



FREDERICK ROBERT TENNANT, c. 1925

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1866-1957

**F**REDERICK ROBERT TENNANT was born at Burslem in Staffordshire on the first day of September 1866. He was the eldest son of Frederick Tennant, a wine and spirit merchant of that town, and was one of a family of four girls and three boys. An elder sister, born in 1862, and a younger brother, born in 1869, survived him and were still living in 1958.

In 1878, at the age of 12, he entered the Newcastle, Staffs., High School. This had recently been rebuilt and reconstituted, under the headmastership of Mr. F. E. Kitchener, formerly of Rugby School. Mr. Kitchener was a man of outstanding personality, and he greatly influenced Tennant's life. Tennant was a brilliant schoolboy, winning almost every prize available to him. But he was no mere bookworm, for he was a member of the school cricket-eleven and had some success as a 100-yards sprinter. Later, as a Cambridge undergraduate, he played Rugby football for his college.

In 1885 Tennant won an Open Scholarship in Natural Science at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. He was placed in the First Class in Part I of the Natural Sciences Tripos in 1887, and again in Part II of that Tripos in 1889. His special subject in Part II was Chemistry. After leaving Cambridge he first held an Assistant Mastership in Mathematics at Dulwich College, and then in 1891 became Senior Science Master at his old school. In the same year he married Constance Yates, daughter of Dr. James Yates, a medical practitioner in Newcastle, Staffs. There were no children of the marriage. Mrs. Tennant predeceased her husband by many years, dying in 1929.

Tennant held his Science Mastership at Newcastle High School until 1894. While doing so he took the B.Sc. Degree of London in 1892, and was ordained as deacon. He held the curacy of Hartshill during a part of this period, and at the end of it was ordained as priest. From 1894 to 1897 he was curate of St. Matthew's, Walsall. He then returned to Cambridge, as chaplain to his old college. He held this chaplaincy, together with the curacy of Shelford and that of Great St. Mary's, Cambridge, until 1899. In the academic year of 1901-2 Tennant delivered the Hulsean Lectures in the University of Cambridge. These were first published in 1902, under the title of *The Origin and*

*Propagation of Sin*. A second edition appeared in 1906, and this was reprinted in 1908. In 1903 he became Rector of Hockwold and Vicar of Wilton, and in the same year he published his book *The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin*. This was followed in 1905 by a work entitled *The Being of God in the Light of Physical Science*.

Tennant returned finally to Cambridge in 1913 as University Lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion. He was Lecturer in Theology at Trinity College, Cambridge, from that year to 1931, and was a Fellow of the College from 1913 to his death in 1957. His last book on sin, *The Concept of Sin*, was published in 1912. Thereafter, feeling no doubt that he had exhausted the subject, at any rate in its theoretical aspects, he turned to other branches of philosophical theology.

In 1922 Tennant delivered a course of lectures in the University of London, which were published in 1925 under the title *Miracle and its Philosophical Presuppositions*. All this was leading up to his *magnum opus*, the great work entitled *Philosophical Theology*. The first volume of this, *The Soul and its Faculties*, appeared in 1928; and the second, *The World, the Soul, and God*, in 1930. It was followed in 1932 by the Tarner Lectures on *The Philosophy of the Sciences*. After a long interval came *The Nature of Belief*, published in 1943. These books together contain Tennant's main contributions to philosophy and to the borderland between general philosophy and philosophical theology.

In Cambridge Tennant lived at a house called *The Knott*, a name which seemed singularly appropriate to the occupier and his activities. This had been designed and built at a time when the world was less safe for democracy than it has since been made, and its architecture presupposed an ample domestic staff and abundance of cheap fuel if life in it were to be comfortable. After Mrs. Tennant's death the household was conducted by her sister, and, when she in turn died, by a sequence of hired housekeepers, who must have had to contend with ever-increasing difficulties. For many years Tennant used to migrate into college and occupy rooms there during the period of the long vacation when his domestic staff took their annual holidays. This gave much pleasure to his colleagues, but little, it is to be feared, to himself. Of the splendours and miseries of the unmarried don living in college, Tennant thought the former a poor compensation for the latter. He was on these occasions like a schoolboy marking off the days until he could once more return to the comforts, however sadly diminished by rationing, of the domestic hearth.

