

POSITIVE RELIGION:  
ITS BASIS AND CHARACTERISTICS.

LECTURE III.

BY THE LATE

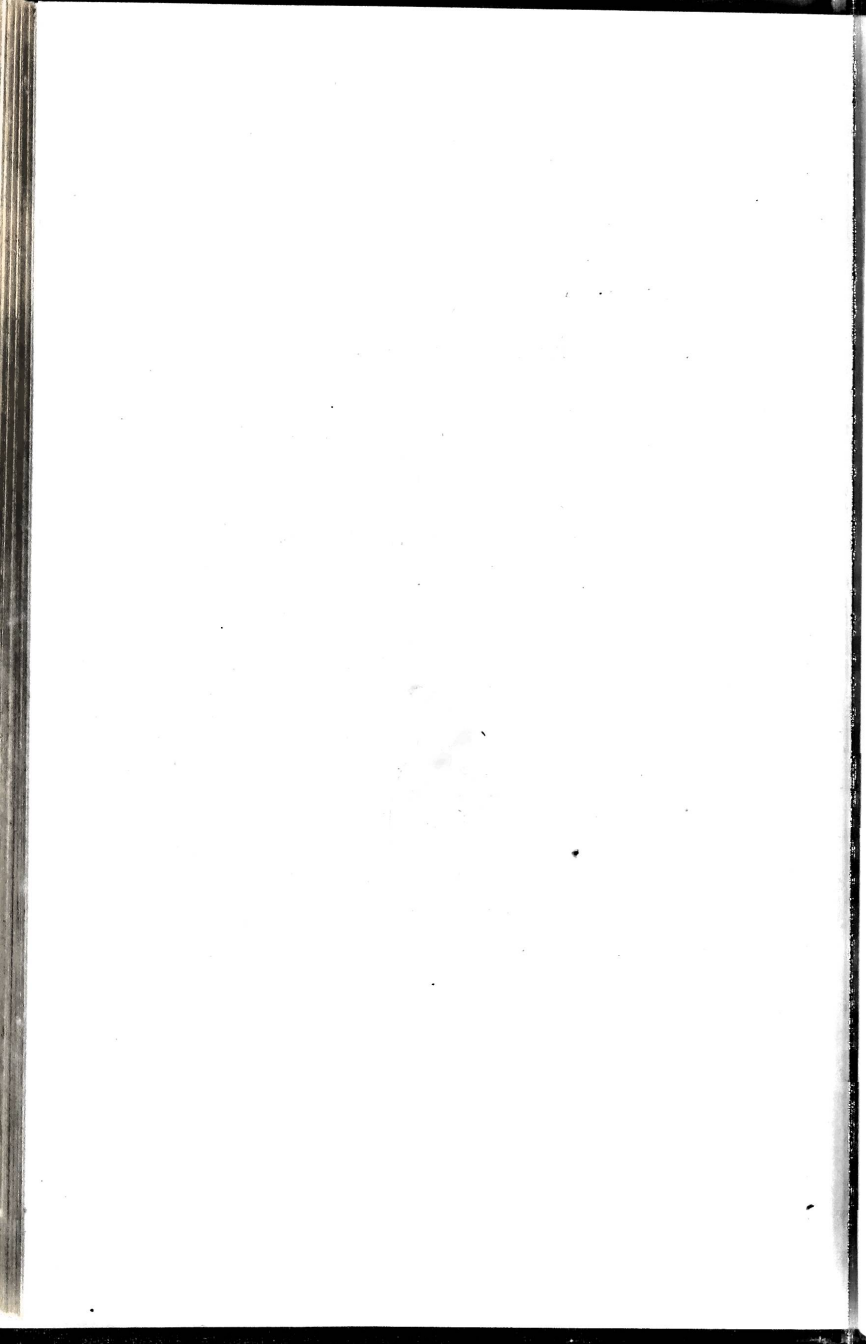
REV. JAMES CRANBROOK,  
EDINBURGH.



