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SCIENTIFIC LIGHTS ON RELIGIOUS PROBLEMS.

II.

THE SCIENTIFIC POSSIBILITY OF REVELATION.

IN my previous study I came to the conclusion that the modern doctrine of the unity of species has tended to make Man more at home in Nature—has given back to him much of that importance which he lost by the eclipse of the old astronomy. If there is only one kind of life in the universe—if man, animal, plant, crystal, the dynamical powers of Nature, and the great Primal Force which is behind them, is each a form of the same existence, it follows that there is no reason for Man's appalling sense of humility. In the acceptance of such a doctrine—and evolution demands its acceptance—we shall receive the impression which men often get by far travelling—that the world is small.

But I am disposed to claim more for this doctrine of the unity of species. Not only does it redeem Man from his sense of insignificance; it furnishes the first ground for a Divine revelation. It is popularly thought that the old theory of separate creations was more favourable to the belief in communion with God than is the new theory of unity of species. I am convinced it is the reverse. There is no reason whatever why a creator should have any intercourse with the thing he has created. Unless the created thing is made in the creator's image, the fact of creation does not bring it one whit nearer to its maker. If I could, this moment, form a stone out of nothing, that stone would be no nearer to me by reason of my act than any stone of the quarry. But if, without any new creation at all, I should disconnect a portion of my life and surround it with a separate wall—in other words, if I should become the father of another living soul, there would be between me and that soul a possibility of the deepest communion. The stone, which was supposed to come by creation, would be

outside of me; the child, which confessedly came from evolution, would sooner or later be in daily communion with my spirit.

The truth is, unless we have such a clause as "made in the image of God," there is far more religious comfort in the doctrine of Evolution than in the doctrine of Creation. And why? Because the doctrine of Evolution gives more hope of Divine *communion* than the doctrine of Creation. Creation implies inequality. If I have been created by the Spirit of Nature, that is an argument rather against than in favour of my *fellowship* with that spirit. Fellowship demands a common level; it can only exist on some point where two beings are united. But a creator and his creatures are on different levels. They may be united *in spite of* that relation, but never by reason of that relation. The creator is at the top of a ladder; the creature is at the foot of it. That fact is in itself a disqualification for communion. It may be supplemented by future facts which bridge the gulf, but in itself it *is* a gulf. Religious communion implies that God and Man are, for the moment, standing on equal ground; creation implies that they are standing on *unequal* ground. If Man had no doctrine but the belief in creation, there would not exist even the basis for a religious worship.

But now take the other alternative. Let us suppose that Man is not created by, but evolved from, the Spirit of Nature: what will then be his position as regards the hope of Divine fellowship? It will be one of exceeding brightness. If creation by the Spirit of Nature implies inequality with that Spirit, evolution *from* the Spirit of Nature does not. Evolution implies a common element. If I have *come out of* Nature, I am entitled to call Nature my father. If I am merely *created* by Nature, I am not. I am not made the father of a stone by creating that stone, because to create a thing does not make that thing resemble me. But I become the father of a child by giving life to

that child. And why? Precisely because that life is not created. It is a part of myself. It is the transmission of my own nature, the reproduction of my essence in a separate form. What makes this child a possible object of communion with my soul is the fact that it has not been created out of nothing, but evolved out of my life.

So is it with Man's claim to the fatherhood of God. It has a more sure footing in the doctrine of Evolution than in the doctrine of Creation. If God is my Father, it is not because He has created me, but because I bear His image. I am more likely to bear His image on the principle of evolution than on the principle of creation. Creation makes me a new product—new even to God. If I am new to God, how can I assume that there will be a congruity between His Spirit and mine! But if I have come from evolution, I have a right to expect that congruity. I am already, in that case, a part of the Primal Force which lies at the basis of all things, and which is of one species with all things. I am in constitutional sympathy with the life of Nature. I have sprung from that life—I have not been created by it. It is not merely the author, it is the fountain, of my being. It bears the same relation to me as I do to my child. It ought to have a life kindred to mine, a soul tuned to mine, a sympathy responsive to mine. I cannot think of the Primal Force as alien to me. It belongs to the same species. I am a part of the original ocean, an arm of the great sea. Doubtless I am an environed part—hemmed in by limits, encircled in creeks and bays. But the water is the same. Shall I not have converse with the parent sea! Shall I not hear the echo of the outside waves! Shall I not receive the breezes from the mighty main! Shall I not be refreshed from time to time by wafted drops of spray from the bosom of the infinite deep!

