

CT 22

THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY

ON

“MAN, THE ONLY REVELATION OF GOD.”

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

OCTOBER 6TH, 1872.

[From the EASTERN POST, October 11th, 1872.]

Last Sunday, at St. George's Hall, Mr Voysey took for his text Psalms, xvii., 15. “As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness.”

In our meditations on the subject of Divine Revelation, he said, we have arrived at a point where it will be necessary to meet the objections of our opponents. We have come to the conclusion that, in the ordinary popular sense of the word revelation, God has made no such revelation to men. Never has he issued or sanctioned with His Divine authority a book, or church, or creed, which is absolutely infallible. All productions assumed to be such bear the plainest marks of human error and deficiency. But while we have stated this conviction over and over again, we have at the same time asserted that man is capable of discovering, and has actually discovered, some true knowledge of God.

We do not deny that this small portion of truth may be held with a great admixture of error, and at its very best can only be an approximation to the absolute truth—a very short step, as it were, in the right direction. We still confess our deep ignorance, **we still profess ourselves to be only learners, and we are prepared**

to unlearn our errors, one by one, as they may be detected. Now to those who already firmly believe in what I might call the mere benevolence of the Great Spirit towards his creatures, this position of comparative uncertainty is not in the least degree distressing or paralysing. They know they are for ever safe in the hands of a righteous God, and they are satisfied with what little they know, so long as they are in the right way of learning more, and taking every means for their own enlightenment, which is sanctioned by their reason and conscience. But, on the other hand, those who have been accustomed to lean on an external authority, on Bible, on Church, or on Priest, are seriously disturbed by even a passing thought that their notions about God may be false. The bare idea of being left to their own consciousness for all their knowledge of God fills them with alarm, as when a lame man is suddenly bereft of his crutches, or one who cannot swim is thrown into the sea.

Never having walked without a crutch himself, and being surrounded by thousands in the same position, the believer in objective revelation looks upon the crutch as a part of nature, a thing indispensable to human welfare, and he turns round upon us who have cast away our crutches with no little angry scorn, as if we were monsters, and as unfit any longer for human society. And if he attempt to reason with us it is on this wise—"Man," he says, "is by nature constituted to lean on an external authority, and that authority we have, without a shade of doubt, in the Bible and in the Church. Your religion, on the other hand, is absolutely without any foundation but the imaginings and fancies of your own brains. You would have me give up these long tried and trusty supports, and depend alone upon my own fallible consciousness. My 'heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked,' as the Bible tells me, and I should be safer without any religion at all, than with one based on the sandy and treacherous foundation of my own misguided reason and corrupt heart."

Our best answer to this will be: (1.) The religion which you now accept on an external authority had for its origin nothing else in the world than this human consciousness which you now despise. Place all the religions of the world in their chronological order,

and you will find that each one is the result of the revolt of independent thought against the authority of the religion which preceded it. Take the greatest teachers of religion and morality and you will find them all in a position of greater or less hostility to the age in which they appeared. They each and all began by shaking off the shackles of existing authority, and setting up above it the conclusions of their own consciousness. They simply saw the defects in the systems under which they had been brought up, and they openly pointed them out to their contemporaries.

(2.) Our next reply to the objection is—At all events we cannot any longer abide by your revelation, for we have discovered errors in it; to our minds it represents God in an unworthy and even in a degraded aspect, and whether our own conclusions about him are absolutely true or not, we cannot hold any conclusions which we have discovered to be false, and which seem to us derogatory of His character. At our very worst we are better off than we were before. If we had no light at all, it would be better than being ensnared into the bogs and fens by the treacherous Will-o'-the-Wisp.

(3.) But thirdly, we will tell you how our conceptions of God are determined, in the first instance, how they are sustained, and how they can be corrected and improved. Of God's nature as spirit, we do not propose to know anything more than that He is not corporeal, nor material, for these conditions would involve dimension, weight and locality, any one of which is inherently antagonistic to our natural idea of the Divine Being. Of God's mode of contact with the outward and visible universe we also know nothing, but are forced to adopt the more reasonable of two alternatives, either that he pervades all space and is immanent in all matter, or else that He is limited in space, that in some place He is, and in another place He is not. Of His general benevolence we must admit there are some tokens in this little earth of ours, seeing that joy greatly preponderates over misery; but if the Divine character were to be only measured by this test, we should be forced to admit that His benevolence was not by any means universal or constant; that His tender mercies are not over all His works and that He failed in many striking instances to give joy to His creatures. We turn elsewhere for instruction as to the moral