PUBLISHED BY THOMAS SCOTT,  
NO. 11, THE TERRACE, FARQUHAR ROAD,  
UPPER NORWOOD, LONDON, S.E.

---

*Price Threepence.*



## LECTURE III.

---

IN the last Lecture, I directed your attention to certain feelings which arise within us whenever we come face to face with nature. They are common to the cultivated and the uncultivated alike, but, I think, are greatly intensified by the larger knowledge of the cultivated obtained through the revelations of science. The feelings are those of wonder, awe, and the sense of the mysterious arising out of the perception of the order and constancy, the adaptation and fitnesses, the beauty and beneficence of the whole universe. The smallest object as well as the most sublime tends to excite them, and the more fully we comprehend the processes by which all the changes in nature are effected the more deeply they excite our wonder and awe, and the more intensely they make us feel how mysterious every thing around is.

Now, as we have also seen, it is not natural for man to stand before this mystery with these feelings of wonder and awe without his curiosity being excited, and his being led to investigate the origin and causes of the objects which so move him. He must ask himself, How came this universe into existence? What is it that determines the order and constancy with which each antecedent is followed only by its own consequent? Who or what arranges those organizations by means of which such admirable results are obtained? What controls the course of human actions so that they become not merely an accumulation of events but a

history? And the answer in almost every case which has hitherto been given has laid the basis of man's doctrine of God. For, failing to find any response from without to his questioning, each man has been content to project upon the phenomena his own image, and in it to find the cause. As he has gazed upon his own thought reflected upon the universe, in delight at his discovery he has exclaimed, Behold the solution of the mystery! See the Creator of the universe revealed in the midst of his works!

But now, what are we to do who have been convinced of the truth of the phenomenal philosophy? who deny that it is in the power of man by any means to transcend the phenomenal? Such explanations as others resort to are proscribed to us. We may neither affirm nor deny anything which rests on conjecture merely, however seemingly plausible an explanation of the facts it may be. We are bound down to that which can be verified, and can only admit of hypotheses as the temporary guides of our tentative inquiries. To us therefore the theories of Polytheism, Monotheism, Pantheism, and Atheism are alike idle fancies making affirmations about that of which we can know nothing. And yet in us nature moves these feelings of wonder, awe, and mystery as deeply as in others, and we not less than they intensely long to penetrate the great secret of the universe. Yes, in some of us I believe these feelings swell with a power, an intensity, a consuming fervour others never experience; and that because we know the questions they originate can never be answered. What then must we do? Are we alone of all mankind doomed to live without a religion? Has our culture come to this, that nothing is left for us to worship?

Now let us be calm and look at the facts. And, first, this is clear, the mystery is insoluble; God is unknowable; we can affirm nothing whatsoever of his existence. The orthodox no less than we constantly

say this. Mr Mansel says it; Sir William Hamilton said it; the whole School of Locke has always said it; and indeed all modern philosophers but the Cartesians. Only most of them endeavour by means of a special revelation or of some specious argument to take back what they thus have clearly admitted. We however abide firmly by that admission. We cannot transcend, we cannot know anything but phenomena and the relations in which they exist, and therefore we can neither know God in himself nor explain the mysteries of the universe. However intense therefore the feelings which nature inspires within us, however deep and ardent the longing to explain these mysteries we have in common with others, we own our inability and never attempt to satisfy the longing.

But are we therefore worse off than those around us? We are better off. They in explanation of the mysteries of the universe create by their fancies an object they call God, and then fall down and worship it. We knowing the worthlessness of fancy abstain from such creations and content ourselves without the explanation. They in their ignorance glory in their knowledge. We in our knowledge confess our ignorance. At least we have learned this, not to walk where there is no light to lead. But I meant more than this when I said that we are better off than they who delude themselves with the creations of their own fancy. I meant that the unknowable, the mystery of the universe, is truer, more real to us, than it is to them, is more present and has greater and a grander, purer influence over our feelings. The very fact that we do not play with it and transmute it into fanciful forms, but accept it as it is, determines this. I must however explain what I mean more fully from another point of view.

