

"THE SACRED ANTHOLOGY." A Book of Ethnical Scriptures, collected and edited by M. D. CONWAY.  
London: Trübner & Co., 1874. 12s.

This book shows what may be achieved by enthusiasm and perseverance. Mr. Conway tells us that he is not an Oriental scholar, but he has given us what no Oriental scholar has yet given to the world, though for many years the world has been expecting and demanding something like a Sacred Anthology, viz., a collection of the most important passages from the sacred writings of the East, translated into English. As Oriental scholars shrank from the undertaking, Mr. Conway set to work, collecting all the translations which he could find ready to hand, and extracting from them whatever seemed to him of real value. \* \* \*

But Mr. Conway was not dismayed by these difficulties. He knew what he could, and what he could not do, and by limiting the scope of his undertaking, and giving to his collection a purely practical character, he has certainly succeeded in accomplishing a useful and important task. "He believed," as he tells us, "that it would be useful for moral and religious culture if the sympathy of religions could be more generally made known, and the converging testimonies of ages and races to great principles more widely appreciated." If we may judge by the rapid succession of editions, Mr. Conway has certainly roused by his *Sacred Anthology* a wide interest in a subject hitherto strangely neglected, and he will have rendered an important service, if it were only by dispelling some prejudices most detrimental to a true appreciation of the value of all religions.

Those who study the history of the human race in all its various phases, from the lowest savagery to the highest civilisation, know that neither in the most perfect work of discursive thought, nor in the grandest achievements of creative art, has the human mind put forth all its powers in greater force or fulness than in religion. We are, from our very childhood, so familiar with the highest religious conceptions, that it is difficult for us to appreciate the mental struggles by which they were conquered and secured for us. We forget that the simplest conception of the Divine requires an almost superhuman effort, and was therefore among most nations ascribed to a divine revelation. We forget that every name of the Deity was the reward of more than one sleepless night at Peniel, and that even in a prayer, such as the Gayatri, are hoarded up the scant earnings of the patient labours of many generations. That tribes, even in the lowest scale of civilisation, should address a Being whom they have never seen, as their Father, that they should never for one moment doubt his existence, should regulate their lives by what they suppose to be his will, should actually offer to him what they value most on earth, may no longer strike us as extraordinary, but in itself it is more marvellous than anything else in the whole of human nature.

And what is more marvellous still, is the striking uniformity with which that power of religion has manifested itself almost everywhere. There are differences, no doubt, and profound differences between the religions of the world, but the similarities far outweigh these differences. Let readers open Mr. Conway's *Anthology*, without looking at the references, and they will find it by no means easy to say whether any given extract comes from a Jewish, a Mohammedan, or a Hindu source. Mr. Conway has arranged his extracts according to subjects. We find passages on Charity, Nature, Man, Humility, Sorrow and Death placed together, and these passages are taken promiscuously from all the sacred books of the world. No doubt we at once recognise the extracts from the Old and New Testaments, particularly when they are given in the authorised version; but even these, if translated more literally or more freely, might often be supposed to be taken from the Buddhist Canon or from the Chinese King. The same sentiments, sometimes in almost the same words, occur again and again in all the sacred books of the world. \* \* \*

It is hardly surprising that a perusal of Mr. Conway's *Sacred Anthology* should have left on many readers the impression of the great superiority of the Biblical extracts, if compared with the rest. The fact is, that what we call the beauty or charm of any of the sacred books can be appreciated by those only whose language has been fashioned, whose very thoughts have been nurtured by them. The words of our own Bible cause innumerable strings of our hearts to vibrate till they make a music of memories that passes all description. The same inaudible music accompanies all sacred books, but it can never be rendered in any translation. To the Arab there is nothing equal to the cadence of the Koran, to us even the best translation of Mohammed's visions sounds often dull and dreary. This cannot be helped, but it is but fair that it should be borne in mind as a caution against declaring too emphatically that nobody else's mother can ever be so fair and dear as our own.

One of the most eminent Oriental scholars expressed the following judgment as to the relative merits of the Sacred Scriptures of the world:—

"The collection of tracts, which we call from their excellence the *Scriptures*, contain, independently of a Divine origin, more true sublimity, more exquisite beauty, purer morality, more important history, and finer strains both of poetry and eloquence, than could be collected, within the same compass, from all other books that were ever composed in any age, or in any idiom. The two parts of which *Scriptures* consist are connected by a chain of compositions which bear no resemblance in form or style to any that can be produced from the stores of Grecian, Indian, Persian, or even Arabian learning; the antiquity of those compositions no man doubts; and the unstrained application of them to events long subsequent to their publication, is a solid ground of belief that they were genuine compositions, and consequently inspired."

Would any Oriental scholar endorse this judgment now?

We have intentionally abstained from all critical remarks with regard to the translation of single passages. Such remarks might be addressed to the translators, but not to Mr. Conway. He deserves our hearty thanks for the trouble he has taken in collecting these gems, and stringing them together for the use of those who have no access to the originals, and we trust that his book will arouse a more general interest in a long-neglected and even despised branch of literature, the Sacred Books of the East.

MAX MÜLLER.

Other works by the same Author.

"THE EARTHWARD PILGRIMAGE." Chatto and Windus. 5s.

"REPUBLICAN SUPERSTITIONS." H. S. King and Co. 2s. 6d.

Mr. Conway's works may be obtained by addressing "The Librarian, South Place Chapel, Finsbury, London," where also may be obtained his Pamphlets on W. J. Fox (3d.); Strauss (3d.); Mill (2d.); Sterling and Maurice (2d.); and Mazzini (1d.).