

G3341
252.6 MOR

What is the Religion of Humanity?

A DISCOURSE

AT

SOUTH PLACE CHAPEL,

MAY 16TH, 1880,

BY

MONCURE D. CONWAY, M.A.

LONDON :

SOUTH PLACE, FINSBURY.

PRICE TWOPENCE.

LONDON:
WATERLOW & SONS LIMITED,
LONDON WALL.

WHAT IS THE RELIGION OF HUMANITY?



THE PHRASE Religion of Humanity has been much and vaguely used; and best phrases so used are liable to degenerate into cant. There is something pleasant to everybody in the word "Humanity"; no doubt all sects would claim that theirs is the religion of humanity. Even sects with creeds based upon a curse on human nature would declare their religion adapted to, and revealed to save, humanity, therefore the religion of humanity.

Among more liberal people we sometimes hear the word 'humanitarian' used for a believer in the religion of humanity. 'Humanitarian' was coined to represent the doctrine that the nature of Jesus was human as distinguished from divine or angelic: it is a good sign when such theological disputes are so far past that their phrases are put to more substantial work. And this other phrase, the Religion of Humanity, which I believe came from the mint of Positivism, also shows a tendency to do various duty. To the majority it probably means a

religion which believes in the perfectibility of mankind; it would include the idea of human progress, also the sentiment of charity, of sympathy with mankind, and a spirit of benevolent reform.

No doubt underneath the humanitarian hypothesis of the nature of Jesus there was at work a faith in human nature; and under any conception of a religion of humanity there would be found the spirit of love to man, the feeling of fraternity, and belief in a happy destiny for all mankind.

These high feelings will, however, be reinforced in proportion as it can be made clear to our minds whether there is any sense in which that group of sentiments in us which relate to humanity can be defined as a religion; if so, in what sense it is a religion distinct from other so-called religions; and whether it is one which is fully credible to us,—whether, that is, it represents the facts and phenomena regarded by the religious sentiment.

That which we call 'Humanity' is the totality of all that is moral in nature; all that distinguishes and chooses, which discriminates right from wrong, good from evil, where all nature not human is unmoral—gives equal support to good and bad.

All history is the history of the war of mankind against external nature; when we go beyond history to tradition, and behind tradition to mythology, we

we find this and only this—man combating Arctic frost and torrid heat, tempest and flood, the barrenness, the ferocities of the earth, the pitiless cruelties of the pestilential and the rainless atmosphere. That siege of man against nature has never been relaxed ; it goes on still ; and in that time man has learned that his own nature represents all that is moral in the universe he can comprehend.

I say represents : for certain animals seem capable of love and mutual service ; but they possess this in the ratio of their approach to human nature, and of their association with it. Therefore they are man's humble constituency ; their feebler minds and affections are represented by him as against the inorganic universe, their common enemy. Now, this ancient interminable war between man and inanimate nature has not been one of sentiment, but of necessity. To wage it has always been the condition of human existence on the planet ; all the animals that could not wage it to some extent have become fossil ; and man would have followed them into extinction if he had not steadily resisted his hostile environment. But during all this war man's sentiments were on the side of his great adversary. He sang hymns to the sun which consumed him, to the storm which beat upon him ; evoked a vast array of

deities out of the elements, and prostrating himself before them in one moment, in the next arose to fight and conquer their cruelty.

Primitive man ascribed to the gods as their particular realm all the elements and regions of nature which he himself could not control. His own empire was built up in practical hostility to this elemental empire of the gods. It was the necessity of the humanised world that it should ever be encroaching on the gods' world, turning the chaos they had created to order and use. Thus there was no love lost between the two. Man's attitude towards the gods was fear; and that of the gods towards man was deemed to be jealousy, sometimes fear also, lest he might build a tower high enough to besiege heaven, or seize on the apples of immortality. There resulted a divorce between man's practical life and his theology. That set of beliefs and diplomatic ceremonials to the sky which were called religion, had nothing to do with man's humanity, which was necessarily devoted to constant revision and correction of that nature supposed to be the creation of the gods.