We meet, then, with mystery on every side. Directly we begin to enquire we come upon ultimate facts we cannot explain. If by means of science we can trace any

particular process to the operation of some general law, not only the general law but the reason why that general law gives rise to that process is unknown. The interpretations and revelations of science only multiply the inexplicable facts. Now, the law of our mind compels us to look in every case for an explanation, an antecedent to what we observe. The law has arisen out of our experience, probably, and depends upon the association of ideas; but it is not the less imperative and insisting than an original law of the mind. We cannot escape from it, and therefore are always asking, how or why these primary facts exist, and what that is which determines them to be. We cannot but look for that something; we cannot think of them coming to be without it; and yet we cannot find it; we learn from experience, it lies and must ever lie beyond our knowledge. But then this discovery only makes the law more urgent and the mystery more insistent. At all events, here we are with the mystery ever before us, ever pressing upon us, meeting us at every step, in every movement, the most real, most unquestionable, the truest thing in life. Speculative philosophers may raise doubts about our own substantive existence, they may raise doubts about the correspondence between the outer world and our own sense presentations of it, every thing in the universe may be made a subject of doubt, but this one, the mystery of existence, the unknowableness of the antecedent of all things, our ignorance of the determining condition or cause of all conditions and causes. The very doubts which men raise concerning other things, bring this fact more urgently before us and leave it an unquestionable reality. And observe, it is not a mere negative fact, that is thus urged upon us. It is not merely that we do not know; but that there is a *something* we do not know, viz., the antecedent, determining condition, cause, or source of these facts, of this universe so mysterious to us. In assuming its existence we are not transcending our experience; we

are merely doing what every natural philosopher, and indeed what every man or woman does when asking after the antecedent conditions of any ordinary phenomenon. We never suppose any phenomenon comes into existence under any given form without some pre-existing, determining conditions or cause. In proportion to the activity of our intellect in every case we enquire what were these pre-existing, determining conditions or cause, and in asking of course assuming the fact of their existence. We are only doing the same thing when we assume that there is a something which determines the existence of the whole universe, and each of its primary facts and consequents, although we confess that something can never be known to us.

Now, this mysterious, unknown, unknowable something, the antecedent of all consequents, the primary condition of the existence of all objects and their relations, not only thus seems to us the truest and most real of all things which occupy our thoughts, but it fills us with that awe which has ever been considered the very first element in religion, as nothing else in the universe can do. All other things, however great and sublime, however recondite and complicated, we can hope by patient thought eventually to comprehend and master. There is not a phenomenal power in the universe but which we may ultimately comprehend, and through the comprehension make subservient to our purpose. But here, before the great mystery, we are helpless; here is what we can never know, and before which we must ever subserviently bow down; here is the limit of both our understanding and our activity, our knowledge and our action. We are surrounded with its wonders, and can only exist as we can conform ourselves to the conditions it has imposed. How little, how insignificant, we feel before it! We are filled with awe, with reverence, with wonder. Spontaneously we humble ourselves and worship. What

then, shall we call this unknown and unknowable, determining condition of all existence? this hidden, mysterious source of the universe? this all-pervading, all-comprehending, all-determining something, which we know must be, and yet ever eludes our grasp? Call it! What signifies the name? No term can name it. God! — Fate! — *Causa-causarum*! — the All-in-All! — every word has been abused; and every word therefore fails to describe the awfulness, the reality of this ever-present mystery. But then, name it we must, and since all names are insufficient, but some have been rendered sacred by the use of ages, we will keep to the sacred names, and call this unknown and unknowable condition of the universe God and Lord.

But more important than to inquire after names, is it for us to note that in those deep feelings already so often enumerated, we have the exercise of the religion appropriate to such an object of worship. That which is unknown can in itself possibly call forth no other feelings than those of wonder, awe, and the sense of mystery; whatever else in any case is mingled with these, must come from other and adventitious sources. Accordingly, as I have before intimated, these feelings are at the base of all the religions which have ever existed in the world. Whatever has been superadded to them, the great mystery of the universe, which has originated all religions, has inspired only these.