So may well ask the believer in evolution! His claim to revelation, Divine communion, the reception of the spray-

drops from the ocean, rests, so far, on a sure foundation—a foundation more sure than can ever be afforded by the mere belief in God as a creator. His faith in the power to catch the spray-drops rests on a belief which belongs specially to the doctrine of Evolution—the conviction that that arm of the sea which he calls his life is composed of the same materials as those which constitute that vast deep called the Life of Nature. If he catches the spray-drops, if he receives the breezes, if he hears the rolling of the outer waves, it is because the water of his life, though enclosed in creek and bay, is already one in essence with the waters of that mighty sea on which these forces play.

So far all is clear. So far the evolutionist would seem to have a religious advantage over the creationist—to be nearer to the possibility of a Divine revelation. But now there comes up that qualifying clause, “enclosed in creek and bay.” Conceding that the little arm of the sea I call my life is one in essence with the parent ocean, there remains the fact that it *is* enclosed. However much it may be identical in essence, is it not separated in space! Has it not become land-locked, walled in, barred from its native breezes! It is here that the real religious difficulty of the evolutionist is supposed to lie. We say to him: “There is a barrier between you and the great sea. However much the waves of your individual life may be identical with the waves of outside life, the fact remains that these *are* outside and yours inside. There is a chain dividing your waters from the waters of the vast ocean—a massive chain, a closely-riveted chain. How is the spray to leap over? How is the barrier to be surmounted? Where is there to be found an opening by which a breath of the great outside ocean can pass to a region so inland, to a life so cribbed, cabined, and confined? Must not your voice be ever the hopeless cry, ‘Behind the veil! behind the veil!’”!

But the evolutionist can answer, No. For you will

observe that in this question of ours there is an assumption. We assume that the spray can only reach the evolutionist by leaping over the chain. In other words, we take it for granted that, if a revelation is to be made from God to Man, it can only be by breaking some of the links of Nature. There is no need that the evolutionist, of all men, should admit this. The revelation which he seeks is not one which shall come through a *gap* in the chain. It is a message which shall be given through a *link* in the chain. The communion he seeks is not something which is to come from behind the veil. His God is *not* behind the veil; the veil is a part of Himself—a phase of His Divine existence. Not by escaping the physical forces does he desire to find his God. He would find Him *in* these forces—in the light, in the heat, in the electric current. The veil of Nature is for him a misnomer. Nature is the sum of existence. If there be a Spirit of Nature, that Spirit must be within it, not beyond it. If there be a message from the Spirit of Nature, that message must come *through* it, not by a leaping of the wall. The spray of the vast ocean, if it come at all, must be wafted by no magical influence, but must be borne on the wings of those very forces which men call physical, and which are supposed to constitute the limits of Man.

Now, I have no hesitation in saying that this demand of the evolutionist is not only scientific, but profoundly in harmony with the ripest development of religious faith. For, in these modern days, there is an ever-growing conviction that even Man's *immortal* hopes lie not behind the veil. He has always thought of his dead as passing into the unseen; but in past ages the unseen was the unphysical. The place of the departed was for him, in the old time, a place above the heavens. At the very least, it was above *our* heavens. If it had material conditions, they were conditions very different from those now in operation. "Realms

of light beyond the sky" was the phrase that familiarly expressed the view commonly entertained. The impression was that everything within sight was thoroughly known to Man. It was no use to seek a home for his dead within the present circle of things. Did he not know all about that circle! Had not his telescope swept its stars and traversed its spaces! Was not this emphatically the seen world, the manifested world, the world of sight and sense! So thought and said our forefathers. But their descendants have had an awakening. A change has come over the spirit of our dream. This so-called world of sense has revealed itself to be a mystery. We have made a discovery. We have found that to seek the unseen we do not need to picture "realms of light beyond the sky." We have found that the unseen exists within reach of our hand, within sound of our voice. This region in which we dwell is itself the Silent Land, the unknown country, the bourne which sends no traveller to visit our shores. We are living every day, every hour, every moment, in the heart of a physical world to which we are deaf, dumb, and blind—are surrounded by forms which we perceive not, encircled by voices which we hear not, touched by influences which make no impression on any of our existing senses.

