

HERESY AND HUMANITY

AN ADDRESS

Delivered before the "Heretics" Society in Cambridge,
on the 7th December, 1909

BY

JANE ELLEN HARRISON

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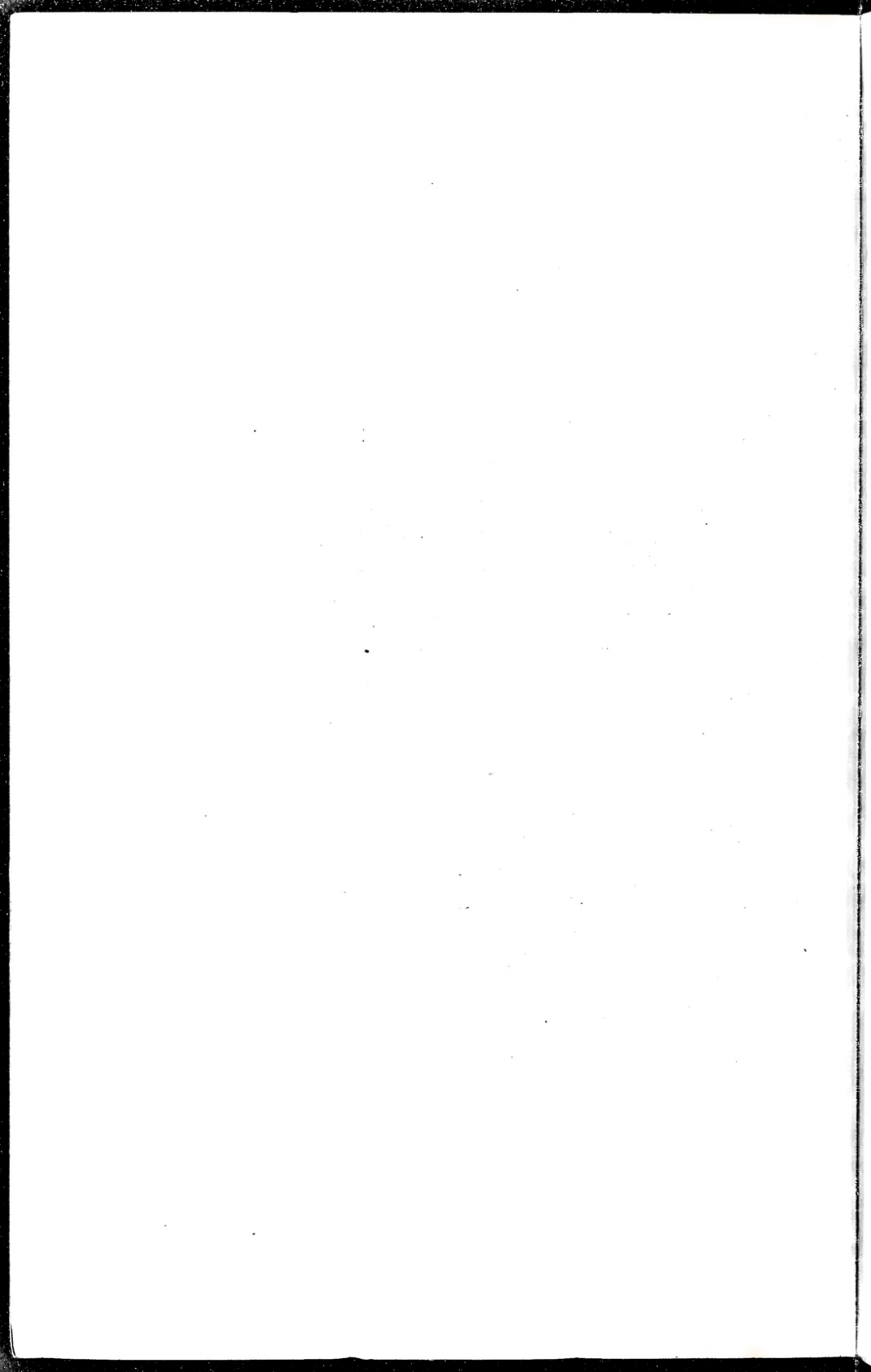
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HERESY AND HUMANITY

THE word "heretic" has still about it an emotional thrill—a glow reflected, it may be, from the fires at Smithfield, the ardours of those who were burnt at the stake for love of an idea.

Heresy, the Greek *hairesis*, was from the outset an eager, living word. The taking of a city, its *expugnatio*, is a *hairesis*; the choosing of a lot in life or an opinion, its *electio*, is a *hairesis*; always in the word *hairesis* there is this reaching out to grasp, this studious, zealous pursuit—always something personal, even passionate. This comes out clearly in the words to which it is opposed—*hairesis*, "choosing," "electing," is opposed to *phugê*, "flight from," "rejection"; and again, *hairesis*, what you choose for yourself, is opposed to *tychê*—the chance from without that befalls you by no will of your own. Only in an enemy's mouth did *heresy* become a negative thing, a sect, causing schism, a rending of the living robe. Free personal choice sounds to us now so splendid and inspiring; why, then, in the past, was it so hated and so hunted? Why instinctively in our minds, when we hear the word "heresy," does there rise up the adjective "damnable"? To be a heretic in the days of Latimer and Cranmer was to burn. To be

a heretic in the days of our grandfathers was to be something of a social outcast. To be a heretic to-day is almost a human obligation.¹

The gist of heresy is free personal choice in act, and specially in thought—the rejection of traditional faiths and customs, *quâ* traditional. When and why does heresy cease to be dangerous, and become desirable? It may be worth while inquiring.

The study of anthropology and sociology has taught us that only a very civilised person ever is or can afford to be a heretic. For a savage to be a heretic is not only not safe, it is practically impossible. We all know nowadays that the simple savage leading a free life is, of all mythical beings, most fabulous. No urbane citizen in the politest society is half so hide-bound by custom as the simple savage. He lives by imitation of his ancestors—*i.e.*, by tradition. Long before he obeys a king he is the abject slave of that master with the iron rod—the Past; and the Past is for him embodied in that most dire and deadly of all tyrannies, an oligarchy of old men.² The past, they feel, has made them what they are; why seek to improve on it or them? In such a society choice, heresy, is impossible.

How came such a state of things to be? Why is it

¹ Some portion of this paper was read at the Inