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Francis William Newman
on Religion

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FW Newman

THE TWO THEISMS.

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THOSE who are contending for free thought in religion are contending for a noble prize, and are temporarily united, while that prize is withheld from the public by powerful influences. But the moment they commence to use their freedom, the same thing happens, and must happen, now as always heretofore. Human infirmity clings to all. Each is finite, and sees but partially; hence their judgments are often in opposition. The contrasts of opinion in Greek philosophy, when there was no organized priesthood to forbid or to cripple freedom of thought, were as extreme as now. 5

Some imagine that, because the schools of material science work on in harmony, and the conflicts of opinion rather assist progress, being but partial and temporary, so will it be in religion, as soon as we resolve to cultivate religious thought scientifically. This might be the case, if materialism were the basis, or if we had foundations recognized by all. But in metaphysics, and in mental science generally, the great discouragement of study has lain in the irreconcilable and fundamental variance of the professors. Materialism and Spiritualism fight together for possession of the schools of morals and of psychology; so also of necessity will they in religion. Those who wish to be scientific are not agreed as to the bases and procedure of the new (religious) science, for which they are hoping in common. Every science has to work out its own problems in its own way. Strong analogies and harmonies are detected between the several sciences after they arise and live; nevertheless each is born independently, and acts independently; nor can any endure dictation from without, though hints and suggestions may be welcome and profitable. Thus, after we have agreed that free thought is necessary in religion, and that 10 15 20

[All textual notes, with the single and notable exception at the conclusion of this essay, present the version published by T. S. and in The Index. See the Bibliography for details.]

public by a powerful adversary. [rev. Misc.]

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25 a scientific religion is the thing to be desired, we may easily remain as far apart
in religious opinion and beliefs as were Stoics and Epicureans; or if our differ-
ence be less extreme, it may be rather from holding more negations in common
than from agreement in affirmation.

Nor, when people profess to believe in God and call themselves Theists,
30 does this go far to indicate real agreement. The question recurs, What do we
mean by God? If we may not give a reply, the word is unmeaning to us, and
we deceive ourselves in thinking that we have any belief at all. But as soon
as we give a reply,—not as believing that it can exhaust the whole reality, but
merely that it may explain our thought,—some one arises to reprove us for
35 presumption in supposing that we can limit the illimitable, and define the in-
comprehensible. Men who by general suffrage are eminent in some physical
science, think forthwith that their physical attainments justify their laying
down the law in religion; and we who have broken loose from the dogmatism
of the churches find that we have to encounter a new fight for our freedom
40 against the dogmatism of this or that “man of science,” who perhaps graciously
allows us the field of “the Unknowable” for religion, or not even that; for it is
well if the new dogmatist will let us have any belief in a Superior Spirit at all.
Nothing is commoner than a shriek of derision against a “personal God.”
Under the groundless pretence that personality means limitation, or means
45 Anthropomorphy, we are forbidden to believe in a God who has purposes and
sentiments. A God *without* either purposes and sentiments is a God in whom
we cannot recognize mind at all, and is therefore a blind force or a blind fate.
A recent writer of great literary eminence, while fancying that he is about to
deliver religion from *sacerdotal* metaphysics, emphatically denies, not the
50 personality only, but even the *unity* of God; thus presenting us with nothing
but a plurality of either forces or abstractions, and plunging us into an abyss
of metaphysics still deeper—one also out of which no practical religion has
every yet emerged.

Setting aside avowed Atheism and avowed Pantheism (a very equivocal
55 term), even in the apparently more limited form of belief denoted as Theism,
there are at least two broadly distinguished schools of thought, between
which, if we remain Theists, it is necessary to choose; and the more fully the
two can be described and contrasted, the greater will be the aid to students
of Free Religion. Indeed one might mark out a third school, the Deism of the
60 eighteenth century. This portrayed the Creator as external to his creation,
which they supposed him to have endowed with self-acting forces. Matter, in
this theory, was either created or endowed with gravitation at a definite time,
which may be called the crisis or era of creation; so that the action of God upon

matter was convulsive and momentary; but in the nineteenth century this doctrine is almost universally disowned. The smallest acquaintance with the great science of geology convinces every one that the idea of creation as limited to a single crisis of time has no plausibility whatever; that creation is undoubtedly the work of continuous ages, enormous in duration, whatever its mode and progress; moreover, that if God is to be recognized at all in the universe, the great forces which are therein detected by the mental eye are strictly divine forces, and that any distinction between *initial* impulses as divine and *continued* forces as not divine is groundless. This is the incipient reconciliation of Pantheism and Theism.

