

LONDON :
CARTER & WILLIAMS, Steam Printers, 14, Bishopsgate Avenue,
Canomile-street, E.C.

93390

The Causes of Irreligion.

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,
SEPTEMBER 5, 1875, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

JEREMIAH, IX., 1. 2., " *Oh that my head were waters and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people. Oh that I had in the wilderness a lodging-place of wayfaring men, that I might leave my people and go from them for they lend their tongues like their bow for lies, they are not valiant for the truth upon earth and they know not me saith the Lord.*"



WE are met together once more, my friends, to worship God in such simplicity and truth as we are capable of, and to pursue the great work which binds us in one heart and soul—the redemption and preservation of true Religion.

Religion has well-nigh become a by-word and a reproach in this age of boasted enlightenment. The record of its past has made good men weep, and wise men scoff. The contemptible triviality of the questions it has raised has often found a fearful contrast in the storms of fierce passion which have raged over them and the rivers of blood in which they have issued.

While philosophers had no alternative but to cast aside with derision the absurd assumptions of theologians; while moralists and philanthropists have mourned over the obstacles to human welfare and progress everywhere set in their path by Christian dogmas; the various champions of conflicting

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creeds have been doing their worst, unconsciously, to undermine all reverence for religion, to alienate the hearts of men from the very thought of God, and to foster the vices and follies which Religion is supposed to condemn.

With many it is quite a question whether religion is not the greatest blunder man has ever committed since the world began. With others, it has ceased to be a question at all and has become a settled conviction. Go into any mixed society and you will find types of at least three prevailing modes of thought about religion. One is partizanship, another indifference, a third denunciation. You have the dogmatic sectarian, believing himself and the rest of his sect or party to be the prime favourites of Heaven; another who makes his boast of being utterly worldly and irreligious, and can afford to do so seeing so many around him to keep him countenance; and a third who never loses an opportunity of scoffing at religion and laying at its door every foul act which comes to the surface. These three are common types. The first is the strongest numerically; the second socially; the third intellectually.

Now there is an obvious cause for each of these three modes of thought upon religion; and it might be well to point it out for the benefit of those who ought to be most interested in the maintenance of religion. We will begin with the first class, the dogmatic sectarian. What is it that makes him what he is? Simply an entirely false notion of religion itself. Nearly all the teaching of Christendom has been to the effect that man is saved or damned according to his belief, and not according to his life. And even where the ideas of salvation and damnation have been kept in abeyance and worthier motives have been substituted, there has been the same false notion at the root, viz: that God is pleased or displeased with us according as we think truly or think falsely respecting Him. I am not one, as you well know, to hold loosely in my regard the value of true opinions on any subject, much less in matters pertaining to religion. We all of us, by our readiness to encounter suffering in the maintenance of our opinions, testify to the importance of believing and proclaiming what is, to our minds, true. But one and all deny with our whole hearts the notion that to hold right

beliefs is praiseworthy, or to hold wrong beliefs blameworthy; that our opinions can make any possible difference to the favour or disfavour of God; still less that on such a slender thread can hang our immortal destiny for bliss or woe. Men can only believe as they may be persuaded; according to the cogency of the arguments before them, or, what is much more common, according to the tendency of their own minds coupled with their early training or surrounding associations. The Christian Missionary in vain confronts the Mussulman and shaking the Bible at him says, "You reject God's word," for the Mussulman with equal right can shake the Koran at the Christian and say, "You are rejecting God's word."

To believe or accept any book or body of doctrine, or any illustrious individual as a Divine teacher, is itself an involuntary act of the mind and cannot deserve praise or blame. God is no more disobeyed or dishonoured by a man refusing to acknowledge the Divine authority of the Bible, of Jesus or of the Church, than He is dishonoured by another man accepting as Divine the authority of the Koran and of Mahomet. But we need not pursue these common-places. It is more to our purpose to observe what inevitable consequences of conduct, feeling, attitude must follow upon believing that our creed or religious opinion secures our salvation from perdition, or in any way merits the favour of God. The first and most obvious effect of this is to set the holders of different creeds at war with each other. They cannot help it. Their very differences, small at first, perhaps, become magnified and raised into essentials of salvation. Kind-hearted men on either side try to convert each other, each truly fearing that the other is going to hell. Hard-hearted men will add hatred to this conviction and resort to violence as in the days of the Inquisition, or to other milder means of coercion as the state of civilization will permit.