There are, then, actually around us, within range of our eye, nay, within stretch of our hand, manifestations of Nature of which we have no conception. We know that at the present moment there is beating on every atom of our body what I can only describe as a rushing, mighty wind. We call it Ether; but this is a mere metaphorical name. We know not what it is; eye has not seen it, ear has not heard it, heart has not conceived it. We only discern its *effects*—as we should discern in the morning the effects of a nightly storm which we had not witnessed. Let me speak of it just now under the metaphor of a storm, as that will best express my present meaning. I will say,

then, that this storm one day began to beat against that house we call "the body." This house had originally neither door nor window; and the tenant knew nothing whatever of the outside world, not even that an outside world existed. But, as the ether storm kept vibrating, it began to bore apertures—little openings through which the tenant could look out. In proportion to the strength of the vibration was the size of the aperture, and in proportion to the size of the aperture was the tenant's view of the world outside. By degrees there were made five little openings, popularly called the five senses. In the course of long ages this is all the progress the tenant has made in a knowledge of the outside world. That is a metaphorical but a perfectly scientific statement of the case. We are waiting for the ether storm to make more apertures, to give us a wider view of the world in which we dwell. *That* is the revelation we ask from God. It is no lifting of a mystical curtain; it is no lifting of a curtain at all. The curtain is raised already. The banquet is already spread before us. What we want is a wider view of the table. We want the opening of additional apertures through extended vibrations of the ether storm.

To drop the metaphor, these vibrations of the ether are the vibrations of that very chain which we have so much dreaded as an obstacle to the possibility of revelation. The ether is precisely that chain which binds all things. Nothing can get in from the outside; that must be admitted. In truth, there is no outside; the chain includes everything, heaven and earth alike. Yet so far is this from being an *obstacle* to revelation that it is actually the hope of revelation. It is on the links of the ether chain that all revelation has hitherto moved; it is by the vibrations of that chain that all messages have hitherto been transmitted. We have seen that messages *have* been transmitted. We have seen that originally the tenant of the

house did not know that there was an outside world at all. We have seen how, gradually, little apertures were opened giving him an ever-increasing glimpse of what science calls Nature, what religion terms the Face of God. And what has opened these apertures? It is the vibrating of the ether chain. What has made me cognisant of the touch of another hand? It is the vibrating of the ether chain. What has taught me the taste of a peach or the odour of a flower? It is the vibrating of the ether chain. What has wakened me to the voices of a great multitude which no man can number? It is the vibrating of the ether chain. What has revealed to me the presence of starry worlds—the existence of many mansions in the house of the Father? It is the vibrating of the ether chain.

The truth is, Nature, as interpreted by the modern scientist, is essentially a revealing medium. The greater part of it is doubtless still in shadow; but where the shadows have been dispelled the dispelling has been effected by herself—by her own ether chain. Nature has never kept her secrets. The ether tells everything—wireless telegraphy proves that. Nature has not even kept her secrets among the things which to us are still in shadow. They are in shadow, not by reason of her reticence, but by reason of our present incompetence. The vibrating ether has not yet succeeded in making a sufficient number of apertures to give the tenant a perfect view. The telegrams are already waiting for us if we had the eyes to read them. The difficulty of getting a message from the Unknown does not lie with Nature. In fact, the message is already given—transmitted on the links of the ether chain. Nature has done *her* part,—to put it religiously, God has done His part. The obstacle lies in *me*; science and religion are alike agreed about that; and it is a great thing to be agreed about. It is an admission which lifts the weight of responsibility from the laws of Nature. It forbids us any longer

to murmur against the evolutionary chain—to say that the desert is keeping us from the Promised Land. Let me examine the point for a moment.

