

G5588

Theism neither Radical- ism, Socialism, nor Atheism.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE LANGHAM HALL, JUNE 23RD, 1878, BY
REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

1 COR. XIV. 8.—“*If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for the battle?*”

A CONFERENCE was held at South Place Chapel, Finsbury, on the 13th and 14th inst. convened by means of the following circular.

^{Ch}
SOUTH PLACE CHAPEL,
11 SOUTH PLACE, FINSBURY,
LONDON, E.C.

THE Minister and Committee of the Religious Society meeting at South Place solicit your attendance at a General Conference of Liberal Thinkers, to be held here on June 13th and 14th, 1878, from 12 to 5 P.M. each day, for the discussion of matters pertaining to the religious needs of our time, and the methods of meeting them.

In assuming the initiative in this matter, our Society has no disposition to commit anyone who may accept this invitation to any opinions held by its minister or members. It is actuated by a desire to promote the unsectarian and liberal religion of the age, now too much impeded by isolation and by misunderstandings among those really devoted to common aims, and to utilise its building and organization for that purpose.

At the proposed Conference it is hoped that persons may be gathered who, though working in connection with particular organizations, yet acknowledge no authority above Truth, and are interested in the tendency to that universal religion which would break down all partition walls raised by dogma and superstition between race and race, man and man.

It is believed that light and strength may be gained for each and all by earnest and frank consultation concerning such subjects as the relation of liberal thinkers

Rev. C. Voysey's sermons are to be obtained at Langham Hall, 43 Great Portland Street, every Sunday Morning, or from the Author (by post), Camden House, Dulwich, S.E. Price one penny.

to the sectarian divisions of the world; their duties of negation and affirmation, and the practical methods of advancing their principles.

The proposed meeting will be informal in its constitution, no regular representation being at present in view, the assembly being thus left free to adopt any practical course for the future that shall appear desirable.

A careful report of the proceedings will be printed.

Your reply, which it is hoped will be favourable, together with the names and addresses of such persons as you believe would be interested in the proposed Conference, may be sent to Mr. MONCURE D. CONWAY, Hamlet House, Hammer-smith, London, W.

I will ask any candid religious person what possible objection he could make to the terms of this circular. Indeed, I will go further, and say, that it reflects great credit on those who drew it up, and that, had the programme but been adhered to, few conferences could have been more timely or more useful. The wonder is that there was not a rush of earnest religious men from every Church and Sect in the kingdom to bear their part in discussing the religious needs of our time, and the methods of meeting them. The archbishops and bishops in their palaces, the deans and dignitaries of the Church, clergy of all shades of opinion, ministers of religion among the Nonconformists, active influential laymen, peers of the realm, members of Council and Legislature, philanthropists of every school—in short, all men and women who are above frivolity, and whose lives are occupied in useful work, might well have been expected to be drawn together by such an invitation, by such an admirable project. The object was exalted, it was set forth in plain terms, free from offence; and, lest any should be deterred by a knowledge of the traditions or present characteristics of the place of assembly, the promoters wisely and laudably stated in their circular that they had no desire to commit any of the attendants of the Conference to their own particular views.

Speaking for myself, it disarmed all opposition, and I was ready at once to throw myself into the scheme, and to contribute, to the best of my power, to the deliberations of the assembly. Looking round at the various schools of religious thought, I could not but feel that the proposed object of the Conference belonged even more to us than to any other association. Our work was inaugurated, and has been manfully maintained for no other purpose in the world than to study the religious needs of our time, and to endeavour to meet them. The very defects of our work are in one sense its merits. We have aimed at providing a path easy and pleasant for those who were weary and footsore in their search after reasonable religion. We have tried to make the transition from old to new as gentle and safe as was consistent with strict integrity.

We have thrown away nothing that we could conscientiously retain; we have retained nothing that we could not conscientiously use. We have added nothing that did not give promise of being a grateful substitute for cast-off forms. It is not perfect; it is purposely left open to correction and improvement, to suit our spiritual growth and the new needs of a coming time. But from first to last it is an effort to recognize the religious needs actually before our eyes, and to meet them with a reasonable satisfaction. A Conference professing to be an interchange of thought on such a theme between really religious people could not fail to be an attraction for us; and again I say the proposal deserved our high appreciation and our genuine thanks.

But the promise so fair, so fascinating, was only made to be broken. The expectations raised by it were doomed to disappointment. Compared with the terms of the circular by which the Conference was summoned the meeting was a signal failure.