This is very distinctly taught in F. W. Newman's book called "*The Soul*," where principles very different from mine are inculcated. Mr Newman thinks we have a distinct faculty which he calls the soul, whereby we immediately apprehend God. In its rudest and most uncultivated state it simply apprehends him as a mysterious power which calls forth its wonder and awe. As it learns more of nature, it rises gradually to the perception of his wisdom, goodness, love, and holiness, calling forth the feelings also of admiration, gratitude, trust, the sense of sin and adoration. And those who



are more orthodox than Mr Newman follow very nearly the same order in their supposed development of the religions of Jews and Christians through the special revelations of God. By the side of these matured systems, the simple feelings which constitute the whole basis of the religion of the Unknowable must appear very meagre and deficient. But a closer examination will show us that those other feelings of admiration, gratitude, trust, the sense of sin and adoration, arise only by attributing to the object of worship qualities, the knowledge of which is derived from his works. Contemplating these works, they discern the order, beauty, adaptation, and the beneficent results which arise from them; and by the study of the nature and history of man discern the moral character of the system by which he is governed. All that is thus discerned is then transferred to the object of worship, as expressive of his nature and character, and the feelings which are excited by it are directed towards him as the embodiment and source of all which calls them forth.

Now, I do not deny that upon their principles this process is allowable; and I freely own that when you have by such a process constructed a God, it must have an immense influence over your life. The conception of such a Being, when realized to the feelings, must wholly control them and overwhelm the influence of every other object. But, as we have seen, the principles or method by which this process is conducted is altogether false. It is purely subjective. It has no basis of fact to rest upon. The object of worship is the pure creation of the fancy. It is an idol in all the bad senses of the word "idol."

Nor, when we come to examine into the matter closely, can we allow that the influence which such an object has over the feelings and life is wholly good. This we might, *a priori*, have expected, from the fact that the object of worship is an idol. All error contains within itself the germs of evil in some form. And there

are several evils to which this error gives rise—1st, There is the false trust a sense of personal relationship to one so infinitely wise and good calls forth, leading to a childish dependence upon his care, and diverting the attention from the study of the laws of Nature, and from the self-government which is the duty and highest prerogative of man ; 2dly, There are the spurious affections excited by the contemplation of such an object, giving a transcendental tone to the whole character, and making one's nature, so far as they are operative, false to itself and to all the real objects around it ; and 3dly, There are the efforts aroused to render oneself pleasing and acceptable to so great a Being, which, being regulated by no rational principle, tend to become of a frenzied and fanatical character, leading to an indifference towards the ordinary and proper duties and enjoyments of everyday life. I might mention other evils ; but probably they all could be summed up in these, which so obviously arise out of the belief in question, that I need not stay to prove the fact.

But now, when we restrain our fancy and refuse to follow those around us into these creations of an object for worship, we not only avoid these evils but we do not lose any of the real good, any of the solid comfort, of the healthful stimulus to feeling which they suppose themselves to find. For, as we have seen, they derive their knowledge of the supposed qualities which call forth the trust, love, and adoration, &c., from the study of the works of nature. So that it is, in fact, not the qualities considered abstractedly, but the works of nature which elicit the feelings. Accordingly we find that the pure and simple study of nature produces the same feelings in us. But then there is this difference. They transferring the facts to their idol, and investing him with them as attributes, they dare not afterwards question their infinite perfection. We regarding them simply as facts of nature, are at liberty to note all the modifications and counteractions, and

regulate our feelings accordingly. Thus *e.g.*, a study of nature as a whole leads us to the perception of her beneficent tendencies. Happiness and good are the predominating results of her operations, and this perception calls forth our trust and confidence in the general issues of life and enables us to repose without agitating care upon the general course of events. So far then we are upon the same ground as those who amuse themselves with the conception of an idol who brings about these results in consequence of his personal relationship to themselves. But from this point we diverge. They are bound by the nature of their conception of this idol to implicit and universal trust. We, on the other hand, recognising merely the order of phenomena, soon discern that there are many contradictions to this seeming beneficence. We observe in the midst of the general good and happiness not a little evil and suffering. We learn that the good and happiness depend upon conditions which often are not realized. We do not place, therefore, implicit trust in the course of events, nor expect with absolute certainty the issue of good. We anticipate the possibility of evil; our trust is associated with watchfulness; we calculate on contingencies that will require resistance and efforts of a painful character to surmount; we prepare ourselves to meet possible sorrows, that when they come they may not overwhelm us. Now, surely everybody must own that it is better thus to moderate our trust and confidence, since the real facts of life require it, than to blindly confide in a power and find in the issue our confidence misplaced.

