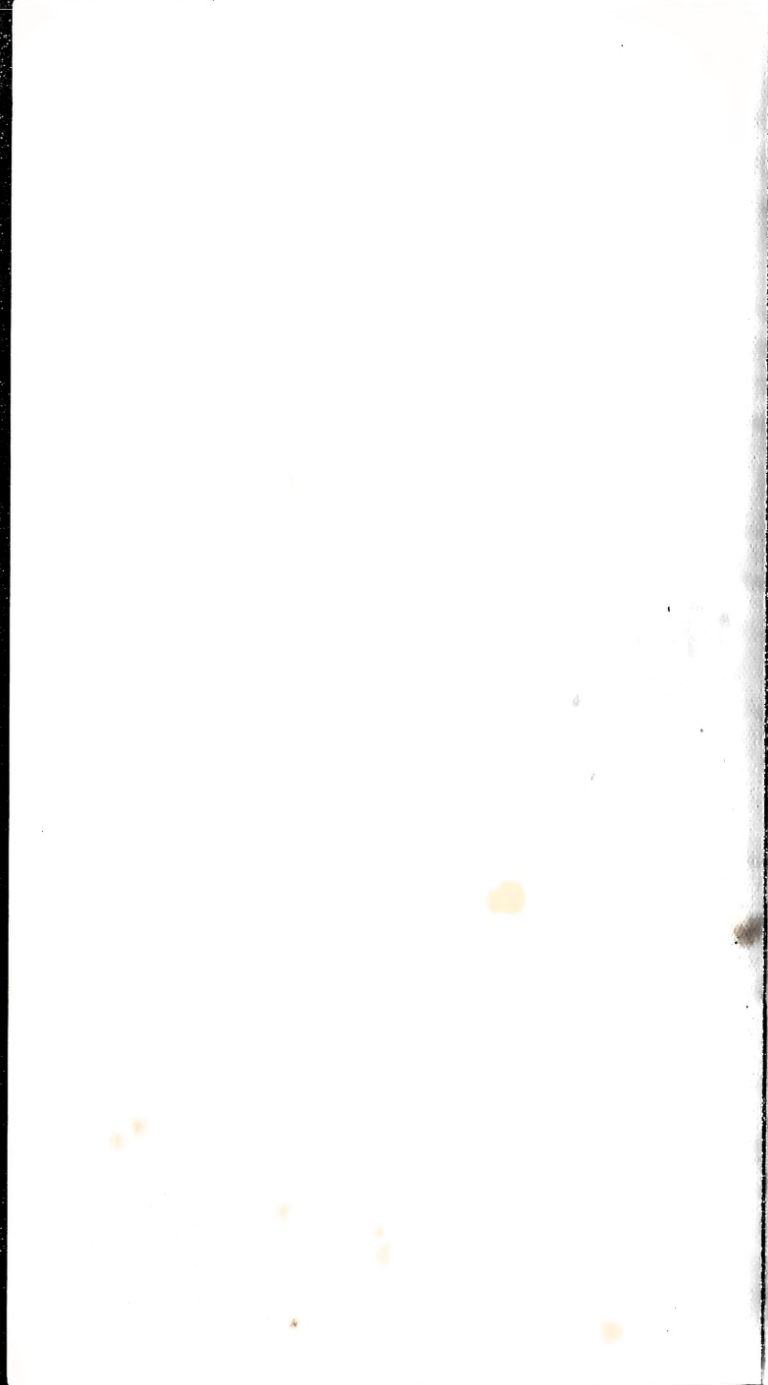


122

# THE HERETICS.

Mr. BERNARD SHAW.

MAY 29, 1911.



*From "Cambridge Daily News," May 30, 1911.*

## "THE RELIGION OF THE FUTURE."

### Mr. Bernard Shaw on Heresy.

The Victoria Assembly Rooms, Cambridge, were crowded on Monday evening, when Mr. G. B. Shaw attended a meeting of the Heretics Society and delivered an address on "The Religion of the Future." In the audience were to be seen a large number of the society's distinguished body of honorary members. Mr. F. M. Cornford, the chairman, introduced Mr. Bernard Shaw as a protagonist of the Heretical movement, and one who never scrupled to tell his audience exactly what his opinions might be on religious questions.