All of which may seem very childish notions. Yet the so-called religions of the world have been generally cast in the same mould; and that is the shape they bear to this day.

The wild powers of nature are translated by theology and catalogued in the creeds. Where do you find the doctrine of satisfaction or expiation? Where do you find any basis for the doctrine that no deity can forgive an offence except the penalty be suffered and the law satisfied? You find it in every creed, but you do not find it in the heart and life of humanity. People do not so exact from others rigid legal satisfaction. The parent who worships a god demanding satisfaction, forgives the child daily without any satisfaction. Humanity could not have survived if it had practised the theology of invariable expiation. But you will find that dogma a reflection of the unswerving course of natural objects, the unvarying sun and seasons, the ever-recurring remorseless powers that now freeze, now bring famine, and listen to no entreaties.

Where will you find the doctrine of vicarious suffering? Not in the voluntary life of humanity. The judge or the parent may worship a deity satisfied by the suffering of the just for the unjust, but he would be shocked at any suggestion in the court or the home that the innocent should be made to suffer for the guilty. And in the household or in society, who would deliberately visit the sin of a father upon his children? Where then do the creeds get these notions? From the

hard forces of nature, which punish transgressions of natural law even though they be virtuous deeds, secure the good of one by sacrifice of another; now make the mother victim of the child, next the child heir of the parent's infirmities.

We might indeed go through the whole list of dogmas that make up what is called religion, and we should find them to be a rough translation of nature's roughness; not religion at all, because confusing good and evil; unrelated to the moral sentiment; a crude primitive science, or attempt at a scientific theory of nature. Those which were anciently deities personifying the inorganic aspects of nature, are now abstract dogmas reflecting the same thing; and as when they were deities or demons, so now when they have become dogmas, they represent precisely all that part of nature which it is the business of humanity to resist, restrain, or even exterminate.

We must, indeed, never forget that human beings are much better than their creeds; that inside their stony dogmatic walls are cultured spots of humane feeling; that they speak and act gently while they worship wrath, and deal justly while worshipping an unjust deity. There is a blessed necessity which exterminates from the practical life anti-social principles; and while it

allows tongues to recite what creeds they please, holds heart and hand to their need and duty with an iron grip. Nevertheless mankind are not passing unharmed through this opposition between their dogmas and their humanity. It is a very serious thing that men should throw the sanctions of sentiment and piety around deified reflections of that inorganic world which it were man's real religion to master, and make into his own human image and likeness. These ancient 'religions' have adopted many humane sentiments, some of them even patronise human life and its joys; but they never make humanity the main thing, the great religious force and director: all that immense power of piety, devotion, enthusiasm, which together make religion, are still on the side of the inorganic universe and its traditional phantasms.

We may then answer our question, 'What is the Religion of Humanity,' by saying, it is a religion which transfers to the moral and intellectual forces which are mastering nature all the piety that now worships personifications of the obstructions mastered. There is need that our sentiment and our work should be on the same side in this great struggle of humanity with mountain and desert, volcano and flood. It is a grievous anomaly to worship the mountain-god

while we tunnel the mountain, and praise the lightning-god while we raise a rod to divert his bolt. That kind of homage and praise are due to skill and to science, and hard-handed labour; not to the wild powers they are levelling and curbing for us. It may be said that such adorations of natural forces do no harm; they are directed to powers that cannot hear or heed them. But there is harm done when the finest seed are sown on clouds, instead of in a soil where they might bear fruit. We can little dream what a reinforcement of the human work of the world it would be if all the devotion and wealth lavished on deities and dogmas were directed to aid and animate man in his tremendous task of humanising his world.

But, it may be asked, and it is the anxious question of many hearts, is there no God of nature, no God in nature? Is there no power above ourselves—or power not ourselves—that makes for righteousness? And, if there be none, are we not orphans? Are we not robbed of all heart and hope in our struggle with earthly evil, having no certainty of ultimate success?

