

Lecture XXX

THE DEMONSTRATION that the meaning and purpose of God are immortality, that God and immortality are one, that God, starting out as an independent being, as immortality, ends up as an attribute of man, completes my task and with it this series of lectures. I have tried to prove that the god of nature religion is nature and that the God of spiritual religion, of Christianity, is the spirit or essence of man. I have been guided by the conviction that henceforth man should seek and find the determining ground of his action, the goal of his thinking, the cure for his ills and sufferings *in himself*, rather than *outside himself* like the pagan or *above himself* like the Christian. In dealing with Christianity, the religion which concerns us most closely, I have not, it goes without saying, been able to apply my demonstration to all the many Christian doctrines and views and still less have I been able, as I originally intended, to extend it to the history of Christian philosophy.

However, it is not necessary, in dealing with such a theme as ours, to go into every detail and particular. It suffices to set forth the elements, the first principles, from which the subordinate principles may be inferred. I have formulated the principles of my doctrine as clearly as possible. I own that I might have been more brief in the first lectures. But permit me to plead the extenuating circumstances that I am not an academician, that I am not accustomed to lecture, that I had no finished text before me and consequently was unable to measure my material by the yardstick of academic schedules, and organise it accordingly. However, to conclude with the proofs adduced in the last lecture would be to end my series on a discordant note; for I have left the premises or presuppositions from which Christians derive God and immortality unquestioned and intact.

God, I have said, is the fulfiller, or the reality, of the human desires for happiness, perfection, and immortality. From this it may be inferred that to deprive man of God is to tear the heart out of his breast. But I contest the premises from which religion and theology deduce the necessity and existence of God, or of immortality, which is the same thing. I maintain that desires which are fulfilled only in the imagination, or from which the existence of an imaginary being is deduced, are imaginary desires, and not the real desires of the human heart; I maintain that the limitations which the religious imagination annuls in the idea of God or immortality, are necessary determinations of the human essence, which cannot be dissociated from it, and therefore no limitations at all, except precisely in man's imagination. Man, for example, is confined by place and time, "his body chains him to the earth," as the rationalist believers say, "and so prevents him from knowing what is on the moon or on Venus." But this is not a real limitation. The gravitation that attaches me to the earth is merely an expression of my inseparable bond with the earth. What am I if I cut my bond with the earth? A phantom; for I am essentially a creature of the earth. Consequently my desire to transfer to other planets is a mere imaginary desire. If I were able to satisfy it, I should not be long in seeing that it is an absurd, extravagant desire, for I should be very uncomfortable on another planet and therefore realise – alas too late! – that it would have been better and more reasonable to remain on earth.

Man has many wishes that he does not really wish to fulfil, and it would be a misunderstanding to suppose the contrary. He wants them to remain wishes, they have value only in his imagination; their fulfilment would be a bitter disappointment to him. Such a desire is the desire for eternal life. If it were fulfilled, man would become thoroughly sick of living eternally, and yearn for death. In reality man wishes merely to avoid a premature, violent or gruesome death. Everything has its measure, says a pagan philosopher; in the end we weary of everything, even of life; a time comes

when man desires death. Consequently there is nothing frightening about a normal, natural death, the death of a man who has fulfilled himself and lived out his life. Old men often long for death. The German philosopher Kant could hardly wait to die, and not in order to resuscitate, but because he longed for the end. Only an unnatural, unfortunate death, the death of a child, a youth, a man in the prime of life, makes us revolt against death and wish for a new life. Such misfortunes are bitterly painful for the survivors; and yet they do not justify belief in a hereafter, if only because such abnormal cases – and they are abnormal even if they should be more frequent than natural death – could only have an abnormal hereafter as their consequence, a hereafter for those who have died too soon or by violence; but a special hereafter of this kind is an absurdity which no one could believe.

But like the desire for eternal life, the desire for omniscience and absolute perfection is merely an imaginary desire; and, as history and daily experience prove, the supposed human striving for unlimited knowledge and perfection is a myth. Man has no desire to know everything; he only wants to know the things to which he is particularly drawn. Even a man with a universal thirst for knowledge – a rare exception – does not want to know everything without distinction; he does not, like a mineralogist, wish to know every single stone, or like a botanist every plant; he contents himself with general knowledge, because it fits in with his general cast of mind. Similarly, man desires the ability, not to do everything, but only to do those things toward which he feels a special inclination; he does not strive for unlimited, indeterminate perfection, which exists only in a god or in an infinite other world, but for a limited, determinate perfection, for perfection within a certain sphere.