#### THE HERETIC AND HIS BUSINESS.

Mr. Shaw began by declaring that his subject was really a serious one, and that Heretics did not matter with regard to it—the people who really mattered were orthodox people. He likened a Heretic to a man with a mechanical genius who began tinkering with a bicycle or a motor car and made it something different from what the manufacturer had made it. Such a man was a Heretic in mechanics; he had a mind and a genius which enabled him to choose for himself. If he had a bad motor car he made a good one of it—he made it to suit himself. The Heretic was a sort of person who, no matter what religion was supplied at the shop—by which he meant the nearest church—he would tinker at it until he made it what he thought it should be. The Heretic was really a man with a home-made religion, and if a man could make a religion for himself at home they need not bother about him—he would make his religion to suit himself. What they wanted to trouble about was the great mass of people who took religion as they found it—as they got it at the shop. What the Heretics had to do was to prepare a ready-made religion for the next generation for the people who had to accept religion as it came. It was of the most enormous importance for any community what ready-made article they were supplying in their schools and churches, as a religion, to the community. Therefore, when he was dealing with the religion of the future,

let them remember that he was not dealing with what the Heretics of the next generation would be talking about. They would be discussing and criticising whatever the religion was, and the great mass of the people would be outside and would have a ready-made religion and would obey laws founded on that religion; many of them founded more or less on the idea that certain courses of conduct were more or less displeasing to whatever force might be moving the world—the mainspring which at present we call God, and might call other names in future—at any rate the driving force.

#### AN UNDERSTANDABLE GOD.

Mr. Shaw went on to argue that if they wanted to get any system of this kind they must really get some sort of God whom they could understand. It was no use falling back on the old evasion and saying that God is beyond our comprehension. The man who said he believed in God and did not understand God had much better turn a good, practical Atheist at once. Better Atheist than Agnostic, said Mr. Shaw: an Agnostic is only an Atheist without the courage of his opinions. The actual, practical use they could make of their God was that they could establish laws and morality which they supposed to be the will of God, and if they did not understand God's purpose they could not do anything of the kind. Therefore they found a large number of people in the country not understanding God who were practically atheists. It was surprising how little they heard of the name of God outside of their places of worship. They hardly ever heard the name of God mentioned in a court of justice, except, perhaps, when a witness was going through the preliminary form of committing perjury, or when the judge had put on the black cap and was sentencing some unhappy wretch to death. In Parliament they never heard about it at all. He did not know whether they ever heard about it in Cambridge, but they would notice that the mention of God had gone completely out of fashion, and that if the name of God was mentioned it was in a perfunctory sort of way, and seemed to come as a sort of shock if the person mentioning it did so in the way of taking the current conception of God seriously. Here in England, Mr. Shaw went on, we had no fundamental religion of our own. Western Europe, of all places in the world, they would say, was, *prima facie*, the place for the birthplace of a modern re-

ligion, yet we had never produced one. We used a sort of oriental religion as the nucleus of our religion—a lot of legends that we must get rid of. The man who believed the story of the Gadarene swine would believe anything, and they must leave him out as a critical force. Also the man who believed the story of Elisha and the bears would worship anything. But they must not leave such people out of account as a practical fact in the universe, because there were the people for whom they wanted to found a religion.