In the first place we heard little or nothing of the "religious needs of our time," and a great deal of downright, and some vulgar, Atheism; one of the speakers going so far as to wish to expunge the very name of religion from the face of the earth. Allusions were also made to recent prosecutions for illegal publications and were designated as "tyrannous." Women's rights [which in one place and on some lips is a term signifying all that is just and good and pure, and in another place and on other lips implies just the opposite] were imported into the discussion; and when we remember what this phrase is associated with in America, we cannot but fear that the reference to it in connection with these prosecutions was as dangerous to morals as to religion. Speeches of this tendency were not checked, but greeted with vociferous applause. Very soon it became manifest that the main object of the Conference as stated in the circular was ignored or forgotten, and superseded by an entirely new one. This was the formation of an association of all "Liberal thinkers" for their protection against the social and other consequences of their free thought. It was proposed to swamp all differences between Atheists and Theists, and to unite for political and social aims. In short the Conference wished to drop religion altogether out of its programme, or to treat Faith in God as a matter of perfect indifference or of curiosity, and only to be tolerated in any members of the Association, so long as they kept it out of sight and did not obtrude it upon the notice of the body corporate.

Considering the position I occupy, and the work which by your faithful exertions I have been enabled to carry on for so many years, I could not but think that such an assembly was the very last place in which I ought to be seen. I formally withdrew from it on the ground of my objection to certain speeches, and the evident favour with which they were received.

If Liberal thinkers, as they call themselves, hold, to any appreciable extent, atheism in religion, radicalism in politics and socialism in morals, they are of course at liberty to make any alliance they please, and for any object that may take their fancy; but it is monstrous to expect to be joined by those to whom atheism is a distressing and dangerous evil, to whom radicalism is utterly distasteful, and to whom socialism is revolting.* To unite such wholly discordant elements for any purpose would be a foolish enterprise; but when it is professed that they should coalesce in order to prosecute some end which is called "religious," the absurdity is too palpable to require exposure.

No doubt every man who has devoutly thought for himself in matters of religion is more or less averse from the orthodox dogmas; and in this one point alone could there ever be found a meeting-place or common ground for the Theist and Atheist. It was thought by some speakers at the Conference that this would be sufficiently wide to admit of organised co-operation between the two; but I venture to think that it could not be made available without the entire submission and suppression of religious belief, and the consequent dominance of Atheism. There is a vast number of Theists, who, like myself, feel that notwithstanding all our repugnance to orthodoxy and our desire to sweep it away, we are nearer in our sympathies to the Orthodox than we are to the Atheist—at least such types as were heard at the Conference. If in fact it were deemed desirable to organise a league to destroy any objectionable form of thought, it would be more natural, and I think more wise, for Theists to join with the orthodox against Atheism than

* The term radicalism, I think, is somewhat ambiguous. Some may call themselves "radicals," who do not hold what I here mean by radicalism. It is the *extreme* of opposition to the constitution and aristocratic institutions of the country. It seeks revolution, and only waits its opportunity to overthrow existing authority. It avails itself of every chance to vilify and endeavour to bring into contempt established law, and desires nothing so much as a commune. But in objecting to it, I do not forget that this kind of radicalism is not confined to socialist agitators and low prints, but is exhibited in one of its aspects by that section of the clergy who band together to set the law of England at defiance, and to pour contempt on our Highest Courts of Justice.

for Theists to join with the Atheists to put down orthodoxy. But I question the advantage of such organizations at all. I believe that the determined resistance offered by the powerful, the influential and the lovers of order in our middle classes, to the very beginning of free thought in religion, is due entirely to the dread as to where it may lead. In religion, they say, it may land us in utter Atheism; in politics it may end in radicalism and revolution; in social morals to their corruption and decay.—The dread of these evils has not only kept back many excellent and generous-minded persons from daring to think at all independently on religion; but is now keeping away from our side many who are quite convinced of the superiority of our beliefs over those of orthodoxy, and who would not scruple to come forward and help us boldly, if they were quite sure that there was no danger of any of those evils, and that they would run no risk of being mixed up with that class of "Liberal thinkers."

If such an alliance as was proposed at the Conference were to be entered into between Theists and such Atheists, it would entirely frustrate the end in view, viz., the dissolution of orthodoxy. In my opinion, even if our feeling and taste permitted it, such an alliance would have the effect of making orthodoxy stronger than ever, of consolidating its loose and crumbling walls, and of firing its defenders with a fresh enthusiasm in its defence. They would feel not only that their religion was in danger, but their social and moral peace was threatened too; and the struggle which would then be really undertaken on behalf of the common welfare of society would give new security and new life to the dogmas which had been attacked. Not by elements such as made themselves manifest at South Place will orthodoxy ever be dethroned. Free thought in religion was not the only or the chief object sought by some of the promoters of this alliance. Free thought means on their lips much more than that; and it is this *arrière pensée* which lovers of order really dislike even more than they dread Atheism.