Next, there comes an over-culture of the sentiment of pride, which soon breeds arrogance and unlawful ambition. Those who believe themselves to be the repositories of God's truth would fain conquer the world, and if they cannot force all men to believe with them, the effort is made at least to force them into outward conformity. And there, in the person of Pius the ninth, we see the embodiment of this principle

and the action in which it finally issues. Nothing can be more logical or more practically consistent. The Pope simply acts, or tries to act, so far as his crippled liberties will allow him, up to his convictions that he is God's vicar on the earth and the sole repository of Divine truth. But in looking at the Roman Pontiff, every dogmatic sectarian ought to see the reflection of what he himself would be if he could. The principle of Rome and that of all her rebel children is the same. The difference is only such as exists between a hen and her chickens. The nature is identical, and, if suffered to develop, each sect would become an imperial ecclesiasticism like that which is governed from the Vatican.

Another result of attaching undue value to opinion is the development of dogma from what was originally perhaps simple and reasonable to what is complex metaphysical or absurd. The Jews, *e.g.*, who did not at first hold this foolish idea of being saved for their creed, never wanted any other God but Jehovah, nor sought to define Him in riddles of speech or to depict Him in any similitude until they caught the infection from those who thought more of creed and worship than of duty and love. But this dire necessity of conceiving rightly about God on pain of His everlasting displeasure set men groping in the thick darkness among mysteries of their own contriving. Nothing but metaphysical definition would satisfy them. The native trustfulness of heart towards the Good Spirit was gone, and in its place came fear and trembling, and speculation; and, like drowning men catching at straws, they invented first one and then another god to keep company with the Supreme, and around every fresh name were clustered webs and mazes of ever-deepening perplexity, every item and detail of which must be held faithfully and kept whole and undefiled, or "without doubt they should perish everlastingly."

It would be impossible to believe unless the facts were undisputed, that our Christian forefathers fought and wrangled, and finally ruptured Christendom over the question whether or not the Holy Ghost proceeded from the Son as well as from the Father. The celebrated *filioque* dispute has never been settled to this day, and it is more incredible still that any one in the whole of Christendom should be found

sufficiently antiquated to care a straw for the clause in question.

But the Church of Rome (and the Church of England too) damns to everlasting fire all who reject this diminutive dogma. According to us and Rome, the whole Eastern Church is under sentence of endless perdition, because she rejects the statement of the double procession, and for good reasons known to herself will not have *filioque* in her Nicene Creed. The recent conference at Rome with the best intentions has nevertheless brought back the smile of contempt to the faces of impartial spectators of the Churches' squabbles. If the voice of God out of Heaven could reach the solemn meditators over this infinitesimal problem, saying, "What doth the Lord thy God require of thee but to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God?" those men whose minds and hearts are worthy of better themes would quietly let that double procession fall under their table, would let go one by one all the silly inventions which led up to it and gave to it its grand but fictitious notoriety, and would disband and go home impressed with the really vital and tremendous questions on which the welfare of so many millions of mankind is now hanging. They would say in their quickened souls "While we have been mooning over the procession of the Holy Ghost and the *filioque*, God Himself is being eclipsed—the lamp of faith is dying out for want of the oil of gladness, and the world is hastening into the night of despair. While we were seeking for new Shibboleths, and torturing language to call white black and to affirm and deny the same proposition with one breath, the voice of joy and peace in believing is fading, fading away; and when men and women in their sadness call on us for comfort, for one word to strengthen their failing faith, we shall be dumb with astonishment and there will be no voice nor any to answer."

