

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jtvi-01.php

JOURNAL OF
THE TRANSACTIONS
OF
The Victoria Institute,
OR,
Philosophical Society of Great Britain.

EDITED BY THE SECRETARY.

VOL. XXXVII.



LONDON :

(Published by the Institute, 8, Adelphi Terrace, Charing Cross, W.C.)

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

1905.

ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING.*

GENERAL HALLIDAY IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read and confirmed, and the following paper was read by the Secretary, in the absence of the author.

THE INFLUENCE OF PHYSIOLOGICAL DISCOVERY ON THOUGHT. By EDWARD P. FROST, D.L.

1. The paper suggested by a sense of increasing difficulty of preserving one's religion.
2. No imputation cast upon Science.
3. For fifty years acquirement of miscellaneous information by uneducated multitudes who can read has been on the increase, as also has the popularisation of Science; while Science has made gigantic strides.
4. *e.g.*, Matter has almost been analysed into imponderables so as to bewilder the half-educated as to spirit and matter. Who is to explain that the distinction between phenomenal and spiritual is unaffected by physiological analysis?
5. Geological discoveries and evolution, etc., have modified views on Divine government of universe dangerously.
6. Results of bewilderment.
7. Especially suppression of anthropomorphism.
8. Science enables men to get a better idea of God's infinity and foresight.
9. Difficulties in respect to order and continuity not insuperable.
10. "The Absolute" and "the Unknowable" upset by Science.
11. Toleration results from advance of Science.
12. Union of Religion and Science.
13. Conclusion.

* May 1st, 1905.

1. I have been impelled to give utterance to the reflections which form the subject of this paper by the feeling that, as the days of the new century pass, ever-increasing numbers of individuals are finding it more and more difficult to hold fast their religious beliefs and so maintain the life of their souls; while at the same time this serious state of affairs appears to be either unnoticed or ignored by many of those teachers and authorities who might have been providing help and relief.

2. In suggesting that certain elements of evil have attended the recent triumphs of Physical Science, I am not venturing to reproach Science or to blame scientific investigators for consequences which they could not be expected to foresee, to provide against which moreover does not appear to be their business. At any rate it is still more the business of those who are supposed to study moral rather than physical phenomena.

3. During the last fifty years, elementary education has become general, the facilities for the acquirement by the elementarily educated of miscellaneous information have been enormously multiplied, and the popularisation of Science has become prevalent; while through the same period physiological discovery has advanced with ever-quickening acceleration, until we seem to have arrived within measurable distance of the solution of some of the fundamental problems presented by that branch of Science.

4. For instance, before long *matter* may be analysed, relatively to human limitations, into inponderables, namely, energy, position and quantity; and what then becomes of the natural conception of "A positive antithesis between mind and matter, between the 'spiritual' and the 'material'?" And if it should appear to many an untrained intelligence that the conception of matter which seems to have been entertained is being inverted or shattered, is there not at once a grave menace to their conception of the correlative of "the material"? What is to become of their vague apprehension of the immaterial, of the spiritual? Their "little knowledge," if indeed undigested information deserve the name of knowledge, has become "a dangerous thing," and yet we can neither forbid them to "taste" nor bid them to "drink deep" with any reasonable expectation that they will do so. Who is likely to impress upon them the simple fact that no essential distinction has been affected, or can be affected by any such analysis, and that since matter is as phenomenal and mind as real as ever, "a positive antithesis" between them is still maintained.

5. To take another instance—geologists and those who have developed the theories of evolution and of the adaptability of organisms to variations in environment, have seriously modified earlier notions respecting the physical side or aspect of the Divine government of the universe.

In comparison with the multiplication of general information during the last fifty years, the general information on this subject may be said to have been almost stationary for about a hundred and fifty years before the middle of the last century, while every recent discovery of importance, thanks to the press and to popular lecturers and writers, is made as impressive and "sensational" as possible.

The difference between the logical apprehension of this department of Divine government made possible by modern science, and the imaginative ideas on the same subject which survive the simple beliefs of childhood in men and women of average intelligence, has become so vast as to constitute a grave danger. The revelation of science has seemed to many to cast discredit on the various theological systems of Christendom. Some it has thrown into bewilderment and distress, to others it has furnished excuses for casting off the trammels of religion. It has overstrained intellects of mediocre capacity, causing them to snatch at all manner of faulty and fallacious solutions of their difficulties.

6. This bewilderment has been, and is, I believe, one of the causes (and not one of the least causes) of the alleged prevalence of indifference to religious matters among both the rich and poor, of the "Pagan London" recently discussed in the press, of the increase in insanity, of the prevalence of inordinate curiosity about matters to which one ought to be indifferent, of much dabbling in (so-called) spiritualism, in "occult" mysteries, and in fortune-telling, as well as of avowed atheism and agnosticism.

7. A very important element in the bewildering process has been the impairment or suppression of the faculty of anthropomorphism, of imagining Deity in terms of humanity, a faculty which has for ages been a great help to the maintenance of religious feelings among simple folk. It must, I believe, constitute the religion of all childhood, and is often indulged in subconsciously by adults, who would repudiate any such notion if formally presented to them, very much as we speak of, and subconsciously imagine, the sun going round the earth. It is hardly venturesome to say that if Milton's *Paradise Lost* had not yet been written, it could not now be written by a

Milton brought up to the present standard of thought and feeling.