One of Tennant's hobbies was gardening, at which he was highly skilled. *The Knott* had a large garden, and there he had formed a comprehensive collection of alpine plants and had constructed with his own hands a beautiful and appropriate setting for them. His other main interest, apart from his studies and from general reading, was music. He had a fine collection of gramophone records of classical works, and he loved to play the violin. At one time he took lessons from an accomplished violinist, the wife of one of his colleagues. She describes him as a painstaking, rather than an inspired or inspiring, pupil. However that may be, his violin-playing was a source of great pleasure to himself and of no serious discomfort to others. His friend, Professor G. E. Moore, would often accompany him on the piano. Tennant had, or was believed to have, a good taste in claret. On the strength of this he was made a member of the Trinity College wine-committee. This honour pleased him greatly, and he used to describe it, a little wistfully, as 'my only bit of preferment'.

That remark is characteristic of the flashes of dry humour which occasionally lit up Tennant's always agreeable and interesting, but seldom sparkling, conversation. He once related to me, with a chuckle, the following story from the days of his incumbency at Hockwold. Shortly after his arrival there he had occasion to hold a service for the Churching of Women. He noticed that the vestry cat took a seat on a hassock at the beginning, remained reverently there during the service, and then retired with an air of consolation to the vestry. 'I ascertained afterwards', added Tennant thoughtfully, 'that she had recently had kittens.'

Tennant's style, both in writing and in preaching, was highly characteristic. He used very long and complex sentences, with an abundance of words derived from Latin and Greek. It was a good style of its kind, for the sentences always came safely into harbour at the end, and there was no kind of ambiguity as to their meaning. The Rev. H. C. L. Heywood, who was a pupil of Tennant's, relates in his obituary notice in the *Cambridge Review* the following story: 'At a W.E.A. class I got a N.A.A.F.I. girl canteen-assistant, who had never had more than a primary-school education, to persevere in reading *Philosophical Theology*. The warmth of her delight can stand as a measure of the richness of Tennant's legacy to us all.' The story certainly does the greatest credit to all concerned, and it would not have been easy to believe it if it had rested upon any less reliable testimony.

Mr. Heywood has also given a description of Tennant's

method of lecturing when he attended his classes in the 1920's. Tennant would give two lectures in immediate succession, one from 10 to 11 and the next from 11 to 12, to substantially the same audience. 'By 12 we were dead. But it was worth it. . . .' 'One day', says Mr. Heywood, 'he gave his normal two lectures, but in a different way. His wife had just that day died, as we heard later.'

Tennant was in fact a shy man, not prone to expressing his emotions, and not readily approachable. But there was a kind heart beneath that rather dry and forbidding protective shell. My colleague, Professor F. J. W. Roughton, has told me how Tennant went out of his way to put him at his ease, as a diffident young Prize Fellow of Trinity somewhat overawed by the distinguished elderly dons whom he now met for the first time on theoretically equal terms at the High Table. No doubt an habitually shy man can best understand and sympathize with the shyness which special circumstances call forth in others; but only if he is kind-hearted will he overcome his own shyness and exert himself to help the victim.

Tennant's apparent aloofness was augmented by the hardness of hearing, which increased as he grew older, and which seems to have been the only serious bodily disability that he suffered during his long life. He resigned, on grounds of increasing deafness, in October 1934 from the *Eranus*, to which he had been elected in 1926. This society, founded in about 1872 by Westcott, Lightfoot, and Hort, consists of twelve Fellows of Cambridge colleges, each expert in a different subject, who meet twice a term in the rooms of one of them to listen to a paper read by a member and to discuss it. Tennant represented theology, and during the eight years of his membership he contributed several excellent papers. The three which are recorded by title in the minutes are *The Empirical Approach to Theology* (5 Feb. 1929), *The Relations of Theology to other Departments of Knowledge* (13 Feb. 1931), and *Deism* (7 Feb. 1933). It is plain from the titles that these were chips from the workshop in which he fashioned his published works. His extremely wide range of interest and of expert knowledge made him a valuable contributor to the discussion of papers by other members. He attended regularly and obviously enjoyed the meetings, until the strain of listening became too burdensome.