#### INTIMIDATING RELIGIONS.

Religion. Mr Shaw continued, virtually went out with the Middle Ages. If they read through Shakespeare's plays they found a man of very great power and imagination, who evidently had no well-considered views of any kind, who produced a mass of plays in which he set forth his own knowledge of humanity in a very wonderful way, and practically left religion out of account. Then they struck the beginning of a commercial age, an age of people who went to church but who gradually began leaving religion more and more out of their lives and practical affairs. There were, he went on, many people who were made more religious if they had a God who produced frightful calamities. If they studied the proceedings of African, and, he had no doubt, European Kings, they would find the same thing. In order, however, not to be personal, he would keep to the African potentates as much as possible. (Laughter.) In Africa they had found it generally necessary, when building their palaces, to bury several people alive and to commit a great number of cruel and horrible murders. This was to create an impression on the tribe and show their majesty and greatness. Mr. Shaw went on to allude to the Mahometan religion, and said that Mahomet had found it necessary to describe the Judgment Day in most revolting and disgusting terms—to introduce intimidation into religion in order to impress the wild and warlike Arabs. The man of genius, he remarked, found it difficult to make people understand him. "I know this," said Mr Shaw, with a smile, "for I am by profession a man of genius." (Laughter and applause.) The difference between a man of genius and the ordinary man, he continued, was that the man of genius perceived the importance of things. There were a great number of people who did not understand the vital

truths of religion, and so the man of genius had to amuse and frighten them with more or less dreadful things.

#### A SYSTEM OF IDOLATRY.

We had hitherto been governed by a system of idolatry. We made idols of people and resorted to some sort of stage management. Men and women capable of giving orders were taken to the head of affairs—sometimes they took themselves—(laughter)—and we gave them crowns or gold lace on their collars, or a certain kind of hat, and sat them on a particular kind of chair. Those people generally were a sort of second-hand idol—they said, "I am the agent of the will of another idol. I understand his will and hand it on to you." We generally had to give them such a different income from our own that their way of life should be entirely removed from that of the multitude. They had to wash their faces oftener, live in a different kind of house, and it was out of the question that their sons and daughters should marry the son or daughter of a common man. In democracy they were trying to get human nature up to a point at which idolatry no longer appealed to them. They saw that in revolutions, like the French Revolution, democracy went first to the cathedrals and knocked the heads off the idols of stone. Nothing happened. No crash of thunder stunned the universe, the veil of the temple remained intact. Then they went to the palaces and cut off the heads of the idols of flesh and blood. Still nothing happened. Cutting off King Charles' head was a sort of vivisection experiment—a much more justifiable experiment than many that took place to-day, because we learnt something from it. But if Cromwell had not died when he did, if he had lived five or even two years longer he would have been compelled to put the crown on his own head and make himself King Oliver. It was an entire failure trying to make people obey laws in England because they were intelligent laws. The people said they must have a King. And so they took Charles II. and made him King. But democracy was progressing. Take himself, for instance, as a democratic prop. It was no use trying a King on him. It did not impose upon him. He knew that a King was a man; but apparently very few others in the country realised this. He liked and respected kings and judges and bishops as men; but they might just as well give up the robes and aprons so far as he was concerned.

He did not value their opinions on politics or law or religion any more than if they were plain Mr Smith.

#### NATURAL SELECTION.

We were, Mr. Shaw continued, gradually getting more and more rid of our idols, and in the future they would have to put before the people religions that were practical systems, which on the whole they could perceive worked out in practice, instead of resulting in flagrant contradictions as they do at present. People, however, went from one extreme to the other, and when they did so they were apt to throw out the good things with the bad ones, and so they made little progress. The old-fashioned atheist revolted against the idea of an Omnipotent Being being the god of cancer, epilepsy and war, as well as of the good that happened. They could not believe that a God of love could allow such things. And so they seized with avidity upon the idea of natural selection put forward by Charles Darwin. Darwin was not the originator of the idea of evolution—that was long before his time—but he made us familiar with that particular form of evolution known as natural selection. That idea was seized upon with a feeling of relief—relief that the old idea of God was banished from the world. This feeling of relief was so great that for the time it was overlooked what a horrible void had been created in the universe. Natural selection left us in a world which was very largely full of horrors, apparently accounted for by the fact that it was a whole happened by accident. But if there was no purpose or design in the universe the sooner we all cut our throats the better, for it was not much of a place to live in. After remarking that most of the natural selection men of the 19th century were very brilliant, but were cowards, Mr. Shaw said we wanted to get back to men with some belief in the purpose of the universe, with a determination to identify themselves, with it and with the courage that came from that. Coming to his own position, Mr. Shaw said he was, and always had been a mystic. He believed that the universe was being driven by a force that they might call the Life Force. He saw it was performing the miracle of creation, that it had got into the minds of men as what they called their will. They saw people who clearly were carrying out a will not exclusively their own.