Nevertheless, our Theism divides itself into two schools, broadly separated, and for convenience it may be allowed to entitle them Greek Theism and Hebrew Theism. Of the former, the great Aristotle was probably a worthy representative; and it commends itself to a great majority of those who are forward to identify their faith with science. The cardinal point of this is that it supposes God to have nothing, in him or of him, but general Law. He may be described as Force acting everywhere according to Law, under the guidance of Mind. He is supposed to be so absorbed in general action as to remain quite inobservant of the detailed results, or at least unconcerned about them. Thus he intends this earth to have day and night, to have vegetation and various animals on it, moreover to have a human population. These generalities he is not too great to design and devise. But it is said, we cannot suppose him to pay attention to any particular *man*, without supposing him to attend to every sparrow, to every oyster, to every stalk of sea-weed, and this (it is thought) would be absurd. He wishes the human race, as a whole, to attain its own perfection, but it is thought puerile to suppose him to attend to each individual; and, as favouritism would be a human weakness, he has no love and no care for any one of us. Conversely then, it would be gratuitous, unseemly, perhaps impossible, for any of us to love him. In accordance with this, Aristotle makes a passing remark—"for it would be ridiculous for any one to say that he loves Jupiter;" not, I apprehend, from his investing Jupiter with the colours of Greek mythology, but from his supposing *no moral relations* to exist between the

and momentary; and the great forces of the universe, which he then bestowed on it, were regarded as no part of the divine essence, but as the properties of matter. To every planet he gave an "*initial impulse*," which prevents its falling into the sun; and then left the system to itself. Thus he may be said to have made a clock, wound up the spring, and pushed the pendulum into activity. Such apparently was the belief of the great Sir Isaac Newton. But in the nineteenth century . . . [rev. Misc.]

Supreme God and us. Of course it will follow from that view that human injustice and vice, great as are their mischiefs, are offences against man or ourselves, not against God; hence the idea of "sin against God" cannot exist. God is not supposed to be concerned with the sin of an individual; to confess it to him would be an impertinence which Aristotle never seems to imagine possible. 100 Indeed, the same great philosopher esteems intellectual virtue as higher than moral virtue, on the express ground that God cannot possess moral virtue, which belongs only to the natures which have passions to restrain and direct wisely; nor indeed is it intelligible to ascribe moral virtue to a Being who is 105 wholly solitary, and has neither temptations to resist, nor duties to fulfil. But probably the modern Theists of this class will admit, that, when a Superior Being gives sensitive life to other objects, he creates for himself relations to them and duty to them, especially the duty of justice not to create them for mere misery, or deal inequitably with them; and that two lines of imaginable 110 conduct at once open, according to one of which God would show himself good, and according to the other evil. Hence the epithet *good* attached to God is not idle and unmeaning, but has a real sense. I do not *know*, but I *hope*, that those whom I entitle Greek Theists in the present day regard it as rightful and becoming to *believe* that God is *good*, even while contemplating either that 115 violence of the elements which causes destruction and pain to myriads of his creatures, or the preying of one class of animals on another. That pain and death are strictly necessary, I suppose all thoughtful persons to understand.

But here a caution is needed, concerning the description of omnipotence, —a word which is often gravely misunderstood; insomuch that one may 120 doubt whether it is wise to use it at all. If the word be strictly pressed, omnipotence makes wisdom needless, and leaves to it no functions. We cannot ascribe wisdom without implying difficult problems to be solved; but to omnipotence there can be no difficulty at all, and no problem; a "fiat" suffices. Hence in calling God Wise or All-Wise, we virtually assume that 125 there are limits to his power, even if we know not exactly what. A second consideration shows that cases of apparent impotence in God may be mere inventions of human absurdity. It is a celebrated Greek saying that "the only thing which God cannot achieve is, to undo the past." This does but assert that divine power is out of place in solving the absurd problem of making 130 contradictions simultaneously true; such as, "Alexander conquered Darius," *a past fact*, and, "Alexander did not conquer Darius," *the past fact undone*. Verbal contradictions belong to the puzzle of human thought, and are no problem for power. One who disputes this does not know what he is saying. Even dull minds will find themselves constrained to deny that God can create a God 135 like to himself. To create the uncreated, is a contradiction. This distinction

