

[OCT. 13, 1869.]

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 5.

There were two sections open to-day. In the morning the meeting at St. George's Hall was presided over by the *Bishop of Chester*, and the subject was

PHASES OF UNBELIEF, AND HOW TO MEET THEM.

The first paper was read by the *Rev. E. Garbett*, vicar of Surbiton, who observed that there were four principal phases in which the versatile spirit of infidelity had developed itself in modern times—the historical, the critical, the philosophic, and the scientific:—

The historical sceptic constructed a new history of the past, purely a work of the imagination; the critical unbeliever tore to pieces the sacred fabric of the Word of God, distributed and rearranged the fragments, wiped out the prophets, stripped God of His personal agency, and tore the mantle of His Deity from the august form of the Saviour of mankind. But, many-sided as modern unbelief was, it had a unity of its own, which presented special characteristics. Its half-contemptuous attitude of toleration towards religion as a necessity for weaker minds, or as one among the other equal forms of human thought and feeling, was to be explained by the same force of circumstances, and resolved by the same analysis. On its moral side it was distinguished by the predominance it gave to the sentiment of religion—its purely subjective side over its objective facts; and substituted a dim, vague, shapeless religiosity in place of defunct belief and intelligent affections. On its intellectual side it was distinguished by identifying the spirit within the man with the divine personal Spirit of God without him; and, therefore, regarding the conclusions of the human mind as the immediate teaching of God. It thus placed the natural tendency of intellect to idolise itself upon a new basis.

What, then, must be our weapons against these new forms of unbelief? Our safety would consist in a bolder and firmer attitude; personally, in an increase of apostolic holiness; pastorally, in an increase of apostolic diligence and devotedness; ministerially, in a more earnest, plain, practical imitation of apostolic preaching, like men who were intensely in earnest, and who dealt with others out of the fulness of a faith which was the light of their own intellect and the joy of their own heart. (Cheers.)

Canon Woodgate observed that in these days it was difficult to say what constituted an unbeliever. Formerly a man that rejected the Catholic faith was held to have rejected everything, but now the smallest shred of belief was looked on as a sufficient title to the name of believer. It was the peculiar feature of these days that no one rejected the Scriptures. And why should he, since everybody claimed the right of making them speak just what he pleased? All this arose from the dangerous notion that the Bible was given that every man might draw from it his own creed, from which there must be no appeal except to his own private judgment. But those who maintained this principle were blind to the consequences that must flow from it; for how could they bid any one to whom they avowed it, stop where they stopped? A political demagogue might just as well ask the excited mob which he had called together to do no more than he thought prudent. One great cause of the prevalence of unbelief was the undisguised but ridiculous hostility to dogmatic teaching; just as if anything ever was taught except dogmatically. The New Testament in every line of it presupposed dogmatic teaching—it was written for those to whom the Scriptures were assumed to have been taught, as St. Luke said, catechetically. Infinite mischief arose from the injudicious method in which many good people treated what they called superstition. The true way was not to declaim against superstition, but to see what was good in it and make that a basis of further teaching. Such was the course which St. Paul adopted towards the idolatrous Athenians; but the result of the modern method was that while rooting out the superstition (which was an easy thing to do) people too often destroyed belief in God altogether. (Cheers.)

Mr. R. H. Hutton, one of the editors of the *Spectator*, read the following paper:—