character of God. We look at man, we examine ourselves. In relation to puzzling problems in the outer world we feel the necessity for faith and patience towards God, such as our children have to exercise towards even the most loving parents. So for a time at least we can put these questions on one side without forgetting that they have been raised and must be answered. Meanwhile we have been watching ourselves and observing the activity of a principle or faculty within us which seldom slumbers, and by which we distinguish between right and wrong; though we confess that our discernment is not always infallible, yet the voice of conscience is always supreme, calling us invariably to do what our judgment believes to be right, and commending us only when we have done what seemed right or have tried to do it. We discover two sides or aspects of our nature, a better and a worse, and in our very souls we reverence the better and deplore or despise the worse. This reverence for goodness as goodness is universal in man, differing only in degree in proportion as different men have higher or lower conceptions of what goodness is. But the verdict of humanity has long been passed that morality, justice, love, righteousness, goodness, call it what you will, is the best and highest in man, and that the most righteous or most loving man is also the noblest. From this we rise by one step into a conception of God's moral attributes. Without daring for one moment to compare the infinite goodness of the great God with the finite goodness of the noblest of man, we simply say—and we say it with undaunted belief in its power to destroy every false religion under Heaven—"God must be at least as good as the noblest of men." What the man would not do in his best estate that God would not do. What a holy man believes to be wrong in himself or his fellows must be equally wrong in God. We cannot any longer accept as a God one whose moral principles are below those of his own finite creatures. We refuse to admit the existence of a God who is under no moral obligations to them.

If this be not surer ground to go upon than that of any inflexible and petrified Bible or Creed, I leave the Christians themselves to judge. It may seem *prima facie* unstable, but humanity is firmer than any of the works or words of men. Mankind itself is the ever expanding Bible on which the Divine Revelation is being

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written. Men turn to truth and righteousness as the needle to the pole, and in spite of all surrounding uproar and confusion of tongues, the heart of man is heard to day singing Hymns of Praise more sublime than were ever heard before, his soul is bigger with great thoughts of God's wondrous love, and his conscience in the main is more sensitive to the calls of a lofty obedience. Man as a race is better to day than man ever was before ; and inevitably he is being rewarded by gaining a purer and loftier religion. He has wrought with more toil and love for his afflicted brother, and the New Temple with its sublimer worship stands open before him.

But it is the old old story. Every religion in the days of its youth was the immediate result of some previous progress in human morality. Take Christianity to witness what I say. The doctrines of the Trinity, incarnation, atonement, the holy comforter, the forgiveness of sin, and the eternal happiness of the redeemed, all had once a relatively true and good sense, inasmuch as each was an improvement on something which it displaced, and it was in fact the result of humanizing a conception which before had been brutal and savage. And if you want more proof that the real origin of religious belief is the reverence for human goodness, take not the mere Creed of Christendom, but take to witness the cherished belief of its heart. The supreme God of its Creeds, called profanely God the Father, is in reality a stern, cruel, implacable tormentor of men, the fiend who will have blood to pacify his anger, the scourge of nine-tenths of the human race whose savage vengeance never flags, and whose burning wrath never cools—this so-called God, where is he in the hearts of Christian men and women ? To the credit of our race, such a God has been banished long ago from the affections of men ; almost from the very cradle of Christianity the followers of Jesus drove that horrid spectre from their minds, and clustered lovingly round the feet of a poor Galilæan peasant because he was a good man. They were right and Christendom is nobly right to day, to say we will have Jesus for our God, our one supreme, our all in all because he was a perfect man, rather than worship that ferocious monster. At all events they are right to make such a choice between making a God of that noble fellow-creature and worshipping

that hideous revolting and fiendish spectre which the creeds firstname. Rightly have they dropped such an image out of their souls' thoughts, and enthroned the Nazarene. But they ought to remember why they worship this man as God. Certainly not because it was said that he was God, but because they believed him to be perfect man. They first admired and loved him for his goodness, and then they made him Divine, and robed him in all the splendours of heavenly royalty out of their gratitude for his human love. To those then who are really Christians and really religious, we come on their own ground, and say, if it is human goodness you really worship, we can shew you plenty of that quite equal to Christ's, and some even better still. We can show you at least the same thing free from some of his personal errors. His conceptions of God we declare to be in some respects deeply inferior to ours. His attitude to those who disagreed with him or denied his supremacy, we have now discovered to be wrong. There was often a vindictive threatening tone about his discourses, which none of his disciples now-a-days would think it right to imitate. Blemishes such as these are not much certainly, but they are enough to show that 1800 years have made a difference in the moral stature of mankind, and that it is a mistake any longer to limit the moral attributes of God to the imperfect exhibition of them by even the noblest of men.

