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SPIRITIST THEOLOGIANS

Theologians have rarely been very popular persons, while they lived, and of late years have been very unpopular. After they were dead,—using the word in its ordinary sense,—some of them have become more popular and gained a fame, wide and lasting, in inverse ratio to their former infamy. Now there is arising among us a new order of theologians at present very popular, who derive their popularity from the fact that they are either dead,—still using the word in the ordinary sense,—or consider themselves to be so related to the dead that they can speak for them, become their amanuenses, see to the publication of their posthumous books, and act in a general managerial capacity for them. Thus the dead in a very realistic sense are now speaking (so it is believed) not as having joined

the choir invisible
Of those immortal dead who live again
In minds made better by their presence

but as claiming to revisit the glimpses of the moon, visibly and audibly. Miss Agnes Repplier has with inimitable grace and wit complained to her large circle of admiring readers of “the determined intrusion” of “Dead Authors” who “force an entrance into our congested literary world competing with living scribblers.”¹ It must now be added that the spirits have taken to teaching and lecturing on theology using their agents among the living as partners or organs. They announce their presence by apparitions in haunted houses and elsewhere, by sitting, or standing, for their photographs, usually quite uninvited, by showing

¹ *Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1918.

NOTES AND NOTICES

DR. TENNANT ON THE DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE AND THE CONCEPTION OF A FINITE GOD.

The existence of evil in the world has led some religious thinkers to give up the omnipotence of God in order to save his goodness, and this has become a quite popular and supposedly easy method of arriving at a Theodicy. In the novels of Mr. Wells, for example, we find this off-hand solution of a problem which has perplexed the most profound minds of every age. This movement in current religious thought may perhaps be said to be simply one phase of the question as to where we are to draw the line between the Unconditioned and Absolute of philosophy, and the "finite God" of such writers as Mr. Wells.

Dr. Tennant thinks he has found the solution in the idea of God as "determinate Being" in contrast with the Absolute of transcendental philosophy, and he has explained his idea for us in two brief but interesting articles in the *Expository Times* for October and November, 1919, the former being entitled "The Divine Omnipotence," and the latter "The Conception of a Finite God."

Dr. Tennant's distinction between the Absolute and Unconditioned of philosophy and the determinate God of theism is perfectly sound. If we say with Spinoza that every determination is a limitation, then we cannot think of God as personal or conscious or as possessed of any of the moral attributes which are attributed to the Divine Being in the Scripture, and which are likewise believed in by theistic philosophy. The result is that we are left with an unknowable Absolute or else lost in pantheism. The same result follows if we define the Infinite as the All, and maintain that God is the Infinite thus conceived. Dr. Tennant is quite justified, therefore, in his desire to reaffirm and defend belief in the "determinate" God of theism and of the Bible.

And once again, Dr. Tennant is right in drawing a sharp distinction between this determinate and personal God of theism and the current popular conception of a finite God. Because God is not the Unconditioned; because He is not the All; it does not follow that He is finite, like one of our-

selves, only perhaps considerably stronger and wiser than we are. "It is not necessary," as Dr. Tennant pertinently remarks in the latter of the articles referred to, "in order to conceive of God as actual and living, to regard Him (as he, Mr. Wells, seems to do) as a consciousness compounded of the best elements in our consciousness, and destined like 'the social mind' to extinction when humanity shall be no more. It is not necessary, again, to conceive Him as a struggling God who needs our help in order to achieve His purpose; as if the world, to contain a real moral issue, must be capable of defeating its Creator, and His triumph over evil cannot be depended upon until after the event." These are true words of Dr. Tennant, and finely spoken. Indeed this finite God he has described is just no God at all. In leaving the pantheism of the Absolute we have passed into atheism.

Both these distinctions which Dr. Tennant has drawn, we repeat, are perfectly sound, and though they seem quite obvious, they need emphasis at the present time, and Dr. Tennant has done a service in this respect.

But when all this has been said, we feel bound to add that Dr. Tennant has gone too far in his limitations of the omnipotence and infinitude of God.