#### THE ORIGIN OF EVIL.

To attempt to represent this particular will or power as God—in the former meaning of

the word—was now entirely hopeless; nobody could believe that. In the old days the Christian apologists got out of the difficulty of God as the god of cancer and epilepsy, and all the worst powers that were in one, by believing in God and the devil. They said that when a man did wrong he was possessed by the devil, and when he did right that he was possessed by the grace of God. It was, in fact, the conception of "old Nick." It was a conception of enormous value, for the devil was always represented as a person who could do nothing by himself, and that he had to tempt people to do wrong. He (Mr. Shaw) implored them to believe that, because it helped them a great deal. People always used to assume that the only way in which the devil could carry out his will was by inspiring or tempting people to do what he wanted them to do. Temptation and inspiration meant the same thing exactly as firmness and obstinacy meant the same thing, only people used the one word when they wanted to be complimentary and the other when they wanted to be abusive. Mr. Shaw went on to put forward a conception of God of a somewhat similar nature, as something not possessing hands and brains such as ours, and having therefore to use ours; as having brought us into existence in order to use us, and not being able to work in any other way. If, he said, we conceived God as working in that way and having a tremendous struggle with a great, whirling mass of matter, civilisation meant our moulding this mass to our own purposes and will, and in doing that really moulding to the will of God. If we accepted that conception we could see the limitations of our God, and could even pity Him. He went on to propound the theory of trial and error, and said that they could imagine that something—the Life-Force—beginning in a very blind and feeble way at first, first laboriously, achieving motion, making a little bit of slime to move and then going on through the whole story of evolution, building up and up until at last man was reached. At this point Mr. Shaw remarked that one of the most terrible indictments that could be framed against God was for them to look at themselves in the glass, and, remembering what they did last week, say that God made them. The only excuse was that up to date God had been able to produce nothing better!

#### THE WILL TO GOOD.

They must believe in the Will to Good—it was impossible to regard man as willing his own



destruction. But in that striving after good they were liable to make mistakes, and to let loose instead something that was destructive. He spoke of the typhoid bacillus as one of the failures of the Life Force that we called God, and spoke of that force trying through our brains to discover some method of destroying that malign influence. If they got that conception, he said, they would be able to give an answer to those people who asked for an explanation of the origin of evil. Evil things were things that were made with the object of their doing good, but turned out wrong, and therefore had to be destroyed. The conception he had put forward, he continued, was the most important conception for the religion of the future, because it gave us what we are at present, and gave us courage and self-respect. The world, he said, must consist of people who were happy and at the same time sober. At present the happiness of the world was as the happiness of drunken people. He did not mean that everybody who was happy was like the man who was locked up for being drunk; but the ordinary men or women, even in the politest society, at present were not happy and did not respect themselves and did not exult in their existence until they had had at least a cup of tea. (Laughter.) We had all sorts of factitious aids to life. We were trying to fight off the consciousness of ourselves because we did not see the consciousness of a mission, and finally the consciousness of a magnificent destiny.