Accordingly, we not only find individuals stopping once they have achieved a certain stage of education or perfection, but whole nations marking time for thousands of years. The Chinese, the Indians, are today

at the same stage of development as thousands of years ago. How do such phenomena fit in with the rationalist's myth of an unlimited human striving for perfection, for which he can only find room in an infinite hereafter? Man has not only an impulse to progress, but also an impulse to rest once he has arrived at a stage of development corresponding to his finite nature. It is these opposing impulses that give rise to the conflict that runs through all history, including the present period. The progressives, the so-called revolutionaries, want to go forward; the conservatives want to leave everything as it is, except that their love of stability does not extend to their attitude toward death – for most of them are believers – and in order to prolong their interesting existences they are willing, in this respect, to put up with the most radical changes, the most revolutionary transformations, of their being. But even revolutionaries do not wish to progress ad infinitum, they have specific aims; once these are achieved, they halt and seek stability. Thus in each generation new young men take up the thread of history where the old progressives, having attained the goal of *their* desires and with it the limits of their being and thinking, leave off.

No more than man has an unlimited drive toward knowledge and perfection, no more has he an unlimited, insatiable lust for happiness, which the good things of this earth cannot assuage. Men, even those who believe in immortality, are perfectly content with earthly life, at least as long as all goes well, as long as they do not want for necessities, as long as no special, grave misfortune strikes them. They do not want a radically different life, they would merely like to see the evils of this life done away with. “The Greenlanders, for example, situate the abode of the blessed under the sea, because most of their food is derived from the sea. Under the sea, they say, there is good water and plenty of birds, fishes, seals, and reindeer which can be caught without difficulty or which are even found cooked alive in a great kettle.” Here we have an example, a picture, of the

human striving for happiness. The Greenlander's desires do not go beyond the limits of his country, his natural surroundings. He does not want anything radically different from what his country provides; he only wants the same things in *good quality and ample supply*. He does not want to stop catching fish and seals in the hereafter; he does not regard what he is as a limitation or burden; he does not want to exceed his species, his essential condition and occupation – he would only like to catch his fish and seals more easily in the hereafter.

What a modest desire! True, the desires of civilised man – whose mind and life, unlike those of the savage, are not restricted to any particular locality – are not so modest. He not only desires (to stay with our example) the edible flora and fauna of his country; he also aspires to the pleasures of distant lands; compared with those of the savage, his pleasures and desires are infinite; and yet they do not exceed the earth or the nature of man as such. Civilised man belongs to the same species as the savage; he wants no heavenly foods, he has no knowledge of them; he wants only the products of the earth; he does not want to abolish eating as such but only an uncivilised diet limited to the products of one particular place. In short, a reasonable and natural striving for happiness does not exceed the nature of man, it does not surpass the bounds of this life, of this earth; it aims merely at eliminating those evils and limitations that can actually be eliminated, that are not necessary, that are not an essential part of life.

Consequently, desires that exceed human nature or the human race itself, such as the desire not to eat at all, not to be subject to any bodily needs whatever, are imaginary, fantastic desires, and it follows that both the being who fulfils such desires and the life in which they are fulfilled are purely imaginary and fantastic. As to the desires that do not go beyond man and his nature, that are grounded not only in empty imagination or unnatural indulgence of the emotions, but in a real need and drive of

human nature, they find their fulfilment within the human race and in the course of human history. Accordingly, we should be justified in inferring a religious or theological hereafter, a future life devoted to the perfecting of man, only if mankind always remained rooted to the same spot, if there were no history, no perfecting or betterment of the human race on earth, though even then such an inference would still not be true.

But there is a history of human civilisation: why, even animals and plants change and develop so much in the course of time that we can no longer discover and demonstrate their ancestry! We *know* innumerable things and *are able* to do innumerable things, that our ancestors did not know and could not do. Copernicus – an example I have already cited in my book, *The Question of Immortality from the Standpoint of Anthropology*, but which is so much to the point that I cannot refrain from repeating it – lamented on his deathbed that for all his desires and efforts he had never in all his life seen the planet Mercury. Today astronomers with their perfected telescopes see it at high noon. Those human desires that are not imaginary and fantastic are fulfilled in the course of history, of the future. Many desires which today remain mere desires will some day be fulfilled; innumerable things which the presumptuous champions of present-day religious dogmas and institutions, present-day social and political conditions, regard as impossible, will one day be reality; innumerable things that today we do not know but would like to know, will be known to our descendants. We must therefore modify our goals and exchange divinity, in which only man's groundless and gratuitous desires are fulfilled, for the human race or human nature, religion for education, the hereafter in heaven for the hereafter on earth, that is, the *historical future*, the future of mankind.

Christianity set itself the goal of fulfilling man's unattainable desires, but for that very reason ignored his attainable desires. By promising man eternal life, it deprived him of temporal life, by teaching him to trust in

God's help it took away his trust in his own powers; by giving him faith in a better life in heaven, it destroyed his faith in a better life on earth and his striving to attain such a life. Christianity gave man what his imagination desires, but for that very reason failed to give him what he really and truly desires. In his imagination, man yearns for heavenly, immoderate happiness; in reality, he desires earthly, moderate happiness. Earthly happiness, it is true, does not require wealth, luxury, splendor, glory, and empty display, but only the necessities, only the things without which man cannot carry on a human existence. But innumerable men still lack the barest necessities! For this reason the Christians call it blasphemous or inhuman to deny the existence of a hereafter and so deprive the unfortunate, the wretched of this earth, of their one consolation, the hope of a better world to come. Herein, they still believe, lies the moral significance of the hereafter, its unity with the divine; for without a hereafter there would be no retribution, no justice, no reparation in heaven for the misery of those who suffer on earth, or at least of those who suffer through no fault of their own.

But this justification of the hereafter is a mere pretext, for it would justify a hereafter or immortality only for the unfortunate and not for those who have been lucky enough to satisfy their human needs and develop their human aptitudes on earth. The above-mentioned argument would make sense only if those who have already attained the goal of human desires ceased to be after death, or if they were worse off in the next world than in this, occupying in heaven the position that their brethren occupied in this. The Kamchadals actually do believe that those who have been poor on earth will be rich in the next world, whereas the rich will be poor, and that in this way a certain equality between the two classes is achieved. But this is not what the Christian gentlemen who champion the hereafter for the above-cited reason want or believe; they are determined to live just as well in the next world as the poor and unfortunate.

This justification of the hereafter is in the same class as the argument in favour of belief in God adduced by many learned gentlemen who say that atheism is the sound view, that they themselves are atheists, but that atheism is suitable only for learned gentlemen not for men in general – that is, the public at large or the common people – and that it is therefore unfitting, impractical, and even criminal to teach atheism publicly. But the gentlemen who express this opinion are merely hiding their own wishy-washiness, their own unclarity and indecision, behind the vague and broad word “people” or “public”; to them the people are a mere pretext. When a man is truly convinced of something, he does not fear to say it in public, in fact, he must say it in public. An idea that fears the light is a feeble idea that cannot bear scrutiny. The atheism that fears the light is an unworthy and hollow atheism. Such atheists have nothing to say, and that is why they are afraid to speak out. The cryptoatheist says only in private that there is no God; his atheism is summed up in this one negative statement, which stands all alone, so that his atheism changes nothing. And it is perfectly true that if atheism were a mere negation, a denial without content, it would be unfit for the people, that is, for man or for public life; but only because such atheism is worthless. True atheism, the atheism that does not shun the light, is also an affirmation; it negates the being abstracted from man, who is and bears the name of God, but only in order to replace him by man’s true being.

What is truly negative is theism, the belief in God; it negates nature, the world and mankind: *in the face of God, the world and man are nothing*, God was before world and man were; He *can exist without them*; He is the nothingness of the world and of man; at least according to strict orthodox belief, God can make the world into nothingness at any moment. For the true theist the power and beauty of nature, the virtue of man, do not exist; a believer in God takes everything away from man and from nature in order to adorn and glorify his God. “*Only God alone is to be loved,*” says

St. Augustine, for example, “*this whole world* [i. e. all sensuous things] *is to be despised.*” “God,” says Luther in a Latin letter, “wishes either to be *the only friend* or no friend at all.” “Faith, hope, and love,” he says in another letter, “are due to God alone, and that is why they are called the theological virtues.” Thus theism is “negative and destructive”; it builds its faith solely on the nullity of world and man, that is, of the real man.

