

ANTHROPOMORPHIC RELIGION.

THOSE who cling, in this age of restless and unquiet thought, to the broad substance of the faith of Christendom—those even who, without that faith, recognize in the phenomena that surround them the footprints of a Creator, and in the order and succession of events the purpose of a Ruler—are told sometimes that they are but trusting to the shadow of their own thoughts, projected, as it were, on the clouds of dream-land. “You think of God,” men say to them, “as after the likeness of men; you reason from your own experience, your own consciousness to that which altogether transcends them, and you frame theories which you cannot bring to the test of any satisfying experiment. Christianity, like most, if not all, the other religions of the world, is essentially anthropomorphic.” That phrase, not in itself a very accurate one, is treated as if it settled the whole question, and the history of the religions of the world is dealt with on the supposition that it explains them all. Man finds himself capable, with the materials that are before him, with instruments that he makes out of them, to produce new combinations and to direct existing forces to new results; and so he thinks of a great Work-Master laying out the heavens as with rule and compass, imposing upon the creatures that He has made laws which they cannot but obey. He makes a watch or a steam-engine with a definite purpose, adapted to a special work, and so he ascribes to that unknown Creator a will that designs and plans. He is the father of a family, or the head of a tribe, or

the monarch of a people, ruling by laws of another kind, which those whom he governs, being free, can obey or not, and he seeks to sway them to his will by penalties or rewards; and so he pictures to himself a King in the Heaven of heavens, ruling men after a like method, with a power absolute and supreme, able to reward and punish, not in this life only, but beyond the limits of the grave. He finds the earthly monarch not inaccessible to prayers and supplications, pleased with deference and homage, propitiated by praise or gifts, persuaded by them or by the influence of favourites to pardon where otherwise he would condemn; and so he thinks of God also as hearing prayers, accepting and requiting praise, appeased by sacrifice and mediatorial intercession. The more distinct and definite the faith thus held, as in the religions which we speak of as revealed, the more it is chargeable with this anthropomorphic tendency. We speak, we are told, of the plans, decrees, counsels of the Godhead, as though we were dealing with those of an earthly ruler; we assume that we can judge as He judges; we bring before men transactions which have the semblance of a forensic compact, as if they had passed between human representatives of statesmanship or jurisprudence. We speak of God, as Mr. Matthew Arnold boldly puts it, as if He were "a man in the next street."

This, if I mistake not, is a fair statement of the language of not a few of those who are recognized as leaders of scientific thought or prophets of light and culture among us. It is reproduced in many forms. We hear echoes of it in our popular litera-

ture ; yet more, we find echoes also, many of us, in the whispers of our own hearts. Those from whom it comes are not, all of them, mockers and scoffers, even if their words sometimes ring as with the tone of scorn .They are earnest in their search for scientific truth, or in their efforts after a higher than a sensuous life, or in their pleadings with men to seek after righteousness and to try the experiment whether that, after all, is not the secret of true blessedness. It is not well to meet even such words as theirs, destructive as they seem to be of our trust and hope, simply with the cry of panic or indignation.

I will add that there is so far an obvious measure of truth in the view thus asserted which gives it at least a claim to be heard, on the strength of which we do well to listen to it as a warning. It is true that in those religions of the world which we group together under the name of Heathenism, in many of the thoughts which men have had under those which we speak of as revealed, this anthropomorphic element has mingled itself very largely. The popular religions of Greece and Rome, of Egypt and India, did to a large extent think of the gods as made in the likeness of men, with their jealousies and their lusts, their loves and their hates, their strife for mastery, their successions of rulers and of dynasties. They ascribed all the joys or the troubles of their life to their intervention, and when the winds were adverse sought to buy their favour with a virgin's blood, or to gain a blessing by costly hecatombs. Even in Israel, with its sharply-defined belief in One God, that thought was not absent, and