But why all this wanton waste of time, and toil and brain? Because they and the whole aggregate of Churches have been taught to believe that on their believing rightly down to the minutest dogma depend all their hopes of salvation. Hence and hence only has arisen this scrupulousness about questions inherently contemptible. Hence has come the utter neglect

of the really important questions, the first and most necessary foundations of all true religion ; and hence has sprung the contempt into which religion has been plunged, and the still wider indifference to it which has fallen like the sleep of death over the most influential people in our land.

And I think *they* will bear me out if I speak apologetically for them on this theme. They would most likely say :—“ We do not hate religion because it is good ; for though we are mirthfully disposed and detest puritanism and asceticism, we are men at heart and have an eye for what is pure and lovely quite as clear as yours. We should not despise religion if the professors and teachers of religion were only to talk a little sense and not treat us as if we were babies. We should not despise it if the preachers were to make some attempt to draw the line between what may reasonably be inferred and what is too incredible to be swallowed. We should not despise religion if it was more natural and appealed to our common sense and better feelings, instead of giving us patent absurdities like the Athanasian Creed, immoral and revolting dogmas like those of the atonement and everlasting fire ; if they did not go on asserting that ‘ if the resurrection of Jesus as recorded in the gospels be not true, then all that Christianity teaches is a falsehood,’ or that ‘ if the gospels are not all true then Jesus must have been an impostor ;’ and other foolish talk of the same kind. We should not despise religion if men and women—especially the clergy—did not quarrel over it so much and manifest such bitterness, jealousy, animosity, and slander towards each other. We should not despise it, if the poor preachers had a chance of speaking their honest minds ; but if we go to church the parson must say what he is bidden to say by the 39 Articles ; and if we go into a chapel the minister must say only what he is bidden to say by the congregation. We see, therefore, the whole system made systematically insincere, and hollow ; and without reckoning the wearisome monotony of second-hand doctrines repeated from Sunday to Sunday all the year round, we are fairly disheartened by the conviction that the preachers are all gagged and muzzled, and whether they believe what they teach or not, we have no means of discovering. Finally,

we despise religion because we are for ever being told that it is wicked not to believe this, that, or the other ; and no matter what we do or how we live we shall be damned if we do not believe in the blood of Christ or submit ourselves to the dictates of the church. We know better than that. We have the sense to discern the malignity and injustice of such an arrangement, even if our consciences did not tell us that we shall be sure to have to pay the full penalty—no more and no less than our sins deserve. We despise religion too because they tell us not to use our reason ; that it is impious to doubt or question any of their assertions or the still more incredible assertions in their Bibles and Prayer-books. We know that *must* be wrong, for if there be a God and He has given us reason, without which we cannot move one step in the discovery of what is right and true, He must wish us to use our reasons in searching after Him and in the discovery of His will ; and *that* religion carries its own condemnation which says it is wrong or dangerous to think for oneself. This is why we despise religion and will no more of it till the preachers talk sense and are permitted freely to say what they really believe.”

Such, I believe is the testimony of the indifferent. In some, indifference has been pushed to the extreme of active hostility ; but the alienating cause is the same in either case. These reflections, loose and fragmentary as they are, should lead us to hope that true religion consistent with common sense, with duty and with cheerfulness, is yet possible to those who have been alienated by what bears the sacred name of religion in our day. Men and women *do* love that which is good, are ready to believe that which is true, are thankful to embrace hopes for the future which do not outrage the intellect or demoralize the heart.

If there be a God in Heaven—and when I say “if,” I do not falter one moment in my grateful trust in Him—then surely He will continue to draw to Himself the hearts of the gentle and aspiring, the hearts of the weary and careworn, the hearts of the tempted and the enchained, the hearts of the weak and the hearts of the strong ; the young, the prime, and the aged, those who toil and those who rest, the sick and the dying. If God loves, He needs us as much as

we need Him, or we should never have been here at all. If He is as good as He is wise, He will not alter the hard path of our lives to suit our discontent, however justifiable, nor surrender into our childish, short-sighted control, the guidance of our lives and destiny.

True religion must live, in spite of false religion, indifference, or hostility,—or this world will be turned into hell; might will overcome right; and every soul which survives the catastrophe will in weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth cry out like Lucifer in his fall "Evil be thou my good."

