

ON THE RELIGIOUS IDEAS

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On the religious ideas by William Johnson Fox

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WILLIAM JOHNSON FOX

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RELIGIOUS IDEAS**

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THE RELIGIOUS IDEAS.

BY

WILLIAM JOHNSON^V FOX, M.P.



Mind, Mind alone (hear witness Earth and Heaven!)
The living fountains in itself contains
Of Beauties and Sublime. AKENSIDE.

LONDON:

CHARLES FOX, 67 PATERNOSTER ROW.

1849.



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ON THE

RELIGIOUS IDEAS.



LECTURE I.

THE RELIGIOUS IDEAS; THEIR UNIVERSALITY.

ALL religions are constructed of the same materials. They are all developments of the same germs: the developments varied and modified by the influence of circumstances. But still, the diversities of religions are upon the surface; and, as we penetrate deeper, an approach to identity is always perceptible. Whatever may be their names or their pretensions; whether they are enshrined in creeds and sacred books, or only exist in the legends of the poet or of the multitude; whether they were promulgated by legislators, when society itself was framed, by some monarch-priest dictating the spiritual as well as the temporal law, or only preached by some hermit or self-ordained peasant, "the

voice of one crying in the wilderness," or in the streets ; whether they bear upon them the stamp of Oriental enthusiasm, or of the calmness and severity of European intelligence ; whether they hold their solemnities amid the pomp of courts, or seek the darkness and the security of the cavern, or worship in some humble barn ; whether their worship be one of strict simplicity, or call to its aid all the resources of all the arts ; still religions, however diversified, are the same in their essentials. They are manifestations of the same ideas ; they are formed from the same elements. As all buildings, from the cottage to the palace, or the enduring pyramid, are constructed with a few materials, wood, stone, metals, &c. ; or as the letters of the alphabet, by their combinations, form all we can express in record and oratory, in poetry and science ; or as, from time to time, we find how few are the elements that in their different states and combinations produce all the phenomena of this material world ; so are a few simple ideas the source, the essence, the elements, and the power of all religions.

Yes, they are few and simple,—revelation, God, providence, the sense of right and wrong, duty, redemption, heaven,—these, and such as

these, are the primeval elements of religion. They are the Religious Ideas. My purpose is, to deliver a succession of lectures on these, the religious ideas, separately considered, but pursuing a similar course with them, which I shall indicate on the present occasion.

These are the conceptions which we find in the most intellectual forms of religion, in the most dissenting Dissent, and the most protesting Protestantism; we find them in the strongest assertion of individual judgment in matters of faith, and we find them also in the most implicit submission which the devout believer in the Roman Catholic system renders to the guide of his conscience, his priest, who is his mediator. We find them in all forms of Christianity, and we find them in that Judaism which originated Christianity. We may trace them in the fierce mythology of the Goths, and in the graceful mythology of the Greeks. We behold them in the multitudinous idolatry of the Hindoo, and in the stern monotheism of the Mohammedan. We find them in the different forms which each religion has assumed under differing circumstances; and we may go back till we behold them shadowed out in the remote and gigantic forms of primeval Egyptian

superstition. They are in all ; although, diversified by various influences, they form different and hostile religions, seeking for the conversion of one another, mutually excommunicating, and influencing by their conflicts the rise and fall of empires.

As we trace these, the religious ideas, in succession, I think it will appear that they have a deeper foundation than the mere ceremonies, the creeds, the books, the priesthood, the teachers, the oracles, by which religions are distinguished, and from which they are called. I think we shall find that they have their root in human nature ; that they are the growth of man's intellectual and moral constitution ; that they are in their essence a reality, as much as he is a reality. I do not call them innate ideas ; that doctrine of innate ideas has been exploded from the days of Locke. We are not born with thoughts, but we are born with tendencies to thought, and to certain modes and forms of thought, which afterwards take a definite existence. For though Locke exploded the doctrine of innate ideas, his comparison of the mind of man to a sheet of blank paper fails egregiously ; there are some things which cannot be written upon that paper by any hands ; and there are symbols of ideas

which will appear upon it, although no hand be excited to trace them there; which, under the appropriate influences, will come out, like the writing on paper with sympathetic ink when it is held to the fire, and will grow plain and legible even to untutored tribes. There are tendencies to modes of thought, such as what philosophers mean by "the moral sense;" not a power born with us, like the physical and external senses, but such a constitution as that, in due time, the conceptions of right and wrong, of good and evil, of duty, will arise in the mind and exist there to a certain extent, though that extent may be diversified by the acquirements and the exercise of the faculties of the individual. The assumption that such tendencies are physically manifested is the foundation of phrenology, and is a correct conception in itself, whether the phrenology which is thus founded be true or false, complete or imperfect, accurate or inaccurate in its deductions. Whether there be or be not in the head an organ of veneration, the tendency of man's being is to venerate; and this tendency will discover or create for itself an object. Veneration seeks the majestic; it will delineate and believe in the majestic. It has a tendency towards this; and although it may be