#### THE IDEAL OF GOD.

We were, he said, all experiments in the direction of making God. What God was doing was making Himself, getting from being a mere powerless will or force. This force had implanted into our minds the ideal of God. We were not very successful attempts at God so far, but he believed that if they could drive into the heads of men the full consciousness of moral responsibility that came to men with the knowledge that there would never be a God unless we made one—that we are the instruments through which that ideal was trying to make itself a reality—they could work towards that ideal until they got to be supermen, and then super-supermen, and then a world of organisms who had achieved and realised God. They could then dispense with idolatry, intimidation, stimulants, and the nonsense of civilisation, and be a really happy body, with splen-

did hopes and a very general conception of the world they lived in. In the meantime those who had exceptional, expensive education should make it their business to give such ideals to the great mass of people. If they adopted a religion of this kind, with some future in it, he believed that they could at last get the masses to listen, because experience would never contradict it. They would not have people saying that Christianity would not work out in business; they would get a religion that would work out in business, and he believed that instead of its being a lower religion than Christianity, it would be a higher one. Also it would fulfil the condition which he set out at starting—it would be a Western religion, not an Oriental one. Let them make the best religion they could, and no longer go about in the rags and tatters of the East, and then, when the different races of the earth had worked out their own conceptions of religion, those religions might all meet and criticise each other, and end, perhaps, in only one religion, and an inconceivably better religion than they had any conception of. (Applause.)

Mr. Shaw afterwards answered a number of questions. Among them was one asking his conception of Christ. To this he replied that Christ was one of the attempts, one of the failures. A man who said that Christ was the highest was not worth working with. They need not bother about the past. Let the dead past bury the past. The concern of the Heretic was with the future: with the Humanity that is to come.

A hearty vote of thanks to Mr. Shaw terminated the meeting, after which it is pleasant to record that the speaker accepted an invitation to become an honorary member of the society.

From "The Gownsmen," June 3rd.

MR. BERNARD SHAW AS HERETIC.

The enthusiastic audience which crowded to the Victoria Assembly Rooms on Monday is a striking example of the recent triumphs of Heresy in Cambridge, and it may be questioned if there is any living personality besides Mr. Bernard Shaw who could have attracted so distinguished a gathering through the heat of a Tripos afternoon to listen to an address of nearly an hour and a half on "The Future of Religion." It need only be said that nearly all the Honorary Members of the Society were present with their friends, and that some two hundred would-be hearers made application, too late, for the limited number of seats available.

Mr. F. M. Cornford was in the chair, and introduced Mr. Bernard Shaw as a protagonist of Heresy, and one who had been described as without ideals and without hopes. Thus encouraged, Mr. Shaw proceeded to outline the functions of the Heretic, as a reformer of shop-made religion—the religion of the nearest Church. The business of the Heretic is to produce a God that humanity can understand; the expurgated Jehovah of the present, or rather the past generation is an unintelligible monster, whose name could scarcely be mentioned outside places of worship. In Parliament he was not heard of at all, and whether spoken of in Cambridge or not was noticeably out of fashion to-day.

It is a disgraceful state of affairs, said Mr. Shaw, that in England we have no religion of our own, and are forced to form a nucleus for our Faith out of the discarded legends of the East. This orientalism must be abandoned. Not that all would abandon it; the man who could believe in the story of the Gadarene swine could believe anything; the man who refused to smile at the episode of Elisha and his bears could worship anything.

Mr. Shaw, however, avowed a democratic belief in the intelligence of mankind, and proceeded to study the peculiarities of African potentates. Indeed, in order not to be personal, he would confine himself to Africa, as far as possible. The man of genius, he remarked, found it difficult to make people understand him. "I know this," said Mr. Shaw, "for I am