Our entreaty to the Christians, is "Give up your worship of Jesus as a God, and come and fall down before the throne of the Great Spirit, for we have found a God more noble than yours. In almost every particular the conceptions which we have of God are more exalted and pure than any which have gone before it. They are attained in the same way as all other conceptions were, viz., by the gradual advance in the moral and intellectual nature of man. We do not say, and we do not mean, that we are better men and women than you, and therefore we have a higher faith than yours. But we do say that your faith was made to correspond with a lower standard of humanity than is to be found to day, and you are still clinging to it. Our faith is nobler than yours because we have allowed ourselves to be taught by the moral progress of our own times, and by the highest instincts of our souls. Your religion is an anachronism; your hearts and lives are infinitely better than

your creed. Take but one or two doctrines. Have you ever once in your life acted so tyrannically, selfishly, and exactly to your neighbour as your God is represented as acting in the matter of the atonement. Have you ever once treated your own child as He is represented as treating His? And in the matter of punishment or even revenge, have you ever been so cruel as to keep a dog or a cat in torment for a week, for a day, for an hour, out of sheer spite and vengeance? No! Don't tell us then that you believe in that infernal picture of God tormenting the damned, or that you morally approve of the sentences passed by your Bible and Creeds on those who reject your Saviour. You surely cannot impute to your favourite God—to your own Jesus who you say is to be presiding judge at the last—a cruelty, ferocity, unmerciful severity of which you yourself are absolutely incapable! No indeed! Then, if not, you must perceive that the only external Revelation worth trusting to is to be found in the lives, aspirations, and instincts of the very best hearted men, and in them alone, and that they will only serve you for a time until the goodness of their hearts and lives is again surpassed. More important still, it will not serve you at all, but as you are good at heart yourselves. I see in this dispensation a most wonderfully wise order of providence. This is a dispensation of Divine silence. God makes no visible sign—He utters no audible voice. He knows that he has given to us a nature which will never rest until it has found Him, and the path by which He has set us to walk, wherein we may find Him is none other than the broad and common road of duty and brotherly love. Here we are, all brought together in many relations, that we may discover and then fulfil our several duties to each other, and learn the highest lessons of charity and self-sacrifice. By doing this and by learning these lessons we see that we raise ourselves. We thereby get an insight into true greatness, into real wealth, into abiding happiness. We thus attain the ends for which we were here placed, first, the promotion of each other's well-being; next, the elevation of ourselves by the process. The third result is that by our own constant elevation we are approaching nearer and nearer to true conceptions of God, to a real finding of him and seeing him, as it were, face to face. It ought, I think, to be borne in mind as a

special feature in our movement, one that distinguishes it from orthodox religions on the one hand, and from pure materialism on the other. We believe that the only knowledge of God attainable by man is attainable only by the practice of goodness. A man must know first by his own heart what love is, true, generous, unselfish, brotherly love, before he can put any trust in the love of God, and the more nobly a man endeavours to live, if he be not already the prey of superstition, the more true and noble will be his conceptions of God. We preach, therefore, that a religion not based upon morality is worthless, and that obedience to conscience and generous instincts must go before faith and worship. The orthodox would fain put the acceptance of dogmas before the common duties of humanity. The materialist would shut his eyes to everything but present obligations; and there is no doubt which is in the right path, and which in the wrong. But we do not see the necessity for ignoring the religious element because we insist on the moral as its foundation.

For to our moral instincts and our attainment of the knowledge of goodness we must add our own deep and earnest aspirations as witnesses of what God really is. I speak now not for myself only, but for all religious souls. While my words convey to my fellow-men only the idea that my God is a magnified man, the image of God in my soul is utterly different, infinitely more lofty, but it is a conception for which I have no language. I cannot put this sublime feeling of the grandeur of God into words; my imagination draws pictures which no brush could paint, and in the depths of my soul I am at length free from anthropomorphism; but out of that sanctuary I cannot pass without encumbering myself with the fetters of human thought and language. It is ever so when I meditate on the goodness of God, something indescribably higher than those words express rises to my soul's vision, including all that I could possibly describe, but a thousandfold more. And so it is that every spoken truth, every tale of human virtue, courage, generosity, justice, and love, lights up the innermost shrine where He dwells, and makes me feel how intensely real He is, and how unutterably more glorious in majesty and in goodness than can ever be represented by the most glowing colours of human eloquence. No words so well express this possession of soul by the Divine presence and its loftiest aspirations as those which I took for my text—"As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness, and I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness."