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# REVIVALISM.

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DISCOURSE

DELIVERED BY

MONCURE D. CONWAY.

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SOUTH PLACE CHAPEL, FINSBURY,

SUNDAY, APRIL 4TH, 1875.

PRICE ONE PENNY.



## REVIVALISM.

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FINSBURY, *April 4th*, 1875.

It would seem to be the attitude of wisdom to preserve a cautious respect for popular movements, a respect that holds many of them at a respectful distance, and never plunges into any. 'Tis said the finest wine is pressed from vintages that grow on fields once inundated with lava. So far we must respect the lava. But the wine does very little good to those who lie buried in the lava; and if there be any religious lava bursting out and streaming around to-day its far-off results will benefit only those who keep out of its way. I do not deny that some good has been reaped in the past from periods of religious excitement. They have broken up the old routine; they have set the sultry air in motion; they have ended that stagnation which is death, even though the life they substituted might be of a poor kind. A change in the religious atmosphere is healthy. In the 55th Psalm it is said that the

Israelites forgot God because they had no changes ; and we may still say that where there are no changes the people suffer by moral fossilisation,— and a forgetfulness of the true import of their own dogmas. Travelling recently in Yorkshire I sat in the same carriage with an affable merchant, and our conversation fell on the American revivalists. This merchant did not like them. He said, “I don’t believe in this religious excitement ; I don’t believe it brings men to the Saviour.” I remarked, “And yet, when one comes to think of it, some of the doctrines taught us are of rather an exciting character. You and I are going to Bradford : now if we had this moment a divine revelation that to-night at one o’clock all Bradford was to be burnt up, and everybody in it burnt unless they fled the town, surely that would justify some excitement. It would be only reasonable if, when we arrived there, we should rush through the streets shouting to the people and warning them to leave a place doomed to be burnt. Yet the burning of Bradford and everybody in it were a small catastrophe compared with the everlasting fires into which they are to be plunged unless they are converted. If the common doctrines of God’s wrath and the eternal hell are true, surely we must admit that the American revivalists are right in raising

some excitement about the matter." When I had thus spoken the merchant seemed to disappear into a shell. He looked out of the window and said he thought we should have more snow. But not another word about the revival could I get from him. I suppose that he is the type of millions of well-to-do people who find it an easy part of conventional life to accept a dogmatic system, but never dream of realising its import. They hate to have that which they accept for the sake of ease turned into a source of uneasiness. What such call their religion is simply a decent kind of selfishness. The revivalist is a better type of man. He has at least the sense to see that if his dogma be true it is a tremendous truth, and that to complain of his excitement—to bid him be quiet about it, is as if you asked a mother to be quiet when her child has just fallen overboard.

The main thing about this revival, as it is called, is its character as a confession made by the churches and chapels of their own long incompetency and unreality. A few of us have for some time been telling them that they were mere pretences, that, unconsciously or not, dogmas were on their lips which did not correspond with their easy-going lives, that they had a name to live but were dead. We told them that men who believed the masses

to be pouring into Hell ought never to rest another hour, but run through the streets, and cry aloud, like the prophets of old. When we said it, it was called infidelity; but now these revivalists are proving it. They preach with determination dogmas ordinarily covered over with decorum; and every preacher, every noble lord, who appears on their platform, confesses that hitherto he and his church or chapel have been uttering words without sincerity or heart. Moreover, they have come—these revivalists—among a population of sectarians, each professing to hold the salvation of man above all things, yet each preaching his own church before all. These men have kept their sect in the background, and they have made it evident that the people have got tired of sectarianism, and feel that the question of party is an impertinence in the presence of the overwhelming and eternal issues presented by the fundamental doctrines of each and all. This is a step forward, for if it were not for the partisan spirit engendered by sects and their rivalries, the dogmas themselves could not survive the light of one clear day.

But in itself this revival is an anachronism, a grotesque attempt to galvanise into activity a thing that is dead. That fact is indeed shown in the arts employed for the work. They are arts borrowed

from the stump and the music-hall. The chief revivalist is a man who while preaching among the Germans in Chicago found that they preferred to pass their Sunday evenings in beer gardens where entertainments went on, to coming to his chapel, and he hit on the plan of making his services a rival entertainment. He got a good singer, he borrowed the popular ballads, set them to hymns, told comic stories and Western anecdotes, caught the tricks of the stump-speaker, and succeeded in getting up an amusement for Sundays which did not reach the Germans, but did attract others not so free in their ideas of Sunday. But this plagiarism from the world was a confession that his doctrine could not stand alone. The world had got the start, and he could only move forward by linking his chapel on to it, adopting its minstrelsy and its methods. They have been remarkably impartial in their appropriations of poetic literature. For instance, I once gave a discourse in a Unitarian chapel in America on the text "Nothing but leaves." A lady of liberal views who belonged to the congregation embodied the sentiment of the sermon in a little poem which she sent me. The poem was printed in the Unitarian paper of New York, and now Mr. Sankey is singing it with great unction in Agricul-

tural Hall, without in the least caring about its heretical origin. Nor is his hymn "Nothing but leaves" the only one which heresy has supplied. I only wish there were more of them, for too many are of the silly sentimental order.

However, it is in large part as an amusement that many are attracted to the meetings. Beyond the indifferent crowd which attends out of curiosity, there are thousands who have never been allowed the usual amusements. Nearly all of the dissenting sects denounce theatres, music-halls, balls and other places of entertainment; and there are many thousands of young people who never attended any such place in their lives. A religious service which combines the features of a prayer meeting with those of the concert and the negro entertainment, a sermon which interlards piety with Western slang and newspaper stories, must present a powerful attraction to the starved tastes of those poor victims of modern asceticism. But what moves them is not that gospel which Dr. Dryasdust has for years been preaching to them without quickening their torpid pulses; it is an infusion of life from that very world which the revivalist denounces while he utilises it. It is confessed that his dogmas in themselves have lost their power; that the world has outgrown them; that



something new was needed. Of course it was necessary that the new power borrowed from worldly amusement should be tricked out in some of the cant phrases and current dogmas of the past; but the effect is that of new cloth patched on to old; the patch points out the threadbare condition of the old cloth that had worn out, and needed mending.

And yet among the thousands who are drawn by the novelty of this motley mixture of worldly and pious things how many are the illiterate, the weak minded, the unreasoning, who are brought to the verge of insanity by it! The revivalists claim to have converted vast numbers—no doubt they have. But neither they nor we can yet see the outcome of this excitement any more than they who in a past century preached a crusade against witchcraft could see the tragical result, as we see it now. Unlike the movements of Wesley and Fox, this excitement is against all the learning of this age, it is an appeal to pure ignorance. With it there is kindled a flame that may easily spread to an epidemic fanaticism.

Just consider for a moment the astounding anomaly of thousands of people in a state of furious agitation and anxiety about the salvation of their souls from the wrath of God and the clutch of Satan! This is not in ancient Persia

where Ormuzd was seen every night conquered by a demon of darkness, and conquering him in turn every morning. It is not in China, where lately the goddess of small-pox was worshipped and prayed to preserve the dying emperor, but having failed to do so was flogged and burnt. No, all this outcry to propitiate a barbaric deity is here in the country of progress—in the age of science. Messrs. Moody and Sankey are actually in the same city with Tyndall and Huxley. Their meetings go side by side with those of the Royal Society.

Washington Irving has given us a type of men who are behind the times in Rip Van Winkle. While he slumbered the world went forward many years, and when he awaked and talked as if nothing had happened, it gave rise to amusing situations. He declares himself a loyal subject of King George, ignorant that while he slept America had become a Republic, and he is roughly handled as a traitor. But one can fancy in these days a reverse picture. One can imagine the fable of a man falling asleep amid the civilisation of this period, and waking up to find himself amid the Dark Ages. Instead of railways he would find stage-coaches toiling through marshes; he would be beset by highway-

