

it is only as we grasp and obey the righteous laws on which the universe is ruled, and by which therefore our individual lot is shaped, that we can become either true prophets or true men, and rejoice in the abundance of peace.

SAMUEL COX.

THEOLOGICAL TERMS.—NATURE, GOD.

APART from any question of the value of theological study, it must, I think, be conceded to the Theologian that certain words should be used in a definite sense. In discussion no other sense or meaning is fairly attributable to these words. The terms of theology—to put the matter otherwise—cannot any longer be considered arbitrary or accidental. They have grown to be what they are, to have a more or less fixed and permanent signification, and it can only end in confusion of thought and irrelevance of argument to take them in any vaguer or looser sense—whether in lower meanings out of which the words have legitimately grown with the advance of human thought—or as counters without any fixed meaning at all. No subject has suffered so much from confusion of nomenclature as theology, and it seems as if our age of fertile yet crude thoughtfulness in so many directions, were destined to add to this confusion instead of clearing it up. The most radical of our conceptions, that of “God,” not to speak of “Religion” and “Nature,” is threatened with an obscuration which can only darken both the philosophical and theological atmosphere, and leave us in hopeless perplexity. We had better give up discussion altogether than to continue fighting in the dark.

This confusion has been long going on, and has sprung from obvious causes. The idea of the Supernatural which

was wont to be accepted as the basis of religion, has been losing its hold, with alarming rapidity, upon the intelligence of the age. And by the Supernatural is not merely meant the *Miraculous in History*. It is long since the miracles, whether of Hebrew or Christian history, were made subjects of special attack. Our own Deism of last century, and the earlier and sometime extinct Rationalism of Germany, known as the *Rationalismus Vulgaris*, both assailed the miracles of Scripture, and endeavoured to shew either that they rested on insufficient evidence, or were capable of being explained as exaggerations of natural events. But during all this earlier phase of the modern conflict with unbelief, the idea of God as a Supernatural Being was left untouched. It was not disputed, or hardly ever disputed, that there was a supernatural Sphere or Order, however it might be denied that special events supposed to be ascribed in Scripture to the fiat of a Supernatural Will, were rightly so ascribed. On the contrary, one of the main thoughts underlying both Deism and Rationalism was, that such events were unworthy of special Divine intervention. They could be sufficiently explained otherwise. But it was not denied that *there was a Divine Will or Supernatural Power*, who might intervene in human affairs, or possibly interrupt the course of nature.

It is, however, just this idea of Supernatural Power or of a Will above nature which has been specially challenged in our time. Empiricism, or what is known as Positivism, has pushed itself into every province of thought; and even where not accepted as a system, the naturalistic spirit in which it takes its rise, and the scientific method with which it is assumed to be identified, have permeated the consciousness of the age till it has thrust the old idea of the Supernatural quite into the background. Fashionable litterateurs and scientists scout it. The Christian idea of God, with its metaphysical basis, is a subject of ridicule, or is quietly

assumed to be no longer tenable—to have perished in the scientific wave which has overrun modern thought.

All this, if deplorable, is intelligible and need not produce confusion. But the remarkable thing is that our age, in parting with the old basis of religion, has not parted with religion, or what it wishes to call religion. In denying the metaphysical basis on which "God," in the historical sense, rests, it declines to part either with the name, or with "the thing" according to its own understanding. "God" is no longer a Supernatural Will. Supernaturalism is inconceivable and unverifiable. But then "there is no necessary connexion between *theology* and supernaturalism. It is quite possible to believe in a God, and even a *personal* God, of whom Nature is the complete and only manifestation."¹ The customary view of "personality" has been that it implied a will; in other words, that it was a moral quality, which can only be conceived as the attribute of a free moral agent. But Nature, it seems, or "the separate phenomena of the universe," may be conceived *personally*. In the early Greek mythology natural phenomena were so conceived. The generative idea of Deity then was not the cause of a thing, but the *unity* of it. "No one has ever supposed that the Greeks regarded Poseidon as the *cause* of the sea. Athena may have been suggested to them by the sky, but she is not the *cause* of the sky." These names of Deity represented certain unities of nature. And why may not "God" now be used to denote the unity of nature, rather than the supernatural *cause* of it. "If we will look at things and not merely at words we shall soon see that the scientific man has a theology and a God, a most impressive theology, and a most awful and glorious God. I say that man believes in a God who feels himself in the presence of a Power which is not himself and is immeasurably above himself, a Power in the contemplation

¹ *Nat. Religion*, p. 41.

of which he is absorbed, in the knowledge of which he finds safety and happiness. And such now is Nature to the scientific man."