What Pascal has said of the sceptics and scepticism of his time, as if it were true for all time, must, I think, be very gravely qualified indeed as regards English scepticism of the present day. "As it is the purpose of God," he wrote, "to be visible to those who search for Him with all their hearts, and concealed from those who are disposed to shun Him, He so orders his communications with mankind that the signs of them are plain to those who seek Him, and obscure to those who do not seek Him"—which is really equivalent, of course, to this—that those who have not found, have never earnestly sought God. Can any man who is really familiar with the higher sceptical literature of modern England—of course, I do not mean the scoffing scepticism, but the conscientious, truth-seeking scepticism—or who is familiar with the difficulties avowed by the learned and cultivated laity in their most earnest moods, deliberately subscribe to this? For my own part, at least, I must say that I have not found it so; I am sure that any assumption such as Pascal's—even if it were ever absolutely true of any age—would, with respect to the deepest forces of modern doubt, be utterly unjust, as well as fatal to any chance we might have of convincing men who are haunted by them. I think that to those of us who believe profoundly in the divine government of all spiritual natures—i.e., of all natures willing and eager to submit to God's government, even though they do not recognise it as we do as being God's, the fact I have mentioned involves no less a conclusion than this—that the fine network of doubts and difficulties which have occupied so important a place in the religious history of our time are themselves instruments of God, intended by Him to effect a great temporary work, and are not merely temptations to be overcome—infidelities to be resisted. Indeed, the sort of holy horror of these genuine intellectual difficulties in the way of faith, which has been, and still is, so common, seems to me a great mischief to the Christian Church, and also wholly without warrant in the New Testament. In the New Testament, indeed, there is plenty of censure of all moral recoil from God; but there is no censure anywhere that I can find for those who are genuinely bewildered by what they think the discrepancies of evidence, and who cannot draw the conclusion their hearts make them wish to draw. Undoubtedly it is a great source of unhappiness when the intellectual constitution is a bar and check upon the spiritual life. Those are far happier whose natures move harmoniously, conviction following easily the spiritual impulses of the soul. But it is not always the happiest natures that do the most of God's work in the world, though it may be the happiest natures which have most of God's being in them; and, for my own part, I cannot doubt that all the genuine hesitations, difficulties, incredulities of high, disinterested, and truth-loving minds are part of God's direct teaching to us of to-day, and are likely to do a great work in purifying our Christianity. And I believe that unless we approach as genuine fellow-workers those who, in spite of their scepticisms, recommend themselves to us by a deeper than intellectual judgment, as devoted seekers after truth, we shall not only lose all chance of gaining them over to us on earth—which I dare say in some cases is not often very great—but a much better chance of ourselves profiting by