The Conference will have done good, however, if it should prove to have led to a better and more accurate discernment of our own work and objects; if it should lead to the correction of those misunderstandings and misrepresentations whereby we suffer from undeserved suspicions and lose the help of those whose sympathies we have already gained. We let it be known then, once for all, that our sole purpose is a religious one; that our quarrel with orthodoxy is not that it is too reli-

gious, but not religious enough ; that we want to elevate and strengthen faith in the Living God and not to knock it down and trample on it ; that we aim at the preservation of social order and of all domestic virtues, to deepen the respect of man to man and not to sow the seeds of class-hatred and party-strife ; to seek after all new truth wherever it may be found ; but always to regard our treasure as a precious trust for the benefit of mankind. The Atheistical party at South Place, were apt to wind up their speeches by some brilliant appeal on behalf of humanity. Let them not forget that our belief in God adds to the sentiment the highest sanction and mandate of conscience, and that we are not one whit behind them in desiring and seeking to release mankind from its burdens. Let them and ourselves also remember that the best and highest of philanthropists are still religious men, orthodox Christians or orthodox Jews, and believers in God, and that it is really an affectation on their part or on ours, if they or we pretend to be setting up an altogether fresh standard of human brotherly love. No doubt orthodox people need deliverance from some bondage—such as we call superstition, sacerdotalism, and spiritual fear. But do we not also need deliverance from our own class of prejudices, bigotry and intolerance, and much irrepressible conceit of which Atheism is the most prolific mother ? If we wish to uproot the errors of orthodox people we must show them some better and higher truths in their place. If we wish to give them better spiritual food, we must provide a real banquet for their hungering and thirsting souls, and not make them sit down before empty tables. It is hard enough for the most joyous and enlightened believer to gain a hearing for his higher truth about God and human destiny from orthodox people ; how then can they be expected to listen to those who not only deny God's existence altogether, but trample on His holy name in jubilant blasphemy ?

We must, however, record our deep regret that that kind of Atheism or Agnosticism (which is so often forced upon the wearied and baffled mind rather than sought by the rebellious and proud spirit) should be exposed to social disabilities. Too often, men cannot help their convictions, especially in matters of religion. No honest convictions should ever be visited with punishment, not even with disrespect. On this ground I would never have raised my voice against unbelievers, of whom I have always spoken respectfully. But it is quite another matter when an alliance is offered for our acceptance, by which our

whole position and work would be compromised. Then is the time when a protest may fairly be made; and the line drawn in conspicuous colour between that party and ourselves; so that no one may have the shadow of an excuse for suspecting us of sympathies from which we utterly revolt. It is the common right of all to make known our own individual positions, our beliefs, our denials, our aims, social, or political or religious; and therefore I felt bound to repudiate, with what emphasis I could summon, all complicity with the opinions, sympathies, and purposes expressed by the majority at the South Place Conference of Liberal Thinkers.

I feel it also my duty to express profound regret that the word "religion" has found a place in the list of the Rules of the Association. It will mislead thousands, it has misled some already. If the new Association care for what is generally understood by religion, by all means let them adopt the right name for it; but if in one breath they vilify and ridicule religion, or give definitions of it, carefully excluding not only the name but all idea of God, and then say that the promotion of *religion* is one of their chief objects, then I deliberately accuse them of making a fraudulent use of words—for what purpose I do not assign—but nevertheless a wilful perversion of a word which to 99 out of every 100 persons has a meaning diametrically opposed to the meaning it has on the lips of the Association.

I bear them no ill-will. I can but regret that men are so divided as we are and must be in our present state of partial knowledge. I am sorry that I have had to protest against their proceedings, and to decline an alliance with them. But I should have been far more full of regret and even of shame had I left it uncertain whether I approved of their scheme or not; had I left a single loop-hole for the accusation that my sympathies were enlisted on their side.

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tion, our beliefs, our views, our aims, social or political or
religious; and therefore I felt bound to republish, with what
comments I could command, all comments with the opinions
and views and proposals expressed by the majority of the
Council of the Association of Liberal Friends.

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religion, or give the definition of a religion which is not only
the name but the substance of the religion, the promotion
of which is the object of the Association, it is surely
unfittingly and unwisely to give it the name of a religious
Association.

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