But again, the contemplation of nature leads us to the perception of its beauty, loveliness, and fitnesses; and the contemplation of human nature especially presents to us its moral and spiritual excellences and beauty. This perception calls forth towards the whole, feelings of complacency, delight, and admiring, adoring affection; whilst towards human nature the more

tender affections of appreciation, approbation, and sympathising love flow forth. And in the exercise of these feelings there are both joy and stimulus to our higher sensibilities and powers. Now, I own these feelings differ much in their character from those of persons who embody the excellences and beauty of nature in a personal being. But the difference is wholly in favour of those who abjure all but the actual facts. For in their case the feelings are entirely real, whilst in the other they are given to a fancied object which, by the confused and conflicting elements that are made to enter into its composition, and the mingling of the infinite and finite, entirely falsifies them, and gives them a fanatical bias. The love, the adoration, and the joy in nature of a pure phenomenalist, ennoble no less than they gladden his whole being; the love, the adoration, and joy felt by the supernaturalist for his idol are not indeed without spiritualizing excellences, but in their highest condition are always based upon a falsehood, and therefore must necessarily tend to a degradation of the worshipper.

I think, then, it will appear from these considerations that nothing is gained when theists proceed to add on to the pure and ever-present mystery of the universe which calls forth our wonder and awe, other qualities of a personal character which call forth the more personal feelings of trust, confidence, love, adoration, and such like. On the contrary, by keeping ourselves to the pure and rigid facts we are saved from an otherwise inevitable fanaticism, and the influence of our religion in every respect becomes more ennobling and purifying.

But this does not mean that we must not associate all the processes of nature, all the facts, issues, and tendencies we observe in her with that mysterious unknown before which we adore. On the contrary, they are necessarily associated with it. For, as I have explained, and I presume, as we all feel, it is not alone

the most generalized facts which suggest this sense of mystery, but also each individual succession of phenomena. We not only feel unable to account for the universe as a whole, but for each particular connection between two events. The fire, *e. g.*, burns my flesh and causes pain. Upon enquiry, I find the following phenomena explanatory of the fact :—The heat consists of the motion of the infinitely small particles of the atmosphere. These striking my flesh with an amazing although calculable rapidity, like cannon balls striking a wall, destroy the fine tissues of the skin, and by exciting the nerves spread over them cause the pain. Very well ; this is the physical explanation so far as we can carry it. But now, why do those infinitely small particles cannonading the skin destroy its tissue ? Why does the destruction so move the nerves as to cause pain ? We are absolutely ignorant. You observe, then, it is not merely that we cannot comprehend these facts under more general ones, but each particular fact, each succession of phenomena *in itself* is incomprehensible and full of mystery, and so brings us into the presence of that unknown something we call God. In this way all the facts of existence, and of co-relation, all the processes and laws of the universe, so far as known to us, are associated with that unknown condition or cause, and are derivable from it as consequents. Whatever of order and organization, whatever of beauty and beneficence nature discovers must ultimately be referred and ascribed to it. Nor is there a single object that comes under our contemplation which does not immediately suggest it. And thus we own, even with a fuller and more consistent meaning than the orthodox, that all things are related to, and dependent upon God ; but we dare not follow them in their rash inferences of what God must therefore be. When, *e. g.*, they and we contemplate the complicated and yet beautiful conditions upon which the eye is capable of seeing, we both refer them to God,