their difficulties, of lifting out from our own faith the bases which it contains. By the more reverent and sympathetic mode of treating doubt, even if we do not succeed in convincing those on whom certain great difficulties have, as it were, seized with a haunting force, that they have merely lost themselves in the labyrinth which, properly threaded, leads to faith—yet by weighing and sifting and appreciating those difficulties fairly, we shall be led to leave out much and perhaps put in more, in our own mode of presenting the grounds of faith that will greatly alter its relations to external thought. And I think it may be shown that we shall in this way adapt our intellectual view of Christianity much better to win the minds of the new generation; that we shall enable it to estimate more truly the relative worth of these difficulties for the future, and to avoid the danger of exaggerating them. I will give two illustrations of what I mean, from the departments of modern inquiry which are at present, I imagine, most interesting to the public. The first is in relation to the animal world, and towards Christ—first, as regards the faith in God, and afterwards faith in Christ. The speculations of Mr. Darwin on natural history, as I think amongst the most powerful of modern causes which alienate earnest minds, not simply from faith in Christ, but from faith in God; and the result has been that Christians have felt a very natural desire, and in some cases almost a spiritual obligation, to discredit and overthrow even the solid substratum of fact on which these speculations are certainly based. Mr. Darwin's theory has looked to many like an attempt to account for creation and the richness of creation without assuming either a divine purpose or a divine will; and to either a Christian or a theist an attempt could be more painful. Yet I think that the way in which the greatest of modern naturalists has too often been met by theologians has done far more to give a false impression of the weakness of theology, and to lead an impulse of factious popularity to the fancied atheism of the theory, than to throw doubt upon a genuinely scientific method, however extravagantly it may have been used. However wide Mr. Darwin's facts may be, and do doubt are, of supplying any general hypothesis as to the origin of species, surely they do prove as much as his, that one of the great formative principles in the animal world which vitally modifies and improves species is the competitive principle, "the struggle for existence" amongst individuals of the same race, or amongst different races which either feed on the same food or are fed upon by the same predatory tribes; that this active and often furious competition tends to the accumulation in each race of all those peculiarities and properties favourable to success in gaining food and in avoiding danger, and to the gradual weeding out of all those individuals and races under great relative disadvantages for either of these functions. The hawk with the wing best adapted for soaring and hovering finds its prey more easily than one with a shorter and weaker pinion; it feeds its little ones more easily; its brood prospers better; more hawks with these favourable peculiarities survive; and so in the end all those of the whole species is moulded so as to adapt it best for its predatory habits. On the other hand, the little birds on which it feeds will develop in like manner the qualities best adapted for avoiding its pursuit, through the more rapid destruction of those species and individuals less qualified for escape. Now, I can quite understand and sympathise with the superficial dread of a theory of this kind, which seems at first sight in but imperfect agreement with our Lord's teaching as to the special providence of every event in the animal no less than in the human world. "Not a sparrow falleth to the ground without your Father." But is it more than seeming? Mr. Darwin, we must remember, has not discovered the facts, only a new and general result of the facts. The bird falls to the ground—the naturalist would say—because its habits expose it to the beak or the gun of the destroyer; because it is not swift enough, or not wary enough, or not insignificant enough, or not like enough in colour to the ground over which it is skimming, to escape. The bird falls to the ground, says our Lord, because God wills it. If, then, we combine our Lord's saying and the naturalist's observations, they come to this—that the Father of all gives the swift beak and strong wing to the hawk that he may the more easily prevail, and by prevailing modify the organisation of the whole tribe in future; that he gives the bird of slow flight and too conspicuous plumage and unwary ways over to destruction, in order that the species may be so modified as to favour swifter flight and less conspicuous plumage and wariar ways in future, and that He himself decrees this constant competition between the gifts by which the fugitives escape destruction, and the pursuers inflict it. Well, that is, after all, not very different from the teaching of the Psalmist. "The young lions roar after their prey; they seek their prey from God." But what I want to insist on is this, that the whole point and drift of Mr. Darwin's facts do not consist in any new stress on the superficially cruel competition in nature—all that was familiar hundreds of years before—but only in this, that the effect of this competition is to perfect gradually the organisation of each tribe of animals for its own peculiar purpose—to make the hawk the hawk, the bird of prey the bird of prey, and the hawk better adapted to catch the prey, and the prey of the hawk better adapted to escape; in a word, to mould to the highest perfection the physical peculiarities which enable each tribe to live, so that as the world goes on swifter and nobler hawks pursue swifter and wariar or less easily detected tribes of inferior birds. Now, surely, so far as this theory goes, it not only does not increase any moral difficulty in the apparently cruel competition of nature; but it does so far as it goes, make clearer the intellectual purpose at work in creation, when we see that physical progress, from less to more perfect organisations, is a part of the very law of the lowest animal life. It may be said, "that is precisely the thing we dread." A natural explanation of the gradual improvement of physical organisation seems to supersede God. If you went out the poorer specimens of each organisation by natural means, it seems to imply that growth in perfection is not due to God, who could easily make the organisation perfect at once." Now, I think that if we face that question fairly, we shall find that, with our minds as Mr. Darwin has put it, it is not only not a reason to discredit his facts and inweigh against any reasonable inferences from these facts, but a nature progress begins, he asserts, by physical improvement attained through the sharpest process of weeding out weak specimens, and leaving only the more capable specimens of any type. Suppose we grant it. How, then, did nature, with this for its great principle, attain to the law of pity and sympathy for weakness, the law of self-sacrifice, the law of Christ? Is it not obvious that the more clearly Mr. Darwin shows that improvements in physical organisation are attained through close competition, the more certainly he proves to us that human nature in its highest form, the Christian nature, has some other and very different root from physiological law, and that the charity, pity, and self-sacrifice for inferiors which is of the essence of the Gospel of the Cross, is no development of that law which governs physiological progress, and also the production and distribution of human wealth. But the Christian revelation which teaches that the spiritual is lord of the natural—that the natural, though proceeding from God, contains no picture of God's mind, but only of such of His purposes as are preliminary to the revelation of His mind—is infinitely strengthened instead of weakened by the discovery that there is nothing in the lower world below man which could possibly be developed into that noblest and most characteristic of human sympathies which reverses the law of physiological, and not less the law of political, economy, and makes our highest glory consist not in the succumbing of the weak to the strong, but in the self-sacrifice of

