christian Faith! It is indeed ever new, ever true; but it is none the less the old, clear and distinct teaching of the Word of God. It is the most vital part of Christianity, the essence of the Gospel, the “ Good News,” which Christ revealed.

Accepting this, we Christians have peace and comfort in God, “ the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort,” and therefore believe that God is Love, that a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without our Father, that “ all things work together for good to those that love God.” We need not to accept the doctrine because a novelist, or even a man of science, has newly propounded it. We have long known it, because we have the Fact of Christ.

The teaching of our theologians may have many defects, inasmuch as theologians are but human. But the main doctrines of our faith, being founded on the Word of God, are as true to-day as they were of old, and, when reverently studied and properly understood, they are as much needed and as comforting and strengthening in our modern trials, sorrows, and perplexities, as they proved themselves to be in the days of the martyrs, whose blood was the seed of the Church of God.