8. The idea of humanity is capable of enormous expansion, and is generally elastic, but it cannot occupy more than an infinitesimally small fraction of the space suggested by astronomical dimensions.

Professor Seeley wrote (*Nat. Rel.*, p. 20), "The scientific man strains his mind actually to realise God's infinity. As far as the fixed stars he traces Him, 'distance inexpressible by numbers that have name.' Meanwhile to the theologian, infinity and eternity are very much of empty words when applied to the object of his worship."

Similar language might be used with respect to the laws of continuity and uniformity maintained from eternity to eternity, which science has revealed, compared with the theologian's notion of Divine foresight and "eternal purpose."

9. In the latter case, many see contradiction and incompatibility. I venture to suggest that a basis for the reconciliation between the scientific and the theological positions exists, and is to be found; though it is not so obvious as in the former case. Perhaps it will eventually be admitted by all competent thinkers, that in spite of superficial differences, perhaps due altogether, or in part to the object under consideration being regarded from different points of view, the theological method of explanation conveys the same essential elements of truth as the scientific, and that too in terms better adapted to the comprehension of the unscientific inquirer. But I do not wish, or dare to maintain, that what I may term the mental by-products of physiological progress are all mischievous or dangerous, or that they are confined to persons of only moderate culture and intelligence.

10. The advance of physical science, in all directions, may justly claim credit for the victory of common-sense over "the Absolute" and "the Unknowable." Those Minervas, born in full panoply of polysyllables from the metaphysician's brain without even giving him a headache, are virtually dead or moribund. The Author of the Universe contemplated by science is no abstraction, but is a concrete entity whose attributes are transcendental.

11. The steady growth of a tolerant spirit, and of large-mindedness, among theologians, must be, partly at least, referable to the widening of the mental horizon effected by the excursions of science into the infinitely large and the infinitely small, and also to the direct influence of scientific doctrine on Biblical interpretations. The acceptance of some of the great general-

isations of physiology, with or without reservation, by many prominent theologians, is balanced by the subsidence of the materialistic wave, which some years ago assumed formidable proportions. Elated by success, several eminent physiologists seem to have thought that their methods could bridge the gulf between the phenomenal and the real, or else eliminate the real from the field of thought. Their failure is now acknowledged by leading men of science, and they have by their abortive attempts indirectly contributed something towards the reconciliation or union of Religion and Science.

12. This union I believe to be the solution of the difficulties which now beset religious teachers, and of the perplexities which now tend to promote irreligiousness. It has been said that *such* an union is not possible; but surely, religion ought to aim at a complete theology; and if we believe that God is in all, and all is in God, a complete theology must include the study of the phenomenal as well as the real, including the moral and psychical. Thus a theologian ought to know physiology, while a physiologist only studies the phenomenal. But if the theologian cannot accept the account of phenomena given by physiological authorities, there must be something radically wrong with either theology or physiology, if, as I believe, the latter be that department of theology which deals with the phenomenal aspect of the physical government of the universe by the Deity.

13. We may rest somewhat satisfied if we have some fixed belief, for belief of some kind we must have.* Life is certainly not worth living without it, and very much worth living with that which to us is truth.†

Professors of Divinity, sincere searchers for truth, and leaders of advanced thought, are compelled to acknowledge that "the field of speculative theology may be regarded as almost exhausted." Dr. Temple declares that "all the countless variety of the universe" was provided for by "one original impress" and not "by special acts of creation modifying what

* See 11.

† Even the "theological materialist," Dr. Henry Maudsley, admits that, "It is possible that a frank cognition and vital feeling of the existence of a larger order of things than the human order might help to impart such sincerity of thought, equanimity of feeling, acquiescence in what is, and quiet expectation of what is to be, as shall constitute the bliss of a peaceful mind," *Life in Mind and Conduct*. Though the words quoted did not refer to a spiritual order, they suit it exactly.

God had previously made ; ”* thus leaving the way clear for us to be in a sense Christian Agnostics as to alleged Divine interposition, though with religion and religious feelings within us to be neither atheists nor materialists, but with a noble consciousness and lofty conceptions of the Great and Universal Spirit of spirits pervading all things, the eternal principle of the universe which we are apt to call the universal laws of nature. At the same time we must not take too much of what we may call the “modern thought” of mankind. Our religion may be positive: it may have its creed, churches, chapels, priests, teachers, rites and ceremonies, morality, aspirations, and consolations, institutions which bring men together to join in services which will take them out of their worldly ideas and show them the spiritual side of their nature, and teach them to form some definite (though very imperfect) conception of the spiritual, some idea of the great Incomprehensible, much to their own benefit and that of succeeding generations.

A short discussion followed, in which Professor ORCHARD and Mr. ROUSE took part, and the meeting separated after a vote of thanks to the author had been passed.

* *The Relations between Religion and Science*, Lecture iv, p. 115 (1885).