We are not now concerned with these views otherwise than in their bearing on what is usually called theology, and the use of theological terms. We wish to speak with all respect of a writer in so many ways deserving of respect as the author of "Natural Religion" and "Ecce Homo." His words we know have awakened responsive echo in earnest hearts. They are the words of one who is at least himself earnest, and eager to guide the religious aspirations of an age which is wandering in many perplexed paths. But with all respect for the writer, both our reason and our feelings are greatly tried by such passages as the above. What possible use can it serve to carry back the meaning of "God" to a nature-basis? Everybody knows that the Greek mythology, like every other ancient form of religion, rested so far on natural personification. The forces of nature, or varieties of these forces, were deified by the early imagination of humanity groping after a divine meaning in the "separate phenomena of the universe." But surely also it was no mere accident that religious thought did not and could not remain at this stage—that Reason seeking always for a higher unity of universal phenomena, could not rest in any Poseidon or Athena, or Zeus, or even in the Jehovah of earlier Hebraism—but was driven onwards with the growth of spiritual reason to conceive of the Divine as moral and spiritual rather than natural—as an eternal and spiritual Life underlying all other life. The "I AM that I AM" of Moses, the "High and Lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy" of Isaiah, the "Father in Heaven" of Christ and the Christian church, those are surely not only higher but truer conceptions than any mere nature-conceptions of earlier religion. And the name of God having grown into this larger meaning—

answering not merely to the natural fears, but to the moral aspirations of humanity—cannot be wilfully moved back to a lower stage of thought. For more than two thousand years “God” has meant to the higher intelligence of humanity everywhere, a Moral Personality—a Divine Reason and Will distinct from, and independent of, the cosmos of natural forces—and it is surely playing with words to alter the meaning and yet retain the name. It may be true that the idea of God is easily degraded, and that many Christians have degraded it “by childish and little-minded teaching.” To conceive of God as “the head of the church interest, as a sort of clergyman” may not be very elevated or scientific, but there is all the difference in the world between any degradation of the Divine idea which springs out of the necessary limitations of the common mind, and a philosophical attempt to take the idea down again from the moral height to which it has ascended. It is confessed by the author that “such a God” as Nature is far from satisfactory; then why reclaim the name for a stage of the idea which humanity has long outgrown? Why say that “the average scientific man worships just at present a more awful and as it were a greater Deity than the average Christian”? The average Christian, even if his comprehension be so feeble that he looks upon “God” as a sort of “superior clergyman,” does not yet empty the Divine idea of all moral meaning. His God may be a very imperfect and poor image of the great Ideal, but it is after all more than an ideal of mere force. It is more than the mere infinity of astronomical or geological millenniums. It is not the “unspiritual God” of mere Nature or Circumstance. The God of the Christian is a God of the living and not of the dead. When our Lord defined God as “a Spirit,” He gave a meaning to the name with which it can never part. He fixed the idea unchangeably in the human consciousness. Anything lower

than this is not God, whatever it may be. "God is a Spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (St. John iv. 24). No unspiritual ideal can reasonably claim that name; "Religion" is not religion when what is so called does not rise into a spiritual sphere. Is there a spirit in man? Is there a spirit above man? Is there a sphere beyond Nature in the widest sense, "a universal self-consciousness, an absolute spiritual life," with whom our higher life is capable of converse and by whom it is being constantly disciplined? Such questions as these surely mirror the only religious problem worth considering.

We do not speak of this or that form of Christian faith, or of any so-called orthodox conception of Christianity rooted in a supernaturalism that clings to the letter of the Biblical narratives. There may certainly be a recognition of a living God, and there may be true religion, not confined within any such narrow bounds. But to speak of God and mean only Nature, even when Nature is made to include Humanity; to speak of "Religion" and mean only the admiration of beauty, or "the knowledge of the laws of the universe"—what are called "the Ideals of Art and Science"—this is to adopt a license of language and thought which can only lead to irretrievable confusion. It is to carry back the hands of the clock, and yet to speak with a voice which we had never known unless the clock had long since advanced. It is to ignore the progress of reason and yet use up its results. It is simply impossible to go back from the moral life that Christianity has poured into human thought, to strip thought bare of spiritual meaning as in the days of Paganism, and yet to use words that have mirrored for ages the higher association, and are unintelligible apart from it. "God" can never be aught but what Christianity has made the conception—the ideal implanted by Christian Thought in the human consciousness—even if Christianity