the strong for the weak. In a word, grant Mr. Darwin's principle as the secret of physiological progress, and you establish that the lower is not the root of the higher, that the law of animal life and of selfish competition for wealth is not the core of that law of moral progress which has steadily tended to check and transform the physical competitions of the lower universe by the nobler competitions of divine self-sacrifice. In other words, the supernatural is not a development of the natural, since the supernatural comes in to enrich the natural by conquering, subordinating, transforming it. I take this, of course, simply as one illustration of the view, that if we welcomed every new discovery in science, instead of starting back in alarm, we should often find new weapons for faith, instead of new stimuli for doubt. (Cheers.) As to Christianity. The greatest difficulty, I fancy, which besets the most cultivated sceptics of the day is something of this kind:—The Apostles and their contemporaries, it is said, had no real knowledge of the scientific improbability, or of the critical difficulties in the way of much of what they believed. What we call "laws of nature" were unknown to them; criticism as we have learned it was alien to them. When St. Paul said that the bare grain which men sow is not that body which shall be, but that God giveth it a body "as it seemeth Him," he never dreamt that organic chemistry could prove that this body must be extracted from earth and air in the way which we see in the seed. In a word, had we lived then, we should have felt a hundred difficulties, and called a hundred lies, of truth, of the more existence of which the Apostles did not so much as know. Just as we should not accept a statement as to any incredible intensity of cold made by men who lived before thermometers were discovered, so we ought not to accept evidence of deviations from all known laws offered by men in whatever good faith, and however intensely we might desire to believe it, who lived before scientific and historic criticism had begun to exist. If, instead of merely condemning this attitude of mind as sinful, we would appreciate it fairly, it would, I think, teach us a good deal as to the true mode of presenting our faith to the world. It has been too much the custom to go far beyond the Apostles on the historical and miraculous side of our Christian evidence, while affing far short of their position in other respects. I think it is true that the Apostles did not in the least enter into the *a priori* difficulties which we see in miracle, and that as ordinary witnesses of mere physical marvels, their testimony should not be received as of the highest weight. But then, on the other hand, they did not build on mere miracle at all, as we should do, and as our writers on Christian evidence have done, supposing it proved. It is a very remarkable thing that, in spite of the miracles of which the Gospel narratives tell us, the Apostles were never finally convinced that their Lord was above nature till they had conversed with Him after His resurrection. The miracles of which we read in His life had little apparent part even in the Gospel they then preached, or such parts of it as they would have had with any witnesses who had not applied to the scientific question. What finally convinced them, hoping and hesitating, was that their Lord was above nature, and that they might trust implicitly all He told them of His life in God, and His passage through death and His victory over it. Of this they regarded themselves as the witnesses, and all the supernatural in His previous life fell into the shade beside it. St. Paul probably knew not one-fourth part of the details which we read in the Gospels. Even St. Peter alludes only to the Transfiguration in addition to the death and resurrection of his Master. The notion of canvassing minutely the historical details of Christ's life was quite foreign to the Apostles. They must have heard all sorts of variations in the incidental touches, or they could hardly have handed down to us accounts so different. Yet it certainly never occurred to them that the sifting and arranging of minute historical coincidences and confirmations would be desirable. They rested absolutely on two points, the image of a character higher than nature—a character impressed upon their hearts—a character whose inner movements were not determined by the mortal accidents of life—a character which was as serene in the fierce conflict of the elements amidst the violence of a cruel mob; and on the external confirmation of this image given by the fact that their Lord had passed through death, and was the same after as before the great moral change. Now, surely, of these two facts they were competent witnesses. No scientific incredulity of miracle would have made them more incredulous of the resurrection than, from quite other causes, they certainly were. No fact in history is more certain than that they believed themselves to have held repeated conversations with their risen Lord, and this, too, in large groups, and that their whole future life was determined by these conversations. And the less scientific they were, the less they knew what future ages would expect from the spiritual and moral character of One standing out thus above nature. Yet that the character was such as to be in keeping with this superiority to the law of natural phenomena, we know by the image left in their traditions—an image far beyond their power to conceive had they not perceived it, and which is only the more remarkable that the details of it, the more we gather it were left floating carelessly with no historical superintendence on the mind of that generation. I think we may fairly thank the sceptics for pointing out to us how widely we have shifted the point of view of the Apostles on our recasts of Christian evidence. Did Christ overcome death? Was He spiritually and morally as much above nature as He thereby proved himself to be naturally? These are questions, surely, on which the Apostles have shown themselves to be competent witnesses. Why deny that beyond the answer to these questions the historical detail is such as we ought to expect from the tradition of an unscientific age—that it is uncritically arranged and, taken alone, would have been insufficient to have proved the existence of the physically supernatural, had it not been proved for us by the resurrection? I think it has been the attempt to put ourselves on ground a great deal surer than that of the Apostles which has produced so much doubt. If the earnest sceptics should lead us back to the ground taken by the Apostles—trust in the account of Himself and His own nature given by one who transferred life and conquered death, they will, I think, have done us a great service. For me, I confess that study of the best modern sceptics has brought me, on the whole, more faith than the study of the best modern upholders. (Cheers.)

