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WHAT IS RELIGION?

(F. Max Muller's First Hibbert Lecture)

A DISCOURSE

GIVEN AT

SOUTH PLACE CHAPEL,

MAY 5th, 1878,

BY

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LONDON:
SOUTH PLACE, FINSBURY.

PRICE TWOPENCE.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY WATERLOW AND SONS LIMITED,
LONDON WALL.

WHAT IS RELIGION ?

THE community may congratulate itself upon the fact that the bequest of an advanced liberal man for the promotion of free religious inquiry, should find its fulfilment in the ancient chapter-house of Westminster Abbey. It is probable that if the dogmas which founded that Abbey still reigned, the first Hibbert lecturer would have been sooner burnt than listened to. But now, amid those historic walls are represented ideas of religion which have been raised quite out of the region of authority, and worthily claim only to stand or fall along with the reason and knowledge of man,—acknowledging no revelation but the history of man.

On Thursday last, in his second lecture, the Professor remarked that even if the theory of human progression could be proved in all other affairs of mankind, that would not prove the same theory true of religion.

This remark applied to the far past; and it is true that what is called religion was for ages the unprogressive, the stationary institution of the world. And this because the religious sentiment was confused with theology,—identified with alleged revelations,—thus removed from the normal current of human interests. But the scene in the chapter-house marks a great change. The Hibbert Trust is, I believe, outcome of money earned by toiling negroes on West Indian plantations. The House of Commons freed those slaves. The wealth they coined comes back to the room in which the House of Commons first sat. There African degradation is turning to English culture. The progress in civilisation represented in that fact is not greater than the religious progress it implies. The leading Unitarian (Martineau) and the Dean of Westminster have united to bring a German liberal there to raise the standard of a human religion. It is now a religious House of Commons. Four centuries ago an old monk frescoed the walls of it with the visions of the Apocalypse. The angels and dragons are now fading around a wider apocalypse. The Isle of Patmos sinks beneath the horizon. The Isle of England rises from the night, its awakened eye holding the Apocalypse of Man.

The eminence of Max Muller is the work he has done in recovering the vast fields of human experi-

ence represented by the Aryan race. No West Indian slave was more bound under his master than our English brains under thralldom to ancient Semitic notions. Hebraism waved its sceptre over European culture, and excluded two-thirds of the world and of history as heathenism and devil's work. Many have been our deliverers from that prison, but no one of them has done more than our first Hibbert lecturer to carry this liberation from the scholar's study to the layman's home. It was because of this that he was called to expound the religion of humanity amid walls built to fortify the dogmas of one tribe against the rest of mankind, and against universal progress. Westminster Abbey has survived to hear sentence passed upon every creed for which it stood. And so at last even tardy religion is caught up into the great loom of the world to be woven in with general civilisation.

That is, so far as it is a sound thread. But is it sound? Is it real? Some say it is rotten, some say unreal: man's childish awe of phantoms, conjured up by his own ignorance. But Max Muller detaches religion from all its special forms or accidents; maintains its reality and vitality; rests it upon the universal human sense and feeling of the Infinite. He appeals to the broad facts common to the civilized man and the barbarian, to East, West, North, South; and he thus,

in laying his foundation, leaves out of sight those facts not universal; such as the special and narrow theories of which a Christian may feel conscious here and a Buddhist there. His question relates not to this so-called religion or that, but to religion itself. All religions might perish, and this essential religion still stand. That he declares to be a natural thing, which has had natural evolutions comprehensible by science. Supernaturalism may, therefore, so far as the present atmosphere of Westminster Abbey is concerned, be regarded as a small way one religion, has of saying to another "Stand aside, I am holier than thou." The interest of the human intellect has passed beyond that pious egotism. It is now profoundly concerned to know, not whether Christianity is true, but whether religion itself is real; or whether our spiritual emotion is merely surviving emotion of waves after the blasts of superstition have so long swept over them.

The main principle affirmed is, that religion is man's apprehension of the Infinite. In searching the largest and the smallest, man reaches an end of his comprehension; the limit of the heavens he can see, the limit of the atom he can divide; but where comprehension ends, apprehension continues; imagination, wonder, admiration, faith, hope, soar on into an immeasurable expanse; and the emotion awakened within

for that transcendent immensity is the religious emotion.