Take for example the Divine Omnipotence of which Dr. Tennant treats in the first mentioned article. He points out quite correctly that omnipotence in God does not mean absolute and unlimited power to do that which is absurd or impossible. Certainly omnipotence does not include "self-contradictoriness." God, as Dr. Tennant remarks, cannot cause a thing to be both existent and non-existent at the same moment. If God were omnipotent in this sense we would have the old dilemma indicated by the question which Dr. Tennant cites: Could God create a being of such a nature that He could not subsequently destroy it? Either an affirmative or a negative answer to this question is fatal to the above idea of the Divine Omnipotence.

And once more, Dr. Tennant is right in pointing out what he calls the "determinateness" of God's omnipotence. God is limited by His own nature. God is just; He therefore cannot be unjust, nor can He act unjustly. He is holy; therefore He cannot be unholy, nor act in an unholy manner.

All this is true, and should be sufficiently obvious. It is only to say that God is God. Indeed both these limits to God's omnipotence mentioned by Dr. Tennant are really one. The logical no less than the moral limits to the Divine Omnipotence follow from the nature of God whose reason determines the laws of thought no less than whose moral nature determines the laws of morality.

But while all this is true, it is also true that all of the limitations which Dr. Tennant puts upon the Omnipotence of God, do *not* flow from His nature, nor from the laws of thought, nor from the necessary constitution of a moral system, and consequently these limitations to the Divine Omnipotence are inadmissible and really destructive of it. Some of what Dr. Tennant calls moral necessities are not such at all. Thus in his zeal for a Theodicy Dr. Tennant asserts that God could not have made a moral system without evil, and that such a system is self-contradictory; that God could not create free agents whose wills were not independent of all control by Himself, and that such an idea is self-contradictory. Now these ideas, we repeat, are not self-contradictory, nor are the limitations imposed on God by Dr. Tennant rendered necessary by anything in the nature of God, or in the idea of a moral system. A moral system without evil and sin is only self-contradictory or inconceivable if we maintain that the only goodness or virtue consists in victory over sin and temptation. But that this is a false idea of moral goodness, the goodness of God Himself is a sufficient proof. The entrance of sin and evil into the world gives rise to a hard problem, and one that has weighed on the minds of all thoughtful men and baffled the philosophers of all ages. But of one thing we may be sure, and that is that Dr. Tennant's Theodicy is too easy, because a moral system without evil is entirely possible and conceivable. To say, then, that God could not have made a world in which there was no evil, and that He cannot overcome evil as long as a moral system is to exist, is to limit and deny the Divine Omnipotence.

The same is true of Dr. Tennant's assertion that human free agency limits the omnipotence of God. Such an alleged limitation certainly does not flow from the nature of God; and no more does it follow from the nature of free agency.

Such a limitation of God follows from a false idea of the nature of free agency. If man is supposed to have a will which is a faculty or a somewhat inside of him, independent of his nature and character, and independent of God, then to assert human freedom truly does limit God. We go farther than Dr. Tennant and say that such a conception of freedom destroys the omnipotence of God altogether. But not only is this a false conception of free agency, and one psychologically quite indefensible, the entire Biblical doctrine of God's Providence implies that He can and does control the acts of free agents without destroying their freedom. To assert that God cannot do this, is not to place a necessary limitation on His omnipotence; it is to deny and destroy it.

Moreover to pretend, as Dr. Tennant does, that such alleged limitations of God's omnipotence are of a similar nature to those legitimate ones above mentioned, which flow from God's nature, is without warrant. We may not be able to understand how God controls the acts of free agents without destroying their freedom, but this does not render it impossible or incredible. Whereas it is both impossible and incredible that God should make a thing to be both existent and non-existent at the same moment. Multitudes believe the former; no one does or can believe the latter. This fact alone should make Dr. Tennant realize that there is a difference between the two suppositions. But the point we wish to emphasize is that in thus limiting the Divine Omnipotence by matters that do not flow from the nature of God or the laws of thought, Dr. Tennant has destroyed or denied the omnipotence of God.