As his deafness increased he dined less and less often in college, and he was seldom seen there after the end of the Second World War. Gradually there arose a generation to whom he

was a mere name, and latterly even his name meant little or nothing to most of the Fellows of Trinity. It is not to be inferred that he became lonely or embittered. Retaining his eyesight and his intellectual powers practically to the end, he continued to read omnivorously. He claimed to have read nearly all the best English novels, and not long before his death he told the then Vice-Master of Trinity, Professor H. A. Hollond, that he was busy re-reading the Greek classics in the original. On his 90th birthday his health was drunk *in absentia* by those of the Fellows who were present in the Combination Room that night.

Tennant died, a few days after his 91st birthday, on 9 September 1957. As that day was in the depths of the long vacation, the memorial service in the College Chapel was deferred until the following Michaelmas Term. It took place on 23 November 1957. His former pupil, Professor J. Burnaby, who, in his capacity of Dean of Chapel, selects with unerring felicity appropriate lessons and hymns for the memorial services to his departed colleagues, chose for Tennant *Ecclesiasticus*, chap. LI, vv. 13-22 and 29-30. This account of Tennant's life and personality cannot be more fittingly concluded than by quoting the following sentences from that lesson: 'When I was yet young, or ever I went abroad, I desired wisdom openly in my prayer. . . . My soul hath wrestled with her, and in my doings I was exact. . . . I directed my soul unto her, and I found her in pureness. I have had my heart joined with her from the beginning, therefore shall I not be forsaken. . . .'

It remains to say something about Tennant's work as a philosophical theologian. By way of introduction it must be emphasized that he regarded analytical psychology (in which reflection on the order of development of experience in each individual and in the race played for him an absolutely essential part) as the indispensable basis for appraising all claims to knowledge, whether made by natural scientists, by historians, by theologians, or for that matter by psychologists themselves. Moreover, he had been profoundly influenced by the psychological and epistemological theories of James Ward, who was Professor of Logic and Mental Philosophy in Cambridge from 1897 to 1925. He accepted in the main, though not wholly and not uncritically, Ward's conclusions as to the findings of analytical psychology studied genetically. The first volume of *Philosophical Theology* is an attempt to develop in an original way a theory of the human soul on Wardian lines. It is probably the best account that exists of that type of view. The subsequent Turner Lectures on *The Philosophy of the Sciences* also presuppose a whole-hearted acceptance of much of

Ward's teaching, and they met with severe criticism from certain philosophers who were unable to take Ward for gospel.

Tennant's first three books were on Sin, as treated in Christian theology. The first was mainly, and the third wholly, philosophical, whilst the second was historical.

His philosophical conclusions on this matter may be briefly summarized as follows. A sin, in the strict sense of that word, is an act deliberately done by an agent who believes at the time (correctly or incorrectly) that it is morally wrong in the circumstances. In a looser sense of the word a person may describe an act deliberately done by an agent as a 'sin', if he now believes such an act to be morally wrong in the circumstances in which it was done, though the agent (whether that person himself or another) did not believe it to be wrong at the time when he did it. It is only in the first sense of 'sin' that an agent can properly be held to be guilty in respect of a sin, and therefore justly liable to moral blame or to punishment.