Psalmist and Prophet had to utter their rebuke: "My ways are not as your ways, nor my thoughts as your thoughts" (Isa. lv. 8). "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself" (Psa. l. 21). And no one can trace, I believe, the various phases even of the theology of Christendom without feeling that here too the aspects of the faith which have been formulated into systems have been modified according to the thoughts of great masses of mankind in this or that age, or of individual thinkers of great power and strong will. Arianism rose out of the transfer to the Divine Nature of the conditions of paternity which belong to our common life. Calvinism starts with the ideal of a sovereignty like that of an earthly ruler, absolute, uncontrolled, brooking no resistance. Theories of Infallibility or Inspiration, of Atonement or Universalism, have started from the assumption that God must have acted in the past, or must act in the future, as men think that He ought to act; that is, as they themselves would have acted, had they been seated on the throne of the Heaven of heavens. The bitter scorn of a great poet of our own is hardly too bitter when he brings before us, as the outcome of this method of searching and seeking after God, the picture of the half-brute nature of a Caliban working out a natural theology for itself, and transferring all his blind impulses and ferocious caprice to the transfigured Caliban of whom he thinks as the ruler of the universe.¹

So much then—not, I believe, too much—in the way of admitting that we are all liable to be

¹ Browning's *Caliban upon Setebos*, in "Dramatis Personæ."

swayed by this so-called anthropomorphic tendency, that it has shaped or modified the religious beliefs of mankind very largely. And yet, admitting this, I am bold to ask whether, after all, this method of search is not a true and right method? whether, when pursued under limitations which the method itself suggests, it does not lead men to the truest thoughts of God which they can attain to in the absence of a truth not discovered but revealed? whether, assuming a revelation, it does not help us rightly to interpret it? Is it a bolder step, when we have grouped and analysed the phenomena of animated existence, when we have seen at every stage, palpable to the unaided eye, disclosed in endless ramifications the further we push our scrutiny, the adequateness of means to ends, compared with which the watch or the steam-engine is the work of a bungling craftsman, to assume that as in every such structure that can be referred to man we have found a purpose and a place, so here also the work implies the design of a great Work-Master—is it, I say, bolder, or less philosophical, to carry on our induction from experience to a conclusion which, it is true, we cannot test by experiment, but which is in harmony with all we have discovered, than it is to take a sudden leap beyond the regions of experience, and to find in the darkness which even the scientific imagination fails to penetrate, that “the elementary particles of matter are instinct with the promise and the potency of life.”? And if men are led, consciously in the case of the man of refined intellect, unconsciously in that of the child or the untaught, through that thought to the con-

ception of a Mind invested with will and character and all that constitutes personality in us, are they wandering from the true path if they reason from the known to the unknown, from the analogy of what they see and know to a conception of that which lies beyond sight and knowledge? True it is that even on that path men have lost their way, and framed for themselves false imaginations, and worshipped gods that were no gods; but the secret of their error has been that they have not been true to the method or to their own nature. Over and above the power to produce effects, and the will that purposes and plans, which lead them to the thought of a Creator and a Ruler, they have in them that which witnesses to a law written in their hearts—a sense of right or wrong in the things they do, or even in their wishes and their thoughts; a consciousness of *being* right and wrong. In proportion as they act on that law, they find a peace and joy, even if sense rebels and the world frowns. If they are led by the prospect of more immediate pleasure or profit, they find that the law vindicates itself, sometimes in shattered health, sometimes in loss of fame or fortune; sometimes, where these are not, in loss of tranquillity and peace and a fearful looking for the day of judgment. Is it more in the path of inductive reasoning to see in these phenomena only that “drift or current of things which makes for righteousness,” for the sake of harmony with which Mr. Matthew Arnold would tell us that we should strive to be righteous, or to recognize in them, as the second stage of ascent in the progress of theology, the witness to a righteous Will

by which the world is governed, and of whose judgment every true utterance of the Judge within us is an earnest and foreshadowing? It is only when we neglect that voice that our thoughts of God become dark and false. The activity of conscience checks the anthropomorphic tendency precisely where it needs checking. "Thou thoughtest wickedly that I was even such an one as thyself, but *I will reprove thee and set before thee the things that thou hast done.*"

It is true that the seeker, who has been led thus far, comes across phenomena that perplex and baffle him, across problems to the solution of which he scarcely seems able even to approximate. There is the mystery of the infinite and strange variety of the forms of animate or inanimate life—the infinitely great and the infinitely little—the revelations of the telescope and the microscope, of which we find it hard to conceive as, each one of them, the result of a distinct separate divine volition. There is the mystery of the struggle for existence, the dependence of so many forms of life upon the destruction of other forms; the mystery of pain; the mystery, above all, of evil, of the recognition of a righteous law which well-nigh all men in some measure recognize, yet against which all men in greater or less measure rebel. It is not a sufficient solution of the former to say that in the law of evolution, by which created life is governed, the weaker must perish and the strong must prey upon the weak. It is not a sufficient solution of the latter to say that the intelligence and the power which belong to the higher forms of life, and especially

to man, imply freedom of choice, and therefore the possibility of a wrong choice and the capacity for evil. The mystery which we cannot solve is that evil appears not casual or incidental only, as one result among many of our freedom, but that it exists everywhere and seems almost the law of life—at least its inevitable accompaniment—for all men that have been or are. It is in facing these problems, still standing on the ground of unrevealed theology, that there is need of patience and of faith. But is the exercise of that patience and faith simply a superstition, at variance with the scientific temper, belonging only to a stage of progress which the world has now outgrown? Has not the progress of science been marked by the discovery of order, law, and, so far as law implies purpose, of purpose also, in what seemed at first to be merely chaotic disturbances of law,—phenomena that men could observe and record, and in part classify, but in no way trace to their causes? Has not the student of science learnt to wait in patience as he stands before such phenomena, in the motions of the stars or laws of light, or the complex structures of animated organism, in its healthy or its morbid states, and to believe that in due time here also he will recognize the working of a law? He refuses to believe that there is any real disorder, any element of chance or caprice in the great Cosmos which he investigates. And is it not at least in harmony with the scientific temper that the seeker after God, who believes that he has found Him in the glory and beauty and wisdom of the universe, and, with a yet deeper conviction, in the witness of his

own consciousness and the experience of his life, and has seen Him, though it be but dimly, in the history of mankind, should refuse to abandon convictions that he has thus reached, simply because they do not at once furnish a short and easy method for solving the problems of the universe? Is it not consistent with true wisdom to fold his hands and wait, holding fast what he has tried and tested, content to confess that, after all, he is not the measure of all things, and that the world is wider than he knows. He has not yet gained the point of vision from which he can look and trace the end from the beginning. There are forces around him, moral and spiritual, no less than physical, of which he is compelled to recognize the existence, though as yet he cannot weigh and measure them, or trace them to their causes, or follow them to their remote issues. "The most part of thy works are hid" (Ecclus. xvi. 21) is the confession which rises to the lips at once of the devout worshipper and the highest of the masters of those who know, but it belongs to wisdom no less than faith to rest in the assurance that when the darkness shall be light and the hidden shall be revealed, they will be found, as all previous discoveries of what was once unknown have been found to be, in harmony with law and with the wisdom and goodness of which within the limits of the known we trace the footprints.

That attitude of expectancy and trust is, surely, the truest and the wisest for all who have not yet passed within the range of the light which we believe has come to us from above, or to whom that light, through the weakness of their own vision or the

clouds that have come between it and them, seems obscure and dim. It will help them to remain steadfast to that which they have believed and felt, to think of God, not indeed as altogether such an one as themselves in the weaknesses and inconsistencies of which in their best moments they are ashamed, but as possessing in infinite perfection all that we most admire, reverence, and love in man. Unless we believed this, the terms love, righteousness, mercy, would have absolutely no meaning as applied to the attributes of God. The old words which proclaim that man was made after the image of God, have in them an eternal truth, and bear witness that it is only thus, by reasoning upwards from what we recognize as best and divinest in ourselves, that we think of God with any clearness, or find strength or comfort in the thought. Naturally and instinctively we ascribe to Him in our best moments a character and a will, and we believe that that character will prove consistent with itself, even when we have to confess that we cannot explain what has, in the natural order of the world, the appearance of inconsistency.