Mr. P. Norfolk read a paper for Mr. R. Lowndes, who grasped with that attitude of mind which sometimes disposed a man to wish that the Gospel were true but which prevented him from absolutely believing it.—

Religion must be something more than a philosophy, however spiritual; and Christianity professes to have a basis of fact, which profession it believes it to make good by proofs. These proofs must be such as time cannot efface or enfeeble, for the religion is for all time; they must be such as require no rare scholarship or unusual powers of mind, for the religion is to be within the reach of all men. Proofs to answer those conditions exist for Christianity nowhere, there is to be in the record life of Jesus. If, however, in this life we find, on the one hand, a depth of wisdom beyond all that we have seen in His, but beyond our time, and ever standing in advance of the most advanced civilisation, and, combined with this, an element of the supernatural running through the whole, so inseparably woven in with every part that it cannot be torn away without leaving mere threads and patches, does not this combination itself carry with it a proof against which the ostensible rational scepticism we have been considering cannot hold out? Every attempt hitherto made to construct an intelligible life of Jesus on a merely naturalistic hypothesis appears to have been a failure. Have the legends of a wonder-loving age become incrustated round a beautiful half-forgotten life? But the beauty, the divineness, lies in the legends. Reduce this life to the biography of a mere man, circum-

scribed by ordinary human conditions, and it becomes simply incomprehensible. Time will not permit, nor is it here needful, to draw out this argument in detail; but it is by this, I am persuaded, if at all, that the sceptic who is not to abandon his mental standpoint, however unsatisfactory.—

He is strong in a twofold faith: he places faith in the goodness of Almighty God, and he places faith in that inner light of the goodness of Almighty God that God has given to him for his guide. It would be an ill exchange for those, or for either of them, to accept, on the supposed authority of Church or orthodoxy the most unimpeachable, if, all the while, an inner voice at his heart were continually upbraiding him, in some such words as these—"The religion of yours is one to which you have no right, for you have been taught to take it up only by silencing the deepest, the most rudimentary, conclusions of your own soul." (Cheers.)

Mr. George Warrington pointed out the importance of meeting objectors to revelation on their own ground. It was no use, he said, for example, to say that a book of the Bible was inspired, or that it had the authority of the Church, to a man who doubted its inspiration, or denied that the Church had any right to decide the matter. Such works as Dr. Pusey's on Daniel or Mr. Westcott's on the canon of the New Testament were admirable illustrations of a more direct and efficacious treatment of the question. When Dr. Colenso denied the Mosaic origin of the Book of Genesis, how unsatisfactory was the mode in which his propositions had generally been resisted. The proper mode of dealing with the matter would have been to have met his criticism with sounder criticism, and to have shown, as might have been done, that granting Genesis to be a compilation, it was a compilation not of the time of Samuel or of Jeremiah, but of Moses. (Cheers.) Again, when people seemed disposed to ridicule such a statement as that of Balaam's ass, it might be pointed out what a special injury there was in such a miracle—they might be reminded that when even a prophet was intent upon abusing the gift of speech for his selfish ends, he fell beneath the lamblike creature of God that would supply it in conformity with the will of its Maker. (Cheers.) The Rev. W. R. Clifton, who has no sympathy with those who dwell within the Church, professing to believe her doctrine, denied them in their lives; and towards those honest doubters without the Church, striving to know the truth, and long falling to know it, he would express the deepest sympathy.—

He had his inner man injured by many a book written by men calling themselves Christians, whereas he had his moral character strengthened by others written by sceptics. We should discriminate our instruments, and take care that argument and authority moved each in its proper sphere. Argument and authority were very well in their place; but perhaps a little more of the former and less of the latter would be better. (Cheers.) Certainly the use of anathema was not to supply the place of argument, and certainly the use of what was now most commonly used. We must meet the sceptic with argument and with sympathy; we must meet him on his own ground; and we must not put forth any argument that he should not accept as effective in any other sphere of thought.