It is plain, then, that sin, even in the looser sense in which it does not entail guilt, cannot properly be ascribed to an infant. *A fortiori* it is absurd to describe an infant as sinful, in the strict sense, in which that would entail that it was morally blameworthy and justly liable to punishment. What can truly be said is this. An infant inherits certain instinctive tendencies, which men share with animals and which have been and still are essential to life in this world. Many of these are strongly active, in one form or another, from the very first. An infant also possesses a capacity to acquire, under the influence of training, example, &c., the power to organize such impulses, and deliberately to check, permit, or encourage their exercise in particular ways on particular occasions, in subservience to wider interests, to ideals of character and conduct, and to rules thought of as morally binding. From the very nature of the case this capacity exists at first only as a potentiality of the second order, a power to acquire a power. For a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition of its actualization is the purely intellectual development which enables an individual to look before and after, to envisage the probable consequences of alternative possible lines of conduct, to put himself in imagination into other men's shoes, to grasp and apply general principles, and so on. Since the inherited passions and instincts are active and strong from the beginning, whilst there is at first no more than a power to acquire a power to control and organize them, it is inevitable that every individual at the earliest stages of his development will

feel and express desires and emotions and will do actions, which are 'sinful' in the looser sense. That is, they *would* have been sinful, in the strict sense, *if* he had had at the time that degree of self-control and those beliefs about right and wrong which he himself may acquire later and which most of his older contemporaries have already acquired. Moreover, although Tennant would not have said that it is *inevitable* that every man, after he has become capable of sin in the strict sense, will perform many strictly sinful acts at every stage of his further moral development, he would hold that this is so likely as to be *practically certain*.

So, for Tennant, the notion of 'original sin' is a complete mare's nest. There is no need to postulate an innate moral kink in new-born infants in order to account for the prevalence of actual sin in adolescents and adults, for that can be explained in the ways outlined above. And, if it were necessary to postulate this, it could not properly be called 'sin', in the sense of something deserving of moral blame or of punishment. The actual condition of human infants cannot even be properly described as morally defective though not blameworthy. For it is an essential pre-condition for the development of the characteristically human kind of moral excellence, and it is absurd to count as a defect in an individual something which he could not have lacked without belonging to a different ultimate species or natural kind of creatures. Moreover, even if it were necessary to postulate an innate moral kink in new-born infants, the traditional explanation of it, in terms of the fall of Adam and Eve and of an inheritance from them, would, on Tennant's view, be moonshine. For the plain fact is that Adam and Eve never existed, that men developed gradually from purely animal ancestors, and that the story of the temptation and fall of their first parents is a bit of primitive folk-lore. And what never happened cannot have contributed to cause anything.

This is the upshot of Tennant's two philosophical works on Sin, condensed from his sesquipedalian sentences. His historical work, *The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin*, traces these ideas from the folk-lore of the primitive Semites, through the canonical and the apocryphal books of the Old Testament, the writings of the Alexandrian Jewish philosophers, of the Rabbis, and of the Jewish pseudepigraphists, up to St. Paul, and thence through the earlier Christian Fathers to St. Augustine. It is an extremely full and interesting account, based on very wide and thorough reading in several languages, and always critical

and judicial in its use of sources. It leaves the reader wondering whether learning, piety, ingenuity, and complete lack of critical capacity ever combined elsewhere to produce such heaps of fantastic rubbish as among the Rabbinical authors. Tennant maintains that St. Paul is the only New Testament writer who concerned himself seriously with the Fall and Original Sin, and he thinks that the way in which St. Paul so very briefly and obscurely formulated his doctrine on these topics was derived from certain contemporary and immediately previous Jewish speculations. It remained for St. Augustine to crystallize what had been vague metaphor and rhetoric into a highly concrete metaphysical doctrine.

Since many Christians have what appears to many non-Christians to be a 'bee in the bonnet' about Sin, and since St. Paul is regarded by them as an inspired writer, it was hardly to be expected that Tennant's conclusions would be welcomed with enthusiasm by most of his fellow theologians. One of them, in a review, reminded him that, after all, 'Sin is sin.' To this Tennant replied that, whilst not underrating the importance of that tautology, he was concerned to emphasize the correlative tautology that 'Not-sin is not sin.'