For us who are willing to accept the guidance of the Word in which we find "a light unto our feet and a lamp unto our path," there remains the question how far it sanctions, how far it checks that tendency to earthly, simply human, thought of God with which it has been specially reproached? And here, as in so many other instances, we find a method of setting forth the truth quite other than that with which human theorists and system-builders are familiar. The writers of the Bible are not

careful to define accurately, to set cautions limits on this side or that, to their statements as to the Divine Nature. Here, as elsewhere, Scripture teaches by the boldest paradox, and presents aspects of the truth that are sharply contrasted, almost contradictory. On the one hand there is not an element even of man's bodily nature which is not ascribed to God. The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good; his ears are open to the prayers of his people; his right hand hath the pre-eminence; his arm is not shortened that it cannot secure; and so on through a hundred instances.

Did these passages, and such as these, stand by themselves, we might have been tempted to think that some majestic form, like the Jupiter of Phidias, or the Ancient of Days, as even Christian art has ventured to portray Him, might have been worshipped without reproach in the Temple at Jerusalem. And yet, where in the whole range of religious thought is there a stronger protest against accepting these and other like phrases as other than a parable and an adaptation? In every manifestation of the Divine glory we are reminded with emphatic iteration that there was no form or similitude, that no man hath seen God at any time, that He is essentially spirit and not flesh, that we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto anything that has been wrought by art or man's device. The boldest anthropomorphic language is used without reserve, because without it the thoughts of men would have been shadowy and indistinct, and God would have been to them but a name for the Unknown and the Inconceivable. **The**

protest against anthropomorphic thoughts is spoken with a vehemence which has seemed to some, fascinated by the majesty of Egyptian or the beauty of Greek art, almost fanatic in its denunciation, lest men should come to think that the distance between them and God was finite and not infinite, and lose the power of worshipping in spirit and in truth under the spell of an idolatrous and therefore unspiritual art.

And so with those other phrases which meet us in every page of the Bible in which the emotions of our human nature are brought before us as belonging to that of God. He is patient, long suffering, and full of tender mercies. He is stirred to wrath and jealousy. He repents of what was in his heart. He pleads with his people, makes his acts dependent on their prayers, smells the sweet savour of their sacrifice or their deeds of love, and so is propitiated and appeased. And yet here too there is the same ever-recurring protest against pushing the parable too far, against ascribing to God any human feelings but those which are consistent with the highest human excellence, against thinking wickedly that He is even such an one as ourselves. "The strength of Israel is not a man that he should repent" (1 Sam. xv. 29). "Are not my ways equal, are not your ways unequal?" (Ezek. xviii. 29.) He dwelleth in the thick darkness which is one with the light that no man can approach unto. Even the thought that He is the Unknown and Unknowable, which seems to some the latest utterance of a desponding science, meets us in its sharpest boldest form in those old Hebrew writings: "Touching

the Almighty, we cannot find him out" (Job xxxvii. 23). "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty to perfection?" (Job xi. 7.) "There is no searching of his understanding" (Isa. xl. 28). "The most part of his works are hid" (Ecclus. xvi. 21). Is not this enough to check all undue approximation of the Divine and human natures? Man is taught to see in his own emotions, when they are at their noblest, that through which he may learn in some faint measure to find God. The earthly father shadows forth feebly the Fatherhood of God; the righteous ruler is the representative of the majesty of the King of kings; and yet we are warned at every step that our words must be wary and few, and that there is a consciousness of the presence of God which transcends all verbal, as it transcends all artistic, symbols of his perfections, in which, overwhelmed with awe and reverence, crushed with the burden of its sin, or lost in wonder and adoration, with that fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom, it abandons all traditional conventional representations, and cries as out of the deep, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee" (Job xlii. 5).

We, who hold the faith of Christendom, and believe that God, who "in sundry times and divers manners spake in time past to the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son," may see in the mystery of the Incarnation the crown and completion of that method of teaching which we have traced in the pages of the Older Covenant. It was the Light that lighteth every

man which had taught men thus to think of God ; and when that Light was manifested that He, the Eternal Son, might reveal to men the Father, whom no man hath seen or can see, He, in his recorded teaching, followed in the same track, and used the same methods. Parable after parable led men from the earthly relations with which they were familiar to those of the kingdom of heaven, of which the mysteries were thus shadowed forth. The sower, the householder, the bridegroom, the father, the king—through all these, men were led to truer thoughts of God than they had learnt from their Rabbinic teachers. And yet here also there was the assertion of that which goes beyond all parables and similitudes: "God is a Spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John iv. 24). Only through the Spirit of truth is the Father fully revealed. The many things which then the disciples could not hear would be made clear and plain, not in parables and proverbs ; but, "I will shew you plainly of the Father." So, after the gift of that Spirit had been bestowed, it was his work to tell of the things of God, and shew them unto men ; to reveal what flesh and blood could not reveal—the secrets of the kingdom, the universal redemption, the mystery of the cross, "the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Cor. ii. 9, 10).