itself be rejected. True religion can never be less than a disciplinary communion of the human with the Divine Spirit, however the love of beauty or of knowledge may purge and test it. If we are to have nothing but Nature—nothing but the science which unfolds its laws and the art that moulds its beauty into form—let us know what we are about. Let us not cheat ourselves with phantoms of God and religion, when we have emptied heaven of all reality and left nothing anywhere but the phantasmal reflection of earth. We may still indeed have a higher life. We may give ourselves to ideal emotion or ideal knowledge. We may strive against *Conventionalism* or *Secularity*, which with our author are the only real enemies of religion. Earth itself may be “apparelled in celestial light” to our fresh and aspiring gaze; and as we put away from us lower desires and base habits, it may be possible for us to say in a metaphor, “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” (*Natural Religion*, p. 120). But *metaphor* in such a case will be the only expression of our spiritual life. Our spiritual being as a fact will be gone; soul will be no more. We may speak of it euphemistically, but what nobody believes to exist substantively will not long survive poetically. There will be no spiritual power to sustain us in our higher moments, or raise us in our lower moods. All ideal must be born from within. Revelation will be a dream. Redemption an imagination. All the characteristic expressions of religion must lose real meaning.

When heaven becomes a fiction, and the idea of a Supernatural Sphere has entirely vanished, it may be right to seek for a higher ideal, and to follow such an ideal if we can find it. But we confess that it seems to us deluding, if not cruel, to use the old terms steeped in supernaturalism—all whose historical meaning is supernatural—to denote things which are quite different. To speak of Theism and

Theology in connexion with Nature and what our author means by Natural Religion, involves in fact a gross philosophical as well as religious confusion. Theism has long denoted, in contradistinction to Pantheism on the one hand, and Naturalism on the other, the doctrine of a Divine Existence distinct from and independent of Nature—not merely physical but human nature. The Theist is definitively one who believes in a Personal Being above Nature, and by whom everything natural exists. The study of Nature may be “a part of the study of God,” in the sense that Nature is a revelation or manifestation of Divine activity, but in no intelligible sense is it true “that he who believes only in Nature is a Theist and has a theology.” The very reverse is true. He who believes *only* in Nature is, according to all the fair meaning of language, a non-Theist and can have no theology, for the simple reason that he recognizes by the very hypothesis no Divine reality apart from Nature. If there be no activity or Power behind all the play of natural forces, then there is no *Theos*, and how then can there be either *Theism* or *Theology*. Men may be often nearer each other in thought than they fancy, and no doubt they readily “slide into the most contemptible logomachies.” But nothing can promote logomachy more than a downright confusion of ideas, and no possible good can come from calling ourselves “Theists,” and claiming to have a “Theology,” when we have discarded from all our thoughts the spiritual conceptions out of which the one and the other have sprung from the earliest ages.

It is, we confess, a surprise to us that a student, not of physical science, but of human history—of the moral forces which have guided the political, social, and religious advancement of mankind—should profess to upset the old ideals of Religion and God, ideals gained by man after many upward struggles, and which, more than any others, have inspired his higher life and consecrated every phase of his

progressive civilization. The Christian ideal is spiritual throughout. It is the ideal of a "kingdom of Heaven" transcending all natural life and glorifying it. It is no picture or imagination; it is a living reality touching the heart with purifying fire. Christian civilization is the out-growth of Faith, and "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen." Nothing can be less like Faith than any mere artistic or intellectual ideal. An intense spirituality is the root of the one, the other has its home in the region of sense and of knowledge. And you cannot measure the one by the other, or speak of the one in the terms of the other. It is a sad ending for Humanity if it has to turn back from the upper air of Faith and breathe only the life of Nature. If "soul" is to become a mere pseudonym for nervous force, and man is not "different generically from the brutes;" if we have to exchange ideas of Divine and human personality for ideas of the unity of Nature, or lessons in science, then human history seems something like a cheat. It has been playing with phantoms instead of working out spiritual ideals. It has been marching to the music of ghosts, and not to the voices of Prophets and Apostles. The march may not cease to be heroic, but the heroism is pitiful rather than tragic. It is without moral issue, and therefore without moral grandeur or interest.

JOHN TULLOCH.