The Religion of Humanity answers, Yes, there is a God in nature, a God and ruler of nature; but that divine parent is nowhere discoverable except in

the spirit of humanity. You may cry for help to glowing suns and circling stars, to gravitation and electricity, to ocean and sky, or to all of them together ; but no help or ray of pity will you get until you have turned to lean on the heart and arm of human love and strength. For these *are* the answers of the universe to your cry. The proof of love in nature outside you is a loving heart inside you. Nature has laboured through untold ages to give you that heart to rest upon, that hand to clasp yours. We must credit nature with what has come out of it. Wild as are the forces around us, terrible as is this vast machinery roaring around us,—amid which we move like wondering children, or at some misstep of ignorance are caught up and crushed,—we may still say that out of it all was evolved the thinker to warn us, the man of skill to devise good for us, the man of science to show us the safe path, the physician to heal us, the artist to beguile us on the way, the poet to cheer us ; the friend, the lover, the father, the mother, who try to guard us, or, if we are wounded, seek to heal our wounds. All these were evolved out of nature. They show us nature pointing us to humanity,—to humanity, the crown and hope of nature's own self, the power which nature has created for its own deliverance,—in distrusting which we distrust the only God in nature, the God manifest within us, and in the sweet humanities around us.

Therefore must we love nature. As we go forth to contend against its inorganic forces, we recognise that our contest with nature is a friendly contest, for deliverance of that inanimate world itself which suffers the pains of labour until now, awaiting its adoption into the liberty of the sons of God: it is the steadfast transfiguration of nature in a light higher than any dawn, a grandeur which its beauties but faintly hint and symbolize.

In these days when, under the fierce light that beats upon the throne of superstition, the ancient images are falling from many household shrines,—images which, however low their origin, have been hallowed by the tender pieties and associations twining around them,—there is a pathetic cry on the air. The fine gold has waxed dim! the white statues are crumbling! ‘Give us back our gods!’ cried the pagans of old when the Christians shattered the fair idols of Europe; ‘Give us back our Saints, our Blessed Mother,’ cried the Catholics when Protestantism broke up the altars; ‘Give us back our Faith, our divine Lord,’ cry Protestant hearts in turn. But know they not why these perished and can never return? They could not do the work of humanity; they could not hear, they could not heed the cry of hearts that needed something more than statues, pictures, or sentimental beliefs.

The other day we heard of the Holy Virgin appearing in Ireland. The press even sent reporters who gathered detailed information about the light that was seen, and Mary, Joseph and John in the midst. But in their descent these heavenly beings did not bring bread to save one starving Irish family. That was left to Saint America who came over with a loaded ship, and is now doing for poor human beings what the Virgin Mary does only for her own altars and priests.

The heretic is not heartless because he cannot be silenced by the piteous appeal of piety that its idols and illusions shall be spared. He is listening to a more sorrowful cry than that; it comes from the great deeps of human agony, want, evil, despair; it is a cry ever burthening the air, but never heeded by the idols which have neither eye, ear, heart, nor hand. How sweet those idols seem to those who decorate them, cover them with devotion, heap on them their gold, their love, and bathe them with their tears; even so cruel they seem to one who knows that it is for want of just that devotion that millions of human beings find this world a hell.

Poor Humanity, how is it tortured even by those abstract dogmas, which inheriting the sway of demons, have power to pervert the human heart; to make it

act cruelly, unrelentingly, like the brutal elements they embody in words and images! I picture Humanity as poor Juliet in her agony. There she is, the beautiful soul, the perfect heart, the supremest thing in nature! Around her an environment of persons who represent the wild elements. The vindictive feud of Montague and Capulet, cruel as venom of serpents; parents who have taken peacock pomp into their breast instead of hearts; a silly ignorant nurse. They all represent the inorganic elements surviving in human nature, pride, ignorance, vengeance; these not hidden there as shameful things but consecrated as duty and dignity: this is the lot with which that heaven, to which Juliet has prayed all her life, has surrounded her gentle soul in its sore need!