the unknown antecedent of these existent conditions. But then, they, taking as their guide the analogies of human nature, proceed to attribute to their God the human faculty of wisdom and will, in bringing these conditions about; we, on the other hand, adhering to our principle that we only can know phenomena, dare not follow them in such inferences. We own that if God be like men the organization of the eye would prove his wisdom or skill in contrivance; but then we do not know that he is like men; we do not know that any of his qualities are like human qualities at all. We, therefore, would not be so presumptuous as to infer he possesses anything like human wisdom. We merely content ourselves with bowing down in wonder, awe, and reverence, before the unknowable cause of that wonderful work, the eye and its power of vision. For all we know that cause may possess personality and all the mental qualities possessed by man. But also, for all we know, its qualities or modes, of existence may be absolutely unlike ours. To attribute human qualities to it may be as absurd as to attribute them to the planets or the trees. Surely, therefore, it becomes us to abstain from such attribution and simply to bow down and adore.

But now, I know that to uncultivated persons this abstinence from fancying qualities and modes of existence to fill up the gaps in our ignorance will be next to impossible. The undisciplined mind is the most impatient of uncertainty and doubt. Where it has not facts to constitute knowledge or to form a judgment upon, it always precipitately creates them in its fancy. It is only the cultured, the disciplined, the matured mind that is capable of suspending its judgments, refraining from the formation of opinions, and confessing its ignorance until it has before it sufficient facts to justify its proceeding to a conclusion. And then, in this special case respecting the mode of the divine existence, the sentiments associated

with it are apt to make men more impatient still. They have so long been accustomed to indulge their fancies without restraint, and have associated with them so many of their dearest affections and the whole system of their morality, that to renounce these fancies and to own their ignorance, seems like rooting up all that they esteem precious and good. And then, too, certain supposed consequences frighten them into precipitancy. "If," say they, "God should after all possess the same mental characteristics as man, only in infinite perfection, what a fearful condition they will be in, who have not recognised and owned them." As if a being even with human qualities in infinite perfection could ever be displeased with his creatures for not recognising what he has given them no faculty to discern; or as if he could be pleased by our stumbling upon truth even, by the exaltation of our fancy over our reason, when the constitution he has given us expressly requires that reason should be supreme and that we should only accept as true, what it can justify.

But however difficult the acquisition of the habit of restraining our fancy and suspending our judgments may be, every cultivated and disciplined mind will necessarily make the strongest efforts to acquire it. It is essential to a rational life. By it alone can we escape those superstitions which, based upon ignorance, are constantly springing up into existence and carrying away multitudes of deluded victims. And surely, of all subjects that can solicit our judgment, none can require such deliberation, such caution, such restraint of fancy, such sober and solemn adherence to fact, as that which concerns the existence of God. I call upon you, therefore, as rational beings to ponder upon and accurately examine the real facts of this great question. Let neither intellectual impatience nor a maudlin superstitious fear precipitate your conclusions or prevent you from that calm and logical investigation which it requires. Follow the truth and nothing but

the truth; whithersoever it leads follow it, and that, in the firm persuasion it can lead to nothing but good.

The positive principles I have set before you, have been necessarily so mingled with references to other doctrines that I will conclude by re-stating them in a brief summary.

We are limited by our faculties to the knowledge of phenomena in their relations of co-existence and succession. In the study of these phenomena, however, we instantly come to ultimate facts for which we cannot account. This incapability fills us with wonder, awe, and a sense of mystery. But although we cannot account for them, we are persuaded there is a something which accounts for them. We could no more suppose them without an antecedent, a cause which accounts for them, than any other fact. This unknown and unknowable antecedent or cause is what we call God. It pervades the whole universe, and is related to every individual object inasmuch as the same mystery, the same impotency, is developed in the whole and in every object. But although this cause, condition, or antecedent is connected with every object, we can infer nothing respecting its nature or attributes, excepting the one attribute of antecedence or conditioning. In itself it is unknown and unknowable excepting *as the unknown*. The only devout feelings therefore appropriate to it are those already named, wonder, awe, and the sense of mystery. How worship, and especially public worship, emerges out of this I shall show in the next lecture.