If a man announced to-day that, standing in broad daylight and in his full waking consciousness, he clearly saw mingling with the stream of the living a multitude of men and women who were known to have departed this life, the statement would be at once greeted as a hallucination. To credit it would be stigmatized as the belief in a miracle, and therefore unscientific. Now, I will concede at once that it would be the averment of an abnormal experience; and in this light I am quite willing to call it the proclaiming of a miracle. But the question which I ask is this, Where would the miracle lie? Not in the thing seen, but only in the seeing it. It would be no miracle that such a spectacle should be manifested by *Nature*, but only that Man should have a faculty to discern the manifestation. No scientific man in the world would say that such a revelation was beyond the powers of Nature to make; the most he could say would be that it was beyond the powers of humanity to receive. It is scientifically certain that you and I are at this moment in the presence of myriad natural existences of which we have no cognisance. It is scientifically probable that among these existences there are forms of life and intelligence. It is scientifically possible that among these forms of life and intelligence there are some of those whom we call "the dead." There may be, nay, there is, a population of our terrestrial atmosphere of which we are as ignorant as we are of the population of the planets. Its presence is a fact; its nature is a mystery. There is a multitude of unseen forms around us, physical or vital. They are thronging us, they are touching us. Compared to their number, all the united objects of the visible earth are but as a single wave on the heaving breast of ocean. Nature has done *her* part in the revealing

process; she is "waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God."

Will she wait in vain? will she wait for ever? That is the remaining question. Our limit to knowledge does not lie in the boundaries of Nature; it lies in the faculties of the human soul, in the paucity of those apertures which the ether has as yet effected. Will it ever effect more? Will the time ever come when the powers of Man will do Nature justice, when the enlargement of his mental endowments will enable him to behold the richness of that feast which the bounty of the universe has already spread before him?

It might seem at first sight that this is a question before which science must be dumb—a question which religious faith alone can answer. And yet it is precisely the question on which evolutionary science should, of all sciences, be the most optimistic. What is that power which in the past has enlarged the faculties of man? It is Evolution. The history of Evolution in the region of life is simply the history of a process of enlargement. Every step has been the unfolding of a fresh power of communion with that Nature which to the Theist is the voice of God. At every stage of life's journey a new door has opened. It is a long stretch from the sensitive plant to the sentient man; how has it been compassed? Simply by the opening of these new doors. Every man of science has been the witness of an Apocalypse more remarkable than that which John of Patmos saw. He has seen life imprisoned at first in a rayless dungeon and unconscious of a world outside. He has seen life waking to its earliest sense of a region external to itself, becoming aware that there is something on the outside, lying at the door. He has seen life coming to the knowledge that there are things *beyond* its contact—things which it cannot touch, but with which none the less it can commune. He has seen life widening from time to time the range of its vision, beholding ever-expanding circles—

the individual, the family, the tribe, the nation, the continent, the world, the multitude of other worlds, the conception of a physical universe. All these gates into the kingdom have been unbarred by the principle of Evolution.

Now, do you think it scientifically likely that Evolution stopped there? Do you think the thing called spiritual aspiration is not the beginning of another of these openings into a real outward kingdom? All the previous avenues have been such openings. Every feeling has revealed the presence of an external counterpart. Shall the aspiration after a Christ—a moral ideal—be the one blind alley of the universe! Shall the impulse towards perfect beauty, perfect purity, perfect love, be the one impulse which has nothing outside of it! Everything that hitherto has been evolved *by* Nature has been evolved *for* Nature—for the sake of a real world. Has moral aspiration not been evolved by Nature! Would the scientist, of all men, deny its common origin! But, if the aspiration after God and truth has a common origin with all things, has it not a common destiny also! Shall this be the only product of Evolution which has no marriage with reality! Is it scientific to say so! Is it progressive to say so! Is it in accordance with the spirit of the age to say so! Surely, in sympathy with that spirit, we must hold that the moral aspirings of the soul are entitled to a response from the system of the universe!

And what of the future? Is it scientifically likely that Evolution has no more doors to open! Our sidelights have revealed only a fragment of the stage; it is the business of Evolution to reveal the whole stage. Do you think it will stop at the sidelights! Do you think it will even pause at the sidelights! Is it scientific to think that it will! Is not the work great and the time precious! I do not believe that the process of revelation is pausing. I believe that now, as ever, a door is being opened in the perceptions

of the organism. We are looking in a wrong direction for that opening. The Christian longs for the Second Advent; the man tormented by doubt would fain see the First. But both are seeking their revelation in the air—in the parting of a cloud, in the descent of something new. There is no *need* for the clouds to be parted. That which we seek is already here. It is within the brain that the veil must be rent. One little aperture added, nay, one smallest widening of an existing window, might fill our eyes with glory; and the completed stage of individual evolution would probably raise the cry, “The kingdom of God is come!”

G. MATHESON.