between the uncreated and the created is irreversible. We may advance from this to geometrical considerations. Archimedes discovered that a sphere is exactly *two-thirds* of its circumscribing cylinder. To bring about, by a divine fiat, that the ratio should be *three-quarters* would be to establish a contradiction. To deny that this falls within the sphere of power cannot shock piety. 140
 As well might one be shocked at the denial that a geometrical shape can be made simultaneously round and square. Further: mathematicians easily imagine a force of gravitation which shall obey a different law from that of Newton, and in following out the inferences find no self-contradiction. Yet it is more than possible that the Newtonian law is a rigid necessity of the physical system, and that to change it belongs not at all to the sphere of power, any more than to reverse geometrical or verbal truths. Nevertheless, it may justly be feared that some minds, who have credit for "philosophy," ill understand thoughts apparently so simple and obvious; since the late eminent John Stuart Mill committed himself to the declaration that in some other world than this, 145
 for aught he knew, two and two might make five; and that he knew "the Whole to be greater than the Part" by experience only:—though it is evidently a verbal truth. But as soon as we understand that the great geometrical and physical laws of the universe are *a condition* under which Creating Power acts, we find abundant room for the profoundest wisdom. When we ascribe Almightyness, 155
 it is only a short phrase for saying that "we cannot know the limits of God's power in any of the problems in which power is applicable; and in dealing with *them*, we assume that there are *no* limits." But this belongs to our ignorance, not to our knowledge. The Homeric epithet *Much-mighty* may be preferred by a rigid philosophy to *Almighty*, in speaking of that which transcends 160
 knowledge.

The Theism which teaches that there is no definite moral relation between an individual man and his Divine Author, but only between the collective human race and its source; and that the relation is limited to this, that God by creating bound himself to be just to the race collectively,—such Theism 165
 does not encourage the individual to any acts of worship, and scarcely to the sentiment of gratitude. Compare the case of a landowner who likes to have pheasants in his copses. Perhaps he takes some pains to keep away the animals which are destructive to them, and in so far causes the pheasants to increase and enjoy life. But if he does not care for any of them, neither does 170
 he wish any of them to care for him. A Greek Theist was beset by uncertainty whether, if he paid thanks and worship to Jupiter, the god listened to him, or in any sense accepted his addresses; hence, with but few exceptions, we find no mark of moral contact between the Greek soul and the soul of the universe. 175

The prevalent tendency of Greek philosophy to that which Christians esteem to be pride and self-righteousness, is perhaps to be ascribed to this cause. Man stood erect in the presence of man, with whom he recognized moral relations, and was not awed and abashed by contrasting his own moral
 180 imperfection with the essential perfection of God. Mr. F. E. Abbott probably extols this position of the Greek mind as *manliness*; for in his *Impeachment of Christianity*, he has attacked the modern religion vehemently on this ground. He says: "It strikes a deadly blow at the dignity of human nature, and smites men with the leprosy of self-contempt." But the phenomenon was older
 185 than Christianity.

I turn to the Hebrew Theism. It recognizes all in God which I have described as Greek Theism, but adds something more, and that of prime importance. It does not suppose that he is absorbed, and as it were exhausted, in general action, but believes that he takes cognizance of individuals also.
 190 When Euripides denies that Jupiter attends to the sins of individual men, he argues, as Epicurus after him, that it would give the god *too much trouble*. [*Melanippe Desmotis*.] "If Jupiter were to write down the sins of mortals, the whole heaven would not suffice, nor would he himself suffice, to look into each case and send its penalty." Thus the reluctance of the opposite school
 195 to admit that the Most High attends to details, really turns upon an ascription of feebleness to him. The Hebrew Theist maintains that the universal agency of the Divine Spirit is a FACT; and that the division of his innumerable acts into two classes, those which we can refer to a definable law and those in which no general law is discernible by us, is a division made to aid our finite minds.
 200 Again, no one regards it as partiality and "favouritism" in the rays of the sun, that they act differently on chemical material differently prepared; nor does it imply "mutability" in God (as objectors tell us), if he act differently on different human souls, according to their state. Hence there is no just *a priori* objection to hinder and reprove that INSTINCT of the heart which casts itself on
 205 God in spiritual prayer; nor is it superstitious to believe that he will strengthen our virtue when we flee to him for aid.

To the Hebrew Theist, God is emphatically "a God who searches the heart." He is regarded as dwelling in its recesses, and having (what can only be called) a *joint-consciousness* with the individual man. The worship is pre-
 210 valently internal and unspoken, however pleasant the sympathetic enthusiasm of common worship when hearts are in unison. In creatures so imperfect as we, and especially in the novice of heart-religion, no small part of secret prayer will be, either petition for more strength to fulfil duty, or expression of grief for failures. An axiom of the religion is that *God desires from us* inward
 215 and outward goodness, holiness, and righteousness: hence any wilful neglect,