men at every turn; he would find a group of clergymen burning heretics and witches, and when he expressed his disbelief in witchcraft and claimed the rights of conscience, he too would be burnt, and perhaps he would not object to leaving such a world as that into which he had relapsed. Now if any reasoning and reading man or woman—any believer in the science or student of the philosophy of this age—wishes to pay a visit to the Middle Ages, or even farther back, he or she has only to go to the Agricultural Hall. Recently a Unitarian entered their rooms for private inquiry, and told the chief revivalist that he had difficulties of a scientific kind about the Bible. “Bah!” replied the revivalist, “if you want to save your soul you must never mind what the scientific men say.” That was quite logical, at any rate. This whole revivalistic phenomenon is the result of not minding what science says. It is the natural result of ignoring all the knowledge that has been accumulated for a thousand years. Take away from us all that we have learned in that time and we should all relapse into barbarians, cowering before every phenomenon of earth or sky, feeling ourselves waylaid by devils, and offering up the blood of the Lamb literally to propitiate a divine enemy.

Now, there is considerable curiosity abroad about

the state of mind underlying this movement. Those who have been educated amid the liberal ideas of the present day are so far removed from the terrors, the experiences and operations going on in these meetings, that it may sometimes occur to them that there must be something real, something novel, in these strange ecstasies. For the benefit of such I will relate what I know about it. It was my destiny to be born in a region where this kind of excitement was almost chronic. Revivalists swarmed, prayer meetings were kept up through the winter, and I can hardly remember an evening which was not passed by me in looking on at what was called the "mourners' bench,"—a long bench where men and women knelt to be prayed for, and sung over, while they filled the air with their shrieks for mercy. When the summer came the leading Methodist families—of which my father's was one—went to dwell in the woods in tents. About two weeks were there spent in praying and preaching all the day long—pausing only for meals,—and during all that time the enclosure in front of the pulpit,—an enclosure as large as this chapel—was covered over with screaming men and women, and even frightened children. For many years after I had become of a convertible age I was talked to by preachers and

prayed with, but could not feel the usual excitement which they called "conviction of sin." Finally I became very unhappy about it. Most of my relations and young companions had been converted, and I felt quite lonely and humiliated that I had not the same experience. I felt that it was something that had to be gone through with, like vaccination. And at last, during a very vigorous revival, I went to the mourners' bench, resolved never to leave it until I had found all that the others had. While I was there women came and wept over me; preachers quoted Scripture to me. Not one whispered to me that I should resolve to be better, more upright, true, and kind. Hundreds were converted by my side, and broke out into wild shouts of joy. But I had no new experience whatever. More than a week passed; every night of it I had knelt in silence from eight until midnight amid wild scenes. I was not in the least a sceptic. I believed every word told me. Yet nothing took place at all. On a certain evening I swooned. When I came to myself I was stretched out on the floor with friends singing around me, and the preachers informed me that I had been the subject of the most admirable work of divine grace they had ever witnessed. I took their word for it. All I knew was that I was thoroughly exhausted, and was ill for a week.

When I got far enough in time away from that proceeding to reflect on it, I began to perceive that its explanation was to be found in physiology, not in religion. And in the hundreds of conversions which I subsequently witnessed, I observed that they generally took place when the body was reduced to the point of exhaustion. In the so-called revivals which have been going on in this country of late, we rarely hear of many conversions at first; it is after people have been going for a good many nights in succession, when the nerves have been weakened by late hours and unusual habits, that the delirium sets in, beginning with a sense of depression which results in a reaction. This reaction is nature's relief to the overstrained system, and it is sometimes pleasant enough to be called conversion, or finding Jesus.

Only utter ignorance of the simplest physiological laws can regard this process as having anything religious or moral in it. On the contrary, it has a demoralising effect on the individual; like any other intoxication, its transient elevation is generally followed by deep depression. The convert finds himself no better for having been converted, but somewhat worse. I have heard them confess this in hundreds of cases in the experience-meetings which often accompany revivals. They

are told by preachers that it is a temptation of the Devil, who is trying to get the soul back again in his grasp. Vast numbers of the converts become open "backsliders"—that is the phrase—while others, having become members of chapels and churches, sink into conscious or unconscious hypocrisy, keeping up as a heartless form and profession the pietism which has no reality. The most sincere are those who perpetually lash themselves into excitements, and whose morbid condition becomes habitual.