Is there no pity sitting in the clouds,
That sees into the bottom of my grief?
O, sweet my mother, cast me not away!

But the mother, slave of her lord, has gone. Then once more to the clouds Juliet cries, 'O God!' No answer. The poor ignorant nurse alone is left her.

O nurse! how shall this be prevented?
My husband is on earth, my faith in heaven;
How shall that faith return again to earth,
Unless that husband send it me from heaven
By leaving earth?—comfort me, counsel me.—
Alack, alack, that Heaven should practice stratagems
Upon so soft a subject as myself!

Alas, Juliet finds that heaven is against her. She thinks how different it would be if Romeo were only able to leave earth and be god for a time. She meets religion presently: the sympathetic, helpful friar, is a disguise for the Religion of Humanity. For this friar is a true holy father where the lordly father had failed; he does not point Juliet or Romeo to heaven nor bid them pray, sing, or confess. When Romeo has slain one in his desperation, the friar gets him off to a safe place. He has drugs, and secret schemes, by which he tries hard to outwit the inorganic tempers that are crushing the lovers. He fails in the end; but that torch he holds over the dead faces of those he sought to save, is the torch of the true Religion, burning through a midnight of tragedies on to the hour that shall raise its light to be a flaming dawn.

Do you ask what tidings more glad can the Religion of Humanity bring to hearts in their agony, the agony caused by the discord, pride, ungentleness of spirit in men and women? Why, it brings hope of a time when hearts will not be proud and harsh, because religion will have concentrated all its power of renovation upon them. Religion will recall its protecting forces from the nature-gods and gather them all around human beings, to love them, help them, save them; so that when Juliet cries 'O God!' her father shall be at hand, her mother shall serve her

as if Juliet were the one Holy Virgin, so that no human being shall ever be brought up to fancy that there is any higher religion than to promote human happiness, purity, and wisdom.

The religion of humanity thus has its meaning and promise for the individual heart, for the soul with its own grief, in that it brings back piety from its wanderings to seek out and love the divine in every heart; but it also holds out to the world at large a hope unknown to any theology, the promise of a perfectly developed Humanity implying a perfect world. For this religion shows mankind to be the creator, and a loving creator; whose eternal design is not the salvation of certain elect ones, of those only after they are dead, and from evils that do not exist, but the salvation of all, of the living, from actual evils. It reveals to each generation that it is not only the heir of all the ages, but the incarnation of their summed-up powers; that this trust bequeathed from all preceding generations, represents not only man in the past, but all that preceded man; every bird that ever sang to its mate, every tiger that ever defended its young; nay, every atom that ever clung to its fellow-atom amid the star-mist, in the first throb of that spirit of life which has climbed on to the splendour of reason and glory of a heart, beside which the sun and moon are mere sparks.

This is the Holy Mother. This is the ever-blessed unwearied Madonna bearing the man-child in her arms. A legend runs that when Mary was travelling in Egypt, and her arm failed from long bearing her babe, a third hand grew out to sustain Jesus : even so is it with the maternal spirit which is caring for the world, watching over human hearts, bearing it onward. Does the old support fail? lo, another ! Already our dear Mother is many-handed. Wherever are love, thought, sympathy, and a devotion to truth and right, there are her sustaining arms. Her unwearied watch is with the student seeking truth and wisdom, with the reformer, the philanthropist, the physician, the man of science, the poet, the artist. Wherever there is one who is contriving a new benefit for the earth, some relief from evil, some mitigation of pain, some beauty which shall soothe and delight earth's way-worn pilgrims, some sweet song to beguile sorrow and pain into self-forgetfulness, win hearts from vain regrets, cast a sunbeam into the darkened breast of guilt, proffer a draught of Lethe to the lips of Despair and Death, there is our divine Father, and there our heavenly Mother, majestic and beautiful : nature is glorified in them : with them are the sign and seal by which all nature, however wild, is for ever bound to follow and obey their eternal attraction.