any choice of the baser part instead of the better, is accounted not merely to be unjust or vicious, but also to be *sin against God*. I am aware that in the present day men calling themselves Christians have pronounced “sin against God” to be an absurd idea, and alledge that one who asks “forgiveness” supposes God to nourish “unseemly resentment.” Such objectors think themselves Christians and are not; nor is the objection just. The longer any one has cultivated religion as an inward life,—the more frequent and more solemn has been his self-dedication before the Divine Spirit to all that is holiest and best,—so much the more certain is he to feel that any wilful deviation is an offence, not *only* against his own soul or (it may be) against a fellow mortal, but *also* against God. If the worshipper on any day have a bad conscience, a cloud seems to hide the serene and glorious presence. If then a keen grief seize him, what matters it whether he use this phrase or that phrase, in seeking to recover his lost ground? A child conscious of wrong asks “pardon” of his father, and does not hereby impute “unseemly resentment;” but he knows he is *disapproved*, and he desires to remove disapprobation, which is to happen through a change in himself, of course, but he is not just then at leisure to study words accurately, and, it may be, he blames himself extravagantly. “We know not what we should ask for as we ought, but he that searcheth hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit,” says Paul excellently. Such strivings are not ineffectual, but eminently conduce to moral culture and vital power, however much they may be reproved or disdained by the unsympathising logician, who perhaps has no personal experience in the matter. Alike pointless is the sarcasm that it is hoped by prayer to “alter the purposes and modify the action” of God; and that prayer “asks him to work a miracle.” Whatever the weight of this against prayer for things external, it has no application at all to that prayer which concerns the heart of the worshipper only. There is no reason why we should *not* hope that God will act differently on souls that pray and on souls that do not pray; and wide experience reports that he does so. Thus also a definite moral relation is recognized between the Divine Spirit and the soul which seeks his intimate influence; and (however it may be regretted or reproved as sectarianism) the sense inevitably springs up that there is in the human race an interior circle of SAINTS or “people of God;” insomuch that without being able strictly to justify every phrase, still this ancient outpouring of desire sounds as melody to the heart: “Blessed are they that keep judgment, and he that doeth righteousness at all times. Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that thou bearest unto *thy people*. O visit me with thy salvation; that I may see the good of *thy chosen*, and rejoice with *thine inheritance*.”

As two seeds, in aspect alike, grow up into different trees, so the funda-
 255 mental difference of Hebrew from Greek Theism, on a superficial view small,
 entails vast moral results. With the Hebrew Theist religion is a signal aid to
 morality; with the Greek Theist it is no aid at all. Duty is everywhere easier to
know than to *practice*. It is an old complaint, "I see and approve the better,
 but I follow the worse." A Greek Theist may be an eminently good man, but
 260 no thanks to his religion; for when he encounters temptation, it adds no
 strength to him. He does not believe that God looks on and approves or dis-
 approves his conduct. But the Hebrew Theist, if he live in the spirit of his
 religion, lives under the thought, "*Thou, God, seest me;*" and it is harder to
 go wrong under the eye of a virtuous friend, though he be but a man. This
 265 religion is *emotional*, and adds a vital force to morality.

Again: if anyone believe God to love his creatures, no impediment exists
 in the inequality of natures to loving him in return. I know that modern "Greek
 Theists" echo Aristotle's incredulity, and call "love for Jupiter" a delusion.
 Yet undoubtedly we love, for their essential goodness, persons whom we have
 270 never seen, though they may not know of our existence; certainly then, if we
 believe that God knows us, and loves us, and every way deserves love, it
 ought not to be treated as beyond nature to love him. A prominent and appli-
 cable test of love is pleasure in anyone's company—that is, pleasure in a sense
 of his presence. Though we judge God to be always with us, yet human society
 275 or needful absorption of mind in business and duty very largely pre-occupies
 us; but if at every vacant interval the heart springs back with delight to the
 remembrance that God is present, such a heart may surely be said to love
 God. Joy in a sense of his nearness is attested by a long series of votaries in
 the Hebrew school, which has propagated itself into Christendom and Islam.
 280 Well-known Hebrew psalms, to which countless hearts have thrilled and
 echoed, proclaim the blessedness of "seeing God's face" (a strong metaphor)
 and living under the light of his countenance. As the hart pants for the water-
 brooks, so pants the "saint" for a sense of *his* presence, whose loving kindness
 is better than life, whose approval brings fulness of joy.