The Rev. Dr. Salmon, Regius Professor of Divinity at Dublin, insisted on the necessity of distinguishing between the facts and the imaginations of science. He was far from depreciating the latter, or imagining that in fact he was the parent of most of the greatest discoveries of modern times; but he would be careful how we accepted of facts which had not yet been established as such. For instance, when he first read astronomy it was held that the motion of our planetary system being unstable by reason of a slight inclination which had been observed in the motions of the moon, had been exploded; but Mr. Adams had been led to conclude, by more recent calculations, that there was something after all in the old opinion. If, then, so important a question as whether our universe contained in it the seed of dissolution depended first upon observations which took thousands of years to bring to light, and upon computations so abstruse that it required the most subtle intellect to understand them, we ought to be very cautious indeed before we said what was or what was not a scientific fact. (Cheers.) After a few words from the Rev. Dr. Thoburn, complaining of the unsympathetic tone adopted by theologians towards men of science who in their way were enthusiastic searchers after truth, the Rev. J. M. Macnaught dwelt on the impropriety of putting forward individual crochets as if they were Divine revelations.—

By unsifted that morning he meant unbelief in Jesus as revealing the Father, reconciling the sinner, sending the Holy Spirit, founding a great society of Church, and procuring everlasting life. Great and lamentable unbelief arose from various causes, but we should be careful of the cause that was no good to be true. There was unbelief that arose from only partial apprehension of the Gospel. There was unbelief which arose from seeing Christianity so called taught by a priesthood or a clergy owning vast sections of the property of a country, and yet claiming immunity from the taxes of that country, and dictating tyranny to those who were to be taxed. There was unbelief in the accounts of the miracles which would recognise the French picture before the Revolution. Another great and fertile source of unbelief was distraction from the Good coming from men having their minds absorbed by material considerations. There was the distraction which came from conceptions—*from living after some evil thing*. If he were asked how it should be dealt with, in his own case that even the worst phase of unbelief—that which arose from the love of some sin—conscience, he called it—*and still more from other places*, should be met by Christian men—and most of all by Christian clergymen—with tenderness and manliness—manliness of intellect and of knowledge. They must speak with saintliness and devotedness, and above all things they should speak by their acts and their lives. (Cheers.)

The Rev. E. Yonge next spoke, but the irrelevance of his language was such that the meeting refused to allow him to proceed. He signified Transubstantiation as a monstrous lie; and said the only substantiation that he would allow took place in the stomach—*of transubstantiation of food into chyle and thence into blood and flesh*.

The Rev. G. W. Bramell said that unbelief, as he understood it, was something far more serious than any denominational difference from points in an established creed. The subject should be taken out of the sphere of party; and as all believers, of whatever name, inherited the evil, all should be asked to unite in a hearty attempt to remedy it. He believed that the remedy must be sought in a more general and intelligent appreciation of the New Testament. He differed from those who attributed the revival of scepticism to the materialism of the age. He ascribed it, or at least much of it, to the unliving form in which the New Testament was presented to the people. It was quite impossible that the Epistle to the Romans, as given in our version, could be understood by the masses. Educated men were offended by the persistent retention of a corrupt text. So far as England was concerned, Tischendorf might never have lived. The Pope had certainly recognised his services, but we had, as a Church, utterly ignored them; nor had our own great scholars fared better. We still read in our churches, not without shame, but without protest, such texts as 1st John v. 7, 8. He trusted that the heads of the Church, and, if possible, men out of it, would take this matter in hand, and give us a modernised, but a corrected New Testament. (Cheers.)

The session then closed.