by profession a man of genius." However, at the risk of being misunderstood, he declared that we had hitherto been governed by a system of idolatry, whether by King or God. But worst of all were second-hand idols; idols interpreting the will of other idols. That was the great point about democracy—the education of the people till they should no longer be imposed on by idolatry. Democracy goes first to the Cathedrals, and removes the heads from idols of wood and stone, and then to the palaces to try a sort of vivisection experiment with idols of flesh and blood. Such an experiment we are making in this hall to-day, said Mr. Shaw, and lo! heaven is not falling, the veil of the temple remains intact. Take himself for example, a democrat to the teeth (which, by the way, Mr. Shaw regretting his infirmities for the fray, confessed later were not all his own)—“It is no use trying these kings and gods on *me*; I refuse to be imposed on. And, indeed, with his utter lack of the bump of veneration (a phenologist had told him long ago that *his* bump was a 'ole), Mr. Shaw appeared the very incarnation of the jibbing Zeitgeist—the religion of the future, in fact, must allow for democracy. And here Mr. Shaw came to his own position. He was, and always had been, a mystic. He believed that the Universe was being driven by a force that might be called the Life-Force, ever performing miracles of creation, ever struggling with the blind whirring mass of matter for the civilisation that is Power, ever striving by the method of trial and error, towards the Good—towards the Superman—towards the Super-Superman, Mr. Shaw contrasted this position with that of the Christian apologists, and their God, who had to be excused the responsibility of cancer and epilepsy: excused, too, for Humanity and the present audience, for which Mr. Shaw thoughtfully apologised to the Universe. “You require a lot of apology,” he said, “as a visit to the looking-glass, coupled with reflections on your life during the past week, would speedily show.” The only consolation was that *up to date* God had been able to produce nothing better. And it is ours, said Mr. Shaw, to work for something better, to talk less about the religion of Love (Love is an improper subject) and more about the Religion of Life, and of Work; to create a world that shall know a happiness that need not be the happiness of drunkenness; a world of which we need not be ashamed.

Tremendous applause greeted the sustained eloquence of such incomparably irreverent Blasphemy, and a number of questions followed, to which Mr. Shaw replied. Amongst these was one asking his conception of Christ, and it was answered that Christ, who must of course be regarded as largely mythical, was one of the attempts of the method of trial and error—but, moreover, one of the failures. Whoever held that Christ was the highest was a hopeless pessimist, and not worth working with. As regards death, Mr. Shaw disclaimed any desire for immortality, either for himself or for Mrs. Shaw, whose presence, however (he said) called for restrained language on this topic. For its external expression the religion of the future might have the Symphonies of Beethoven and the plays of G.B.S.

It was pertinently objected by one Heretic that Mr. Shaw ought to endeavour to avoid the unpleasant word God, with its unsatisfactory associations, but Mr. Shaw replied that though he admitted the word was somewhat fatuous, yet "Life-Force" did not please people, and he could find nothing better. For the views of one somewhat boresome speaker Mr. Shaw requested twenty minutes' silent prayer.

A hearty vote of thanks to the lecturer for his unusually outspoken address concluded a very remarkable meeting, after which it is gratifying to record that Mr. Shaw accepted an invitation to become an honorary member of the Society.

C.K.O.

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Extract from "The Christian Commonwealth,"  
June 7th.

. . . . . a crowded and enthusiastic meeting. Like Rev. R. J. Campbell, Mr. Shaw was invited by the Heretics.

Mr. F. M. Cornford, of Trinity College, who presided over the distinguished gathering, remarked that it was a refreshing experience for Cambridge to hear one who never concealed his real attitude towards religious questions; and, thus encouraged, Mr. Shaw embarked on an indictment of the current creeds of the Churches, an avowal of faith in Democracy, an exposition of the Dionysian philosophy of the Superman, the Life-Force, and the Transvaluation of Religious Values.

The business of the Heretic, said Mr. Shaw, is to produce a God whom humanity can under-

stand; his mission is the reformation of shop-made religion—the religion of the nearest church. It is a disgraceful state of affairs that in England we have no religion of our own, but make a shift with the discarded legends of the East. This dressing-up of ourselves in the outworn rags of Orientalism must cease. We must have a religion which we can carry out into our lives, into the world of business, into the work of Democracy. Democracy would not tolerate the insincere idolatry of the present day. Democracy removed the heads from idols of wood and stone; it even made vivisection experiments with idols of flesh and blood. "It is no use trying these Kings and Gods on me," said Mr. Shaw. "I refuse to be imposed on." And he besought the audience to note that though he stood there uttering these blasphemies, yet the heavens had not fallen, and the veil of the temple remained intact! That was the extraordinary thing, and should give courage to others. It is ours, he continued, to strive for nobler ends, even as the Life-Force is striving—to talk less about the Religion of Love ("Love is an improper subject") and more about the Religion of Life and of Work—and by striving to help to create a world of which we need be less ashamed. Let the dead past bury the past; we must look to the future, and cease to assume that the Highest lies behind. Whoever held that Christ was the highest possible was a hopeless pessimist and not worth working with. But though Mr. Shaw considered the figure of Christ as largely mythical, and Christianity to a great extent a failure, yet he begged not to be misunderstood; he did not depreciate the great work which Christ helped on, the work of realising God, of pressing on towards the Good, towards the Superman—towards the Super-Superman.