But it was, after all, not in our Lord's teaching only or chiefly, but much more so in Himself, that this method of education reached its highest point. It was through his human nature as the Son of man that men were to approach to a knowledge

of the Divine mind of the Son of God ; through his meekness and lowliness of heart, his patient and enduring love, his purity and righteousness that men were to approximate, as far as was possible, to the knowledge of what God is. Even those who stand aloof, "holding no form of creed, and contemplating all," will own that that human Life, in its transcendent purity and overflowing sympathy, its "sweet reasonableness" and beauty, has brought men more into harmony with the righteousness of which they think (one fails to grasp the meaning of the words) not as belonging to a person, but to a drift, or current, or power that pervades the universe. We who believe that the Word that was in the beginning with God and was God, became flesh and tabernacled among us, that He did nothing but what He saw the Father do, and spake the words which the Father had given Him to speak, can enter more fully into the meaning of the words, "the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him," and listen with awe and adoration to that which, if it were not true, would have been a blasphemy to make us shudder. "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John xiv. 9).

Upon that rock the Church of Christ is built, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Every upward and onward step in the progress of theology in Heathenism, or Judaism, or Christendom has been an emancipation from the baser forms of anthropomorphism, from the assumption that God

is even such an one as ourselves in that which is our weakness and our shame. But every such step has also started from a clearer recognition of what is best and noblest in us as having a Divine original and archetype, as being that through which we are led to that **knowledge of the Most High which**, if we only track our way through the labyrinth of material phenomena, we fail to reach. In the perfect holiness of the man Christ Jesus we find the revelation of the Father, whom before we had dimly seen; and the vision of the King in his beauty, who is one with the Sufferer on the cross, has had power to draw men unto it, and will form for ever the blessedness of the saints of God. And when the veil is removed, and those who have been like Him here shall enter into their rest, then also the vision of the Godhead shall be one with that of a transfigured and glorified humanity. We shall be like Him then, for we shall see Him as He is, eternally human as well as eternally divine. In proportion as we strive to attain that likeness, and to reproduce that life here, with whatever feebleness of thought or erroneous formula, we shall attain ourselves to a clearer knowledge of God, and be as lights shining in the world, helping others also to attain to it. No one who realizes what St. Paul was in that life which was hid with Christ in God, in that heart the pulses of which were one with the pulses of the heart of Christ, can doubt that to have known him must have led many a penitent sinner, many a rough outlaw, many a poor soul steeped to the lips in sensual infamy, to know God as they had never known before; and those who are followers of Paul,

as he was of Christ, and Christ was of the Father, are in their measure and degree restoring in themselves that image of God after which they were created, and so helping others to see it clearly. So, as they feel and know and taste the nobleness that is possible in man—the patience, purity, meekness of the saints of God—men, women, children, penitent sinners, and perplexed and weary souls learn what no debate or definition could have taught them. “They love us; will not God forgive?” they ask, and, in asking, make answer to themselves. The method of which men speak with scorn as leading to poor unworthy thoughts of God, has proved to be that which has led them to the highest and the worthiest. The revelation of God in Christ has taught that a true anthropomorphism is the one safeguard against idolatry.

E. H. PLUMPTRE.

*THE FIRST CHAPTER
OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.*

VERSES I AND 2.

THESE, and the two succeeding verses, the first four of the Epistle to the Hebrews, constitute a single sentence, skilfully and elegantly constructed. It is a stately tree of thought, remarkable alike for luxuriance of branch and for symmetry of form. It is the first of a whole forest of corresponding trees.

The usual formalities of superscription, salutation, and introduction are absent. We enter at once into a compact thicket of theological thought.