That large multitudes of our people should confuse this kind of dissipation with true religious feeling argues a mental condition which is most deplorable. It is the saddest social feature of our time that, just as the people are advancing in political power, they are showing themselves in large part subject to the basest superstitions and the most irrational agitations. Any demagogue who undertakes to raise a convict into a martyr, stands a chance of being followed to Hyde Park by thousands of his dupes, and religious mountebanks draw vaster numbers than the greatest teachers of science. In this ignorance have the people been left by those who have for centuries held the seats of learning and the centres of religious instruction. They have not taught the people to reason; nay, they have discouraged reason. They have burned

in one age those who have tried to enlighten the masses,—in another age have imprisoned them, and even now denounce them. As they have sown they shall reap. For the moment the revival is mingled with snobbery. It was urged against Jesus that none of the rulers believed on him, but these revivalists have live lords and even a lord chancellor around them, and reserved seats for distinguished people. No doubt some of these eminent persons hope to control the movement for their own ends; but it is far more likely to control them, and to degrade wiser men. That which is born of one excitement may be swiftly turned by another to other ends. I sometimes think that a terrible Nemesis is yet to come from this mass of barbarism on those who have permitted it to grow,—a retribution which shall flame on the walls of society and signify to all times and nations the danger that lies in the propagation of superstition among classes predestined soon to wield supreme power over civilisation.

That which is raised up in the country by Revivalism as religion is the reverse of all real religion. It is the paralysing spirit of fear. The honest revivalist said last week in his sermon, "If I did not believe in Hell, I would go back to America tomorrow." Of course he would. The mainspring



of his movement would be broken. Yet, what is more base, selfish,—what more essentially irreligious than this yielding to terror of that which despised considerations of love or of principle? Even the Catholic Madame Guion had learned the grossness of this pious cowardice. She met in her vision an angel bearing a furnace and a pot of water. “Whither goest thou?” she asked. “I go with this furnace to burn up Paradise, with this water to quench Hell, that men may hereafter love God without fear, and without hope of reward.” As fear reverses the spirit of true religion, noise drowns its true voice. The tendency of all progress in moral and inward culture for ages has been to show the highest power within man to be that which is most quiet. It is so in external nature. The fiercest thunderstorm has not in its lightnings so much force as the little magnet that silently guides the ship. The blaze of the sun, and all its colours, are not so potent as those rays which cannot be seen at all, but in their latent power fix and photograph each object set before them. I have heard of an inward kingdom that cometh not with observation; a power lost sight of when men cry “Lo, here, and lo, there,” or cry “Lord, Lord!” I have heard of a pure, a silent growth in the heart, akin to that which clothes the earth with bloom, gliding

softly from winter to spring, revealing in each first the blade, then the ear, and the full corn in the ear. But I have not heard that gentle unfolding of the deeper nature hinted in any of the manifold revivals I have witnessed. I do not doubt that the deepest longing of thousands who attend these revivals is for repose—repose for their tempest-tossed lives, and for their passion tossed hearts. They seek repose amid dogmas of danger and despair; dogmas which would turn their Heaven itself into horror for every good heart, which must feel beneath it the abyss of woe. There is but one way of repose for a humane heart. It is to be freed for ever from these phantasms out of darkened ages. But no liberating, no really saving word, shall you hear in any revival meeting.

You shall have to wait long there to hear man told of the path that leads from ignorance to knowledge, from vice to virtue, from conformity with vulgar creeds to freedom of mind—the only real new birth of man. This ranting is about imaginary dangers, their exhortation is to a fictitious salvation. Every enemy is named that is no enemy; the vengeance of God, the vengeance of Satan; no word is ever said of man's only real enemy—his own ignorance, his animalism. So I turn from the revivalists of Islington, and journey rather to the mount where

g a prophet stood, far away in dim dawn of time, to  
learn what even Doctors of Divinity and Lord  
Chancellors it seems have not yet learned;—As  
Elijah sat on the mountain, behold a strong wind  
broke in pieces the rocks, but the Lord was not in  
the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but  
the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the  
earthquake a flame, but the Lord was not in the  
flame; and after the flame a small, still voice. And  
it was so that when Elijah heard the small, still  
voice, he wrapped his face in his mantle.

## South Place Chapel.

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