Now there are certain inferences from this principle which it hardly lay in the way of the lecturer to unfold. It was intimated, however, in what he said about the progressive development of conceptions of colour, and I will use that to illustrate my own point. In arguing that the ancient races of men apprehended the Infinite vaguely, though they had no word for it, he said, "We divide colour by seven rough degrees. Even those seven degrees are of late date in the evolution of our sensuous knowledge. In common Arabic, as Palgrave tells us, the names for green, black and brown are constantly confounded. In the Edda the rainbow is called a three-coloured bridge. Xenophanes says that what people call Iris is a cloud, purple, red and yellow. Even Aristotle still speaks of the tricoloured rainbow, red, yellow and green. Blue, which seems to us so definite a colour, was worked out of the infinity of colours at a comparatively late time. There is hardly a book now in which we do not read of the blue sky. But in the ancient hymns of the Veda, so full of the dawn, the sun and the sky, the blue sky is never mentioned; in the Zendavesta the blue sky is never mentioned; in Homer the blue sky is never mentioned; in the Old, and even in the New, Testament, the blue sky is never mentioned. In the Teutonic languages

blue comes from a root which originally meant *bleak* and *black*. The Romance languages found no useful word for blue in Latin and borrowed their word from the Germans."

The Hibbert lecturer believes those ancients saw the blue sky as we do, but they had no word for it because they had not detached it mentally from dark or bright. But whether the outer eye has unfolded or the inner eye,—visual power or the analytic mind behind it,—it is equally shown that the full phenomena were not revealed; and we are again reminded that in going back to the ancient world for his beliefs man suffers a relapse from the height he has attained. In the matter of *blue sky* the Bible is as much a blank as the Vedas. So far neither was a revelation—or unveiling—of phenomena. That knowledge, by natural means and scientific culture, we have reached, and see seven colours where our ancestors saw three or four. Are we to suppose their spiritual senses were finer, while their other senses were duller, than ours? Are we to suppose that their religious analysis was more perfect than ours? If so, it would be a miracle; but where is the evidence of any such miracle? Compare the God of the Vedas or of the Bible—Indra or Jehovah—with the God of Theodore Parker, nay, of any living Theist, and only a blindness worse than blue-blindness can declare those thunder-

gods equal to the Divine Love adored by the enlightened heart to-day.

That conclusion is inevitable from the moment it is admitted that religion is a subject for scientific treatment. Once let it be admitted that religion is to be dealt with by unbiassed reason,—by such calm sifting of facts as if the subject were electricity,—and from that instant every particular system of religion must take its place in the natural history of mankind. Be it Brahminism, be it Christianity, it comes down from the bench and goes into the witness-box. Each testifies what it knows, but it cannot coerce the judgment of Reason. Christianity may testify that it saw miracles; Confucianism that it saw none; Islamism that it was revealed from Allah; but it is no longer the sword which determines their credibility; it is Reason. So their testimony goes for precisely what it is worth. If they saw only three colours where there were seven, possibly they also saw miracle where there was only natural fact. The world cannot go back to the year One for its ideas of the Infinite any more than for its optics. It may recognise in Christ a great religious teacher, just as it recognises in Aristotle a great scientific teacher; but as it cannot diminish the known colours because Aristotle knew only three, so it cannot deny religious facts because unknown to Christ. But it may find fresh

reason for faith in science and religion in that, with grand vitality, they far outgrow both Aristotle and Christ, and all the systems that would confine them.

Now, as to this apprehension of the Infinite in which the Hibbert lecturer finds the religious faculty; it sounds at first rather metaphysical. It is tolerably clear that no abstract notions of the Infinite can have any commanding power over the nature and passions of mankind. We must, therefore, in considering historic religions, think rather of the forms with which human imagination has peopled the Infinite. The Infinite in itself is metaphysical; but its vault, populous with gods, becomes practical. The creed which has swayed the world has been in an Infinite just transcending man's finite in power or excellence; while it is finite enough to deal with him and feel with him. The god or personality which man associates with infinitude may be of unknown strength, so separate from finite man; but he may be angry, loving, ambitious, so-linked on to the finite?

It is just in this twofold aspect of these images of the Infinite that we may discover the reality and meaning of religion. To which side of the god does it belong—his finite or his infinite side? his likeness to man or his transcendency of man? his comprehensibility or incomprehensibility.