It was pertinently objected by one Heretic that Mr. Shaw should endeavour to avoid the unpleasant word God, with its unsatisfactory associations. Mr. Shaw admitted the difficulty, but complained that he could do no better. For the views of one somewhat bore-some critic Mr. Shaw requested twenty minutes' silent prayer.

It was a magnificent meeting: Mr. Shaw appeared the very incarnation of G.B.S., gloriously irreverent, transparently sincere, divinely prophetic, and inspiring—the very thing for our older Universities.

Extract from the "Daily Express," May 30th.

"CHRIST A FAILURE."

Extraordinary speech by Mr. G. B. Shaw.  
 . . . in the course of his remarks he said "When Charles Darwin came along with his theory of Natural Selection the people jumped at it and kicked God out of the window."

Extract from "The Academy," June 3rd.

"A DETESTABLE OUTRAGE."

"The question whether Mr. Shaw has beliefs or none may interest an egregious egotist . . . our protest is against the dissemination of poisonous theories amongst young persons . . . but we do not observe that the lecturer was kicked out of the window, or that he was thrown into the Cam . . . unless public attention is called to the vile and blasphemous ravings . . . it is unnecessary to resort to coarse profanity to teach the doctrines of materialism . . . Socialism must now stand forth naked and unshamed as resting for its sanction on flagrant infidelity."

Extract from "Cambridge Review," June 1st.

Mr. Shaw said that the progress of democracy means the destruction of idols, whether idols of wood and stone, or of flesh and blood, whether original or deputy idols. The ordinary man has no time to construct a home-made religion, and it is the business of the leaders or thought to see that the ready-made article they supply him depends for its strength not on idolatry, but on its own inherent reasonableness. It is time that Western civilisation produced a religion of its own, instead of dressing itself in the rags of an Oriental one. Mr. Shaw described the first flush of triumph of Scientific Materialism in the latter half of the last century, and the gradual discovery of the terrific gap which it made in life. We have now discovered again that we cannot do without the conception of Purpose in the Universe; religion consists in identifying ourselves with this Purpose—God or the Life-Force or whatever we choose to call it—and realising that it can only develop itself through us. God, like Man, can only progress by the method of trial and error, which is the explanation of the problem of evil. If we once

realise that God is not omnipotent, but that it is our duty to help him make himself, we shall have a religion again, and that a native-born religion.

It need hardly be said that Mr Shaw's outspoken lecture was of the deepest interest, though numerous criticisms spring readily to the mind. Perhaps some of the large audience found it difficult to believe at first that this mild-looking elderly prophet was really the terrible G.B.S.; but his vigorous outbursts of irreverence and Hibernian wit soon reassured them. We congratulate the Heretics on their skill in capturing this most elusive and most stimulating of modern thinkers.

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Telegraphing to the "Daily Express," in answer to the inquiry whether he had used the expression, "Christ was a failure," Mr. Shaw used these words: "Have not seen report, but the fact you mention is sufficiently obvious in the modern smart sense of the word."

(*"The Academy," June 10th, in answer to rebuke.*)

Replying to the question of a "Manchester Dispatch" representative regarding the opinions of one Dr. Adami on himself, Mr. Shaw said: "I really don't know that I ought to say anything at all upon such a brief message. Look how I was treated over the question, "Is Christ a failure?"

(*The "Birmingham Daily Mail," June 11th, commenting on the "Oxford incident" (sic).*)