This Religion of Humanity therefore has not the

disadvantages of some new sect or new idea: it not only exists already, but it has existed for ages. I believe it to be the only religion that does really exist, and that alone which the great teachers have taught.

It is a very common experience with those who abandon an established church, sect, or creed, that they never cease to honour the great teacher said to have founded that church or creed. Most free-thinkers feel that they love Christ much more genuinely than Christians. The same phenomenon appears throughout the world. Wherever there is a protestant movement we hear the cries, 'Not Buddhism but Buddha!' 'Not Confucianism but Confucius!' 'Not Christianity but Christ!' It is not difficult to see why we love the teacher while opposing the system named after him. The teacher represented the religion of humanity. No matter what he taught, he was another step; he sought to remove some evil or error, and added something to the growing life of the world. But the system which has borrowed his good name is invariably one based on that which he resisted. Every so-called religion is a new edition of the old nature-worship: it is a system trying to sanction its power with the prestige of a breaker of systems. But such power can never be built up except by reversing

the freedom and humanity of the system-breaker, because it must rule by bribe and menace. There never was a prophet who did not teach love, forgiveness, gentleness; there never was a system which did not make its prophet teach wrath, expiation, satisfaction. 'Love your enemies,' says the prophet as he was; 'Depart into fire,' says the prophet as the system makes him.

As time goes on this anomaly is seen. The human religion is at work; people grow ashamed of their dogmas; they more and more dwell on the sweet parables, the kindly deeds, the human side of their prophet; they try to hide and forget the awful character which the system assigns him. But it is impossible: that awful character is an old rôle in the drama of the gods; Jehovah had to play it, and Jove, and Jesus; every successful name has to be put to that part if a creed is to survive after it is unloved and unbelieved. So, steadily, as knowledge and liberty advance must such systems crumble and their idols follow them; when their supernatural terrors have become grotesque and their celestial promises antiquated, there are left only the vulgar fears and interests to which an existing order appeals, and from that moment the familiar face of selfishness is seen beneath the mask of piety. Such is the process now going on;

by it true and faithul hearts are hourly set free ; and there is fair prospect of seeing a swiftly-growing and expanding spiritual union among the really religious, though the discovery that what each sincerely loves in his prophet his seeming opponent loves equally ; and what he discards is that which none can love, though it may be tolerated. No man loves Jesus for his miracles : no heart responds to his curse on a figtree ; none rejoices in his formula for cursing the goats at the last day. The Jesus beloved is he who spoke of the forgiven prodigal, who wept tears over his dead friend, knew the scripture of the lilies and the waving corn, promised peace, and gave men rest in the faith that even as they forgave the trespasses of men all the more would the divine love forgive them. That is the Jesus really beloved by the sincere and lowly hearts that are not concerned in Christianity as a politic system ; and they do not love him more than those called 'infidels.'

There is one belief concerning Christ in which all sects, churches, Secularists, Theists, Atheists agree : they all agree that he was a man. Some believe he was a God-man, others a miraculous man ; all agree that he was a man. That then is the only doctrine that can be pronounced literally Catholic, that is universal. And as the definition of a man grows

truer, and as more and more mankind come to feel how dependent they are for all advancement upon the fidelity and wisdom of great and good men, it will not be thought derogatory to Jesus that he should be called a man. But it will be found derogatory to connect him with the thundergods of primitive ages. It will be resented more and more as a lowering of his goodness and greatness to call him the incarnation of Jehovah, whose biblical record is one of wrath, injustice and cruelty. As Jove and Jehovah have died of inhumanity, so will the Doomsday Christ pass out of human love and belief. It will be realised that the whole thought and work of Jesus was to abolish that system of belief which Jehovah represented, and all the gods like unto him. Those personifications of crude, cruel nature, and Jesus representing the love and morality which soften and subdue nature, are practically opposite principles, and their necessary combat makes all the serious controversies of our time.