Thus while Greek Theism is to the individual a mere theory of the intel-
 285 lect, and possibly a science, Hebrew Theism must be something else beside
 science, namely a life, dwelling in head and heart alike. It attributes to God
 perfect goodness, perfect holiness—words varying in sense with different
 minds, yet in all suggesting something high above what the individual has
 290 attained. Hence, in spite of dull imagination, low morals, and a necessarily
 mutilated appreciation of what God really is, the votary in this religion holds

264-5 though it were but a man. His religion . . . [rev. Misc.]

up to his heart for worship an object far nobler and purer than himself. If I refer to the poetical tale of Job, who, on getting a mental sight of God, cried out: "Behold, I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes," I may justly be told that this is mythological. However, the prophet called Isaiah in our Bibles said in his own name, "We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousness is but filthy rags"—words strangely treated as a doctrine special to Christians, and tending to undervalue practical righteousness! On the contrary, they are the vehement aspiration of the heart for a higher goodness than its own—a heart utterly disparaging its own attainment in comparison to that which it sees above it, and longs for. But I suppose it will be added, "*If* such self-contempt is *real*, it is debasing; it saps the dignity of man." Yet it is not visible that Luther, or John Knox, or Oliver Cromwell were deficient in manliness, if even they "crawled on the ground" under a sense of their own vileness, contrasted to God's purity. I fully admit to objectors that the inward religion common to Jews and Christians may become *morbid*, namely, by assuming an intensity of grief which (in a weak nature) endangers moral despair. The ups and downs of a much-tempted, much-sinning man, often bitterly repenting, often jubilant with delight—whose sins *perhaps* (like those of the poet Cowper) are unknown to all but himself and hardly believed by others—may entail a mental malady like Cowper's; or, in a more robust and carnal nature, may drive a man into hardened courses. I wish objectors to understand that I see this danger. Nevertheless, as fire may burn us, and could not be the great aid to us that it is if this were impossible, so judge I of that mental contact between the impure soul and its far purer object of worship. The *humiliation* thus induced forbids a man to despise even the most sinful and polluted of his race, makes him tender-hearted and forgiving, preparing him to believe that there is a fertile seed of goodness in those who have plenty of visible imperfection. I strongly deny that such humiliation tends to unmanliness, or lessens human dignity. The vehemence of passion uses strong language—as in love, so in devotion. The "self-aborrence," which is reprov'd as debasing, is felt only in the contrast of our darkness to God's purity, and has nothing to do with the comparison of man with man. To "crawl" before man is a loss of dignity, but before God we have no dignity to claim. Surely humility towards God must make us more amiable to man. "To do justly and love mercy" are in sweet accord with "walking humbly with God."

If there is any truth in what I have here laid out, a not unimportant inference seems to follow. A Hebrew Theist (such as I have described), though he believe neither in Moses nor in Jesus, finds true co-religionists in pious Jews and pious Christians; and not in those only who recognize him as "one of their invisible church," but in many who shun him and shudder at him—

many whose religion is disfigured by puerile or pernicious error. On the other hand, he may regard a Greek Theist as a good man, a noble man, a man to be esteemed; but he does not find in him a co-religionist; nay, rather regards him as “unregenerate” and needing “conversion.” So too the Greek Theist evidently finds nothing in a respectable Atheist, however hard and scornful, to repel him. The difference between these is one of intellectual speculation, and does not at all touch the heart. Thus, I incline to believe, the chasm which in Religion separates *Theists who do not worship* and *Theists who worship* is a broad dividing line. Those on this side are co-religionists with Jews, Brahmos, Christians and Mussulmans; those on the other side, are co-religionists with Pantheists (?) and Atheists. When those nurtured in the old national religions unlearn dogmatic authority, all human nature may be united in a common belief of Hebrew Theism, as conscious children of One God. But if we disbelieve our personal relation to God, Religion has lost alike its *restraining* and its *uniting* power. A Theism which is a mere speculation of the intellect may indifferently be asserted or denied. Atheism is morally on a par with such Theism. Of course this is not adduced as any disproof, but only as indicating the practical importance of the controversy.

337 between the two is one [rev. Misc.]

338-9 the chasm which separates [rev. Misc.]

339-40 *Theists who do not pray* and *Theists who pray* is the broadest of all dividing lines. [rev. Misc.]

342-9 [This paragraph, in The Index, concludes as follows:] and Atheists. Perhaps it is for this reason that I feel so keenly the endless scoffs of THE INDEX against Christians of every class, just as if they struck myself. Scoffs and unintermitted small carping seem to me below the dignity of science, even when substantially just. But the use of such weapons belongs to men who suppose that religion is matter of the intellect only. When truth and error are mingled in great complexity, and have laid firm hold of the affections, error certainly cannot be extirpated by logical slaps in the face. On the contrary, intense aversion is excited, walls of separation are built up, prejudice is confirmed. Those whose religion is no mere dry light, but has emotion in it, cannot be beneficially accosted by a contemptuous, unsympathizing censor. But these few words are a mere corollary to the main topic of this article.