Passing from the works on sin to the *Philosophical Theology*, we may begin by noting the following negative facts. Like most competent philosophers since Kant, Tennant rejected the ontological and the cosmological arguments for the existence of God. But, unlike Kant and many of his successors, Tennant also denied the possibility of arguing from ethical premisses to theistic conclusions. Moreover, after a careful examination, he denied that the occurrence and the characteristic features of religious experiences furnish any satisfactory ground for theism. The most that he will admit is that, if the non-ethical and non-religious aspects of the world as we know it provide good reasons for believing in the existence of God, then the ethical and the specifically religious aspects serve to strengthen the argument and to fill out the conclusion. Tennant was thus left with nothing but the teleological argument, i.e., what is familiarly known as the Argument from Design, but would be more accurately described as the Argument *to* Design. After Hume's dealings with this in his *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, it is little enough to 'come and go on'.

Professor J. E. Littlewood tells me that Tennant once confided to him that in his student days at Cambridge he had gone through a phase of atheism, but had recovered his faith through reading

and reacting against the polemical writings of T. H. Huxley. Some of Tennant's readers might be inclined to suspect that the recovery was no more than partial, and that the remedy had permanently weakened his theological digestion.

The essential points in Tennant's positive arguments may be summarized as follows. Theism is to be defended as being, on the whole, 'the most reasonable explanation' of the world, when *all* the known facts are fairly taken into account. He proceeds to distinguish various senses in which 'explanation' has been used in science, and the sense in which natural theology claims to give an explanation of the world which science does not give. This is *teleological* explanation, in the strict sense, i.e., where we explain the existence of something by pointing out that it must have been planned, desired, and brought into being by an active, intelligent person.

Tennant considers five sets of facts, each of which has been held to be an adequate basis for a teleological argument for theism. These are (i) the adaptation of human thought-processes to the objects with which they are concerned; (ii) the adaptation of parts to whole in each living organism; (iii) the adaptation of the inorganic part of nature to the production, maintenance, and development of living organisms; (iv) the beauty and sublimity of nature; and (v) the facts of moral obligation, moral value, &c. He considers that none of these facts, taken by itself, would suffice to make it unreasonable to reject a teleological explanation. But some of them rather definitely favour such an explanation, whilst the concatenation and mutual connexion of all of them seem to demand the hypothesis of an intelligent over-ruling organizing mind.

Tennant was fully aware of the objections which have been brought against this kind of argument for that kind of conclusion. They may be summarized as follows. (i) The peculiarly ordered fragment, which forms the basis of the argument, may occupy only a small and exceptional region in the contemporary world, and may exist only for a short and exceptional period in the world's history. (ii) When we are dealing with something unique, as the world and its history as a whole must be, all talk of one constitution of it being antecedently more probable or less probable than another becomes meaningless; and so inverse-probability arguments, which necessarily take the form of strengthening or weakening the antecedent probability of an hypothesis, are inapplicable in that context. (iii) The argument is one by analogy, from our embodied selves and their operations

within the world, to a mind which is unembodied and to its operations on the world as a whole. The differences are too fundamental for argument by analogy to be valid.

Tennant deals candidly, patiently, and acutely with all these objections. I do not think that he succeeds in seriously blunting the edge of any of them, and it may be doubted whether it is possible to do so. When he goes into detail, the dissimilarities between 'design' as known in man and 'design' as ascribed to God are seen to be profound. He insists that God must be regarded as a creator, who brings into existence genuine substances, which are not mere combinations and rearrangements of pre-existing substances; and he admits that we have no such power ourselves, and have no clear conception of it. He insists too that we must not suppose that God's design existed before its execution, or that God used means to bring about his proposed end, or in short that God ever existed without the world existing also. If all this be granted, the analogy with human design and its execution seems to fade into nothingness.