When the orthodox talk of God becoming man, we have only to say,—Let him be a real man and we can believe on him. Remove from him the theologic costume of miracle, of unforgiving last day wrath, of ceremonial and ritual preserved from the ancient worship of the elements by cowed and terrified barbarians ; give us the great heart and brain, the real

man as he was, ally him with the grand work of humanity on earth, unite him with his true brothers, his peers of every age and race, and be sure there will be no heart on earth which shall fail to surround him with love and homage !

Already there are signs that this is the way Christianity is tending. The character of its defence has completely changed. We no longer hear its defenders resting it upon miracles or upon Judaic history, but upon the morality and the humanities they believe bound up with it. They plead for the social and domestic virtues, and say that to the masses these rest upon Christianity. That is a good sign. It is necessary to prove to them that Christianity does not come into this moral tribunal with clean hands ; that it carries into innumerable homes a book containing cruelties and obscenities, as God's word ; that it propagates superstition, and teaches man to rest for safety upon metaphysical dogmas rather than righteousness : but, while maintaining this, we may gladly recognise the happy change by which the dogmas are being steadily overlaid by considerations of practical virtue. This I believe will go on until out of these transitional controversies shall emerge the full-formed religion of Humanity, to be loved and honoured of all, and to include all races in a fraternal competition

to promote the health, happiness, and virtue of the family of man. Christian apostles felt and foresaw this. 'Be not deceived,' cried one, 'he who doeth righteousness is righteous.' Said another, 'Pure religion and undefiled is to visit the widow and the fatherless in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted by the world.' A third added, 'Love is the fulfilling of the Law.' Equally was this the testimony of Zoroaster, of Buddha, of Confucius. In this religion have the prophets and sages lived and died; and this will remain for ever the religion of the faithful and true, the helpful and the just, when all our controversies have died away. When the dogmatic systems have taken their place among other relics of antiquated philosophy, there will still be growing and expanding in the earth the religion of humanity,—the hatred of pain, which superstition worshipped; hatred of all sacrifice of human welfare; passionate horror of all evil, and that which inflicts suffering; passionate love of all that promotes welfare; concentration of all powers within and without to the humanisation of man and his world; and the immortal hope that Humanity will survive for ever, conquer all evil, attain perfect knowledge and joy. This religion will flourish over the graves of all idols and creeds,—and this is the Religion of Humanity.

SOUTH PLACE CHAPEL.

WORKS TO BE OBTAINED IN THE LIBRARY.

BY M. D. CONWAY, M.A.

	Prices.
	<i>s. d.</i>
The Sacred Anthology: a Book of Ethnical Scriptures	10 0
The Earthward Pilgrimage	5 0
Do. do.	2 6
Republican Superstitions	2 6
Christianity	1 6
Human Sacrifices in England	1 0
Sterling and Maurice... ..	0 2
Intellectual Suicide	0 2
The First Love again... ..	0 2
Our Cause and its Accusers... ..	0 1
Alcestis in England	0 2
Unbelief: its nature, cause, and cure	0 2
Entering Society	0 2
The Religion of Children	0 2
What is Religion?	0 2
Atheism: a Spectre	0 2
The Criminal's Ascension	0 2
Idols and Ideals (including the Essay on Christianity), 350 pages	6 0

Members of the Congregation can obtain this Work in the Library at 5s.

BY A. J. ELLIS, B.A., F.R.S., &c., &c.

Salvation	0 2
Truth	0 2
Speculation	0 2
Duty	0 2
The Dyer's Hand	0 2

New Work by Mr. CONWAY—"A Necklace of Stories," illustrated by W. J. HENNESSY, is now ready. Price 6s.

Mr. ALEXANDER J. ELLIS's Discourses:—"Salvation:" "Truth:" "Speculation:" "Duty:" and "The Dyer's Hand. Bound in 1 Vol., price 1s.

Mr. CONWAY's "Demonology and Devil-lore." Second edition, revised and enlarged, 2 vols, illustrated. 28s. Members of the Congregation may obtain this work in the Library at 23s. 4d.