But God is nothing other than the abstracted, phantasmagoric essence of man and nature, hypostatized by the imagination; hence theism sacrifices the real life and nature of things and of men to a being who is a mere product of thought and imagination. Thus atheism is positive and affirmative; it gives back to nature and mankind the dignity of which theism has despoiled them; it restores life to nature and mankind, which theism had drained of their best powers. God, as we have seen, is jealous of nature and man; He wants man to honour, love, and serve Him alone; He wants everything else to be nothing and Himself alone to be something; in other words, theism is jealous of man and the world and begrudges them any good. Envy, ill will, and jealousy are destructive, negative passions. Atheism, on the other hand, is liberal, open-handed, open-minded; an atheist acknowledges every being’s will and talent; his heart delights in the beauty of nature and the virtue of man: joy and love do not destroy, they are life-giving, affirmative.

The same applies to the elimination of the hereafter, which is inseparable from atheism. If denying the existence of a hereafter were an empty negation, without consequence, it would be better, or at least no worse, to retain the after-life. But the negation of the next world has as its consequence the affirmation of this world; the denial of a better life in heaven implies the demand for a better life on earth; it transforms the hope of a better future from a concern of idle, inactive faith into a duty, a matter of independent human activity. Of course it is outrageously unjust that some men should have everything while others have nothing, that

some wallow in the good things of life, in the benefits of art and science, while others lack the barest necessities. But it is just as preposterous to argue the necessity of a hereafter in which reparation will be made to men for their sufferings on earth as to argue the necessity of a public justice in heaven which will correct the defects of the secret justice that prevails on earth. The necessary conclusion to be drawn from the existing injustices and evils of human life is the determination, the active striving to remedy them – not a belief in the hereafter, which only makes men fold their hands and leaves the evils intact.

But, it might be argued, granted that the evils of our social and political world can be corrected, what good does that do those who have already suffered and died as a result of these evils? How does a better future benefit the people of the past? True, it does them no good at all, but neither does the hereafter. The hereafter with its balms always comes too late; it cures an ill after it has passed, after death, when man no longer feels the evil and consequently has no need to be cured; for though death, at least as long as we are alive and thinking about it, has the disadvantage of taking away our feeling and consciousness of the good, the beautiful and the pleasant, it also has the advantage of releasing us from all evils, sufferings, and sorrows. The love that has created the hereafter, that comforts the suffering with the thought of the hereafter, is the love that heals the sick after they are dead, that slakes the thirsty and feeds the hungry after they have died of hunger and thirst.

Let us then follow the example of the pagans and let the dead rest in peace! “The pagans,” I wrote in *The Question of Immortality*, “cried out to their dead loved ones: May thy bones rest gently! or: Rest in peace! – whereas the Christians shout a cheery *vivas et crescas in infinitum* into the ears of the dying, or else their pietistic healers of souls à la Dr. Eisenbart take advantage of their fear of death to bellow at them that only the fear of God can guarantee their eternal beatitude.” Let us then leave the dead in

peace and concern ourselves with the living. If we no longer *believe* in a better life but decide to *achieve* one, not each man by himself but with our united powers, we will *create* a better life, we will at least do away with the most glaring, outrageous, heartbreaking injustices and evils from which man has hitherto suffered. But in order to make such a decision and carry it through, we must replace the love of God by the love of man as the only true religion, the belief in God by the belief in man and his powers – by the belief that the fate of mankind depends not on a being outside it and above it, but on mankind itself, that man's only Devil is man, the barbarous, superstitious, self-seeking, evil man, but that man's only God is also man himself.

With these words, gentlemen, I conclude my lectures. My only wish is that I have not failed in the task I set myself and formulated in the opening lectures: to transform friends of God into friends of man, believers into thinkers, devotees of prayer into devotees of work, candidates for the hereafter into students of this world, Christians who, by their own profession and admission, are "*half animal, half angel,*" into *men*, into *whole men*.