Precisely the same thing is to be seen in the second of the above mentioned articles, that on "The Conception of a Finite God." Dr. Tennant again is seeking middle ground between the unlimited Absolute of philosophy and the finite God of Mr. Wells, and again we think he goes too far in limiting God. He thinks that the term "infinite" has had no connotations which can be useful in theology, and since he identifies infinity with indeterminateness, he does not believe that God is infinite. We have agreed fully with Dr. Tennant that God is not the unlimited Absolute of speculative philosophy, but differ with him as to the significance of the term infinite

as applied to God. We suppose that it means simply that no limits can be set to the Being and perfections of God, and that it thus expresses a fundamental idea in the Biblical and theistic conception of God, though it is not a Biblical term. If this is the meaning of the term when applied to God, it does not exclude ascribing to God providence and purpose, which ideas Dr. Tennant supposes to conflict with the infinitude of God. But this by the way. We agree with Dr. Tennant that God is not the unlimited and indeterminate Absolute, and that we must ascribe to Him providence and purpose. We shall not take time to quarrel over the use of terms. It is Dr. Tennant's idea of the limits to be put on God which is the matter of importance, and here, we repeat, he has again gone too far.

In the first article it was the omnipotence of God which Dr. Tennant was seeking to limit; in this second article he confines himself again to just one attribute of God, *viz.*, His Omniscience. And as before it was the human will and human freedom which were supposed to limit the Divine Omnipotence; so here it is the human will and human freedom which are supposed to limit the Divine Omniscience. In short, the old and familiar idea meets us that God cannot foreknow the acts of free agents. Here at once appears a limitation of God which does not at all spring from His nature, as in the former article Dr. Tennant professed that all the limitations do which are due to the "determinateness" of God. It is therefore a limitation which conflicts with the idea which Dr. Tennant would apply to God as a substitute for infinity *viz.*, determinateness with perfection. Is it a perfection not to be able to foreknow the acts of free agents? Surely not unless such knowledge involved absurdity or contradiction. Dr. Tennant of course supposes it does involve a contradiction because such acts he thinks are unknowable. But this again is not true unless we make the unwarranted assumption that for an act to be free, it must be entirely uncertain as to its occurrence, or in other words, that contingency is essential to free agency. But this is not the case. An act may be free as to its mode of occurrence, and certain as to the fact of its futuration. The foreknowledge by God, then, of human acts is not inconsistent with human free agency, and so this limita-

tion which Dr. Tennant puts on God's omniscience is an unwarranted limitation of God, and destroys the idea of "perfection" which Dr. Tennant would ascribe to God instead of infinity.

Of course in a sense there can be no foreknowledge with God. As Dr. Tennant says, all past, present, and future is an eternal now or present for God. But his limitation of God remains nevertheless unchanged, for that part of the "eternal now" which lies in the future to us men, is hidden from the knowledge of God, according to Dr. Tennant, in so far as it concerns the acts of free agents.

Perhaps it were well for a God who is not omnipotent that he should not be omniscient, for a knowledge of a future over which He had no control might be a source of grief or terror, and so the blessedness of God would also be limited. Perhaps it were well for men that a God who is not omniscient should not be omnipotent, for a Being all powerful and yet half blind would be indeed a dangerous menace to mankind. But the God of the Bible and of the best theistic philosophy is all blessed, all powerful, all wise, and all good. We think that Dr. Tennant in seeking to escape from the unlimited Absolute of transcendental metaphysics, has gone too far in the direction of the advocates of a finite God.

And what, finally, is the hope which belief in this God of Dr. Tennant's holds for mankind of final victory over evil? Not the hope of the New Testament that Almighty God by His Spirit is saving the world, and that this victory will at last be complete; but simply that in creating the world a moral system, it was in some way, not further explained, arranged so that goodness should have an inherent quality which makes it gradually get the better of evil. But this is not a well grounded hope. Goodness is not a something apart from a will either Divine or human. If our hope is not to be in ourselves it must be in God. Although Dr. Tennant has not fallen so low in his conception of God as has Mr. Wells, surely he has approached very near to the God of Deism.

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