Religion,—whether it be a sense of dependence, or

awe, of emotion, or aspiration—whatever its aspect, refers to that in which the object of worship passes beyond the worshipper. In this it differs from theology, which concerns itself with that side of the god which is within the knowledge of man. The Theology of one period may describe the gods, as the Greeks did, even to the colour of their hair; the Theology of another period may disprove such gods' existence, substituting invisible Beings, as that of Paul did. One Theology may build up a Trinity; another may supersede it with a Quaternity or Unity. But it would be an error to suppose that Religion is either directly making those images, or directly replacing them.

These personifications are the successive inventions of a changing science; they are utilised by priests who support theologians to maintain them, or, when they become discredited, to modify or replace them. But, although the religious condition of man may be harmonious with such images at one time, discordant with them at another, what human worship adores is the unknown, the eternal, the vast, the perfect,—all expanding beyond its conception, but yet believed to be powerfully existent.

Thus Religion is different from Fear. Man would never fear the Infinite. It is only when to its vastness Theology adds a smallness like man's own that men begin to tremble. It is not Jove, the incomprehensible

Heaven, man fears ; but Jove, the comprehensible Chieftain, going about with a thunderclub to kill him. That Jove men fear, because they understand him ; they go about themselves with clubs less big but equally murderous. That is not Religion—it is Theology ; a primitive speculative science of gods. But we have reached now a Science of Religion, and understand that its reverence, its devoutness, emotion, love, so far as really awakened in man, were for what rose above his own weakness, his passions, and his sorrows.

What, then, does this apprehension (which must be distinguished from comprehension) this feeling about the Infinite amount to ? Simply to man's belief in something better than himself. Man believes in a Wisdom greater than his own. Theology may personify it in Minerva, or in the Holy Ghost ; but the worship is not for the work of man's wisdom—it is for the wisdom ascending beyond man. So the forms perish : the worship of wisdom perishes not. Man adores a power beyond his own : theology may identify it with mountain and lightning, sea and whirlwind, and these may overawe his heart so long as he knows nothing of them : but when the mountain is climbed, and the sea voyaged over, the cloud seen as vapour, the wind weighed, the lightning bottled and sealed up, the ever-kneeling spirit of Religion passes

onward, and amid innumerable forms and names that come and go, seeks still the better, the wiser, the more powerful and happy,—ever leading on from the finite to the Infinite.

And this high seeking, born of each heart's faith in a better than it knows, is the religious force, because it is the controlling and creative force. It is idle to tell us, in face of the moral progress of the world, that the life of man has been the result of correct metaphysics, theological definitions, abstractions about the Absolute and co-eternal Persons. The force that is moving the world onward is the longing in each human being for somewhat more perfect than what they have or are. It is Maya in India praying her babe Siddârtha (Buddha) may be wise beyond all men she ever knew; or Mary in Palestine praying the same as she watches her baby Jesus; or any mother that hears me, whose tender breast feels stirring within hope that the new nature she has started on its career may ascend till she can kneel in homage before it. It may be the humblest workman dreaming of a more perfect skill; the young artisan feeling after an invention pregnant with results incalculable. Wherever and however manifested it is the great vision of a glory transcending our own; and though such ideals are always being reached and passed by—infinites becoming finites—so, endlessly the spirit grows, so

immortal is its nature, so unceasing the work of creation, the outline is never filled up. Over crumbled gods and goddesses, religion ascends for ever, burning, disintegrating, generating, regenerating,—Humanity's passion for the Perfect.

There is a danger in the method of the historian and archæologist of religion. Because he must trace the evolution of religion through its visible and definable effects—fetish, shrine, dogma, temple—there is danger that these may be regarded as types and forms of religion itself. When a geologist walks over hills, cliffs, rocks, he traces the path of drifting glaciers scratched on rock ; he finds sea-shells on the hill-tops, boulders dropped in meadows, pebbles rounded by waves long ebbd away to channels many miles distant : he says, seas and rivers have smoothed and deposited these shells and sands, and shaped these undulations of hill and vale. Yet these are not the sea,—they are but fringes and accidents in the history of the sea. But in religion men still have the habit of seeing the shards and shells of theory—the pebbles of theology worn from crumbled temples—as forms of Religion itself. They are but things which Religion influenced, they report its ancient tides and currents, but they are not—never were—religion itself.