Tennant points out the many ambiguities which lurk in the term 'infinite', and concludes that there is no sense in which it is both true and important to apply it to God. After a similar discussion of the ambiguities of the term 'perfect', he concludes that the only perfection which can properly be ascribed to God is moral perfection. This, however, turns out to be no more than a denial, couched in positive terms, of the presence in God of certain features, such as conflicting desires and intentions, which are imperfections in us. In general, Tennant's view about such adjectives as 'infinite', 'eternal', 'omnipotent', 'omniscient', &c., which theists are wont to predicate of God, seems to be as follows. So far as they convey information at all, that information is negative, i.e., they warn us against ascribing to God certain specific kinds of limitation which are characteristic of human existence, action, cognition, &c. Beyond this they are just honorific appellations, which can no more be taken literally than such titles as 'Your Serene Transparency' applied to earthly potentates.

As might be expected, Tennant's discussion of the problem of evil is eminently fair and balanced. That evil exists is certain, and all attempts to make light of it by calling it merely negative are idle verbiage. As regards *moral* evil, Tennant's defence of God is based on the contention that the highest kind of value can reside only in beings who are capable of making deliberate choices and are morally responsible for the choices which they

make. Such moral responsibility would be impossible unless they were free to choose between alternatives, some of which are less good or more evil than others. It would therefore have been logically impossible for God to create beings capable of the highest kind of value, and at the same time to ensure that they would never make morally wrong choices.

Tennant's defence of God on the score of *physical* evil is as follows. The world could not have been a training-place for the development of moral character, unless men's bodies and their environment had consisted of things with fixed properties and subject to general laws. Now it is impossible that the bodies and the environment of sentient beings should be of that nature without at times occasioning suffering to innocent persons and animals. Such suffering is not willed by God either as an end or as a means. It is tolerated by him as an inevitable collateral consequence of the only conditions under which free agents can develop moral characters and exercise moral volitions.

No doubt it is less unpalatable to regard the world as designed to be a moral gymnasium than as designed to be a pleasure-city, though one cannot help wondering whether even the former view of it does not assign a ridiculously exaggerated role to the human race in the cosmic drama. The task of theodicy would certainly be greatly simplified if we could be sure that a man's present earthly life is but a short phase in an indefinitely prolonged existence. Now Tennant does state categorically that 'the world . . . cannot safely be regarded as realising a *divine* purpose, unless man's life continues after death'. But he also denies that we have any independent evidence of human survival. One would have thought that this alleged negative fact, taken in conjunction with the statement just quoted, would make it very doubtful whether the world *can* 'safely be regarded as realising a *divine* purpose'.

Tennant loathed obscurity and irrationality and mysticism. He typically remarked, after quoting a typical sentence from Jakob Boehme: 'We do well to call nonsense by its name.' It will be clear from the above summary of his theological position that he was to all intents and purposes a Deist. He was equipped with far wider and deeper knowledge of science and of history, and with far better philosophical abilities, than were the English Deists of the eighteenth century, and so he made a far better attempt at what is probably a hopeless undertaking. But I think that *Christianity not Mysterious*, the title of a book by the early Deist Toland, exactly expresses Tennant's own theological ideal.

It would seem that that ideal has become more and more unfashionable in recent years. One has the impression that the mode at present and in the recent past is to emphasize and exaggerate everything in Christianity which is obscure, paradoxical, shocking to good sense, and (as viewed by an unsympathetic outsider, at any rate) neuropathic. If, among the many mansions of their Father's house, there are places prepared both for Tennant and for (let us say) Kierkegård, their respective apartments must be at the most widely separated ends of the building. There is no doubt which is the more popular end at the present time. But fashions in theology and in philosophy change fairly quickly, and past experience leads one to expect the pendulum to swing back in due course for a while to good sense and sweet reasonableness. If ever that should happen, Tennant's work will surely be admired as a masterpiece in its kind.

C. D. BROAD

I am indebted for information about Tennant's family and his early life in Staffordshire to the kindness of his nephew, Mr. H. C. Ellis of Burslem; and for certain other pieces of information to those of my colleagues at Trinity College whom I have mentioned by name in the above memoir.

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