Having now detached the religious sentiment from

the forms which have borrowed its consecration ; having identified it as man's impulse towards the Perfect—which philosophy calls the Infinite—let us ask whether we are genuine and true in calling this religion. Or is our use of that word only a piece of conventionality? Does Religion mean anything different from morality, or different from conscience? If not, then our use of it is mystification, conformity, cowardice.

I believe Religion to be a different thing from Morality. I understand by morality rules and standards of conduct relating to recognised social duties. But there is something in man which leads him to defy the rules and standards around him. A bad man violates moral rules for the sake of self : but another man breaks them at the cost of self. What leads Jesus to break the Sabbath, or Buddha to refuse offerings to the gods? Or what leads the reformer of to-day to challenge the social and political order?

Are such men seeking the benefit of the majority? The majority are against them. The majority is made uncomfortable by them. Are they seeking general advantages? They are often plunging everything into revolution, and doing it consciously. You might persuade a freethinker that to disestablish the Church would leave the majority poorer than now ; or that innumerable advantages to millions would be lost if

the Athanasian Creed were exploded. But would any consideration of majorities make him support the Church: would any advantages make him advocate the Creed? It may be said he is obeying the voice of conscience. That explains nothing. Conscience is an organ of forces beyond itself. It dictates war to one tribe, peace to another. Conscience is a majestic throne, but we search for the power behind the throne.

Now, here we have a force in man which often confronts customs, moralities, the social and political order, which disregards majorities and their interests, disregards self-interest also; and this force with passion, enthusiasm and martyrdom, seeks something it never saw, something that never existed. It is manifested in all history, and is known in universal experience; it actuates theists and non-theists; it is especially visible in the overthrow of popular idols and dogmas claiming its worship. Is that morality? Not a whit more than it is politics, or trade, or art, or any one of the manifold human interests which slowly but steadily follow the lead of that pillar of cloud and fire.

I call it Religion, because that is a universal name which no sect or nation has ever tried to monopolise: but I do not care for that name if any one has a better. I *do* care that it shall not be confused with

wholly different things, with either morality, politics or science. Much less, with Theology. For Theology is the great enemy of religion. Morality, Society, Science, are its ministers, but Theology is its rival,—the Opposer that would arrest the current of its life, and nail man down to bestow upon a fragment of his universe and himself the passion born for aspiration to the perfect whole. To call it ideality, poetry, harmony, love of humanity, is to name the fruits by which this religious life is known. To name it Religion may, indeed, be very inadequate; neither etymologically or practically can that word do more than preserve the distinction and witness the existence of that which language cannot define; but as inaccuracy of words like “sunrise” and “sunset” cannot now mar the glories they suggest, so no etymologic fault can disparage that only catholic name we have (Religion) so long as it is left us by Sectarianism and Superstition to designate the universal aspirations of mankind. Christianity can only claim to be a religion; it cannot claim to be Religion. No sect can claim to be Religion itself. That is an older banner than any existing nation or church; under its broad folds and heaven-born tints thousands of sects have perished; it widens with the ages, blends with all grandeurs without and within, leads onward the steady march of

man with his world to that supreme beauty which enchains his senses and enchants his heart.

For essential religion no adequate word or definition has ever been discovered, or is likely to be discovered. If the lecturer's statement there halts, it is because the Infinite, the Perfect, cannot be defined. To call it the Infinite leaves the moral sentiment unexpressed. To call it "morality touched with enthusiasm," leaves the progressive life untold. The philosophers of Germany and America in the beginning of this generation called it Transcendentalism;—but that white light wanted fire, and faded. Some have called it absolute Being. Jesus called it Love; and no fairer emblem of it was ever named than that supreme glory which quickens the world, from the marriage of flower with flower which to-day clothes the earth with blossoms, to the mother and her babe, and all the manifestations of that unselfish joy which alone can transfigure human passions. But man needs Light as well as Love. And so it is that the highest in us is as ineffable as that which it seeks. When we have dwelt on its varied intimations; when we have thought of Ideality and Poetry, perfect Being, the Infinite, the Immortal, Supreme Reason, pure Beauty, universal Love—even then the wise heart is conscious that it has touched but a few chords of the harp with a thousand strings; and when the thousand strings have all been swept,

when human language has rehearsed all its concepts
 and its dreams to the last accent, yet in the silent
 heart the still small voice will go on sweetly singing of
 a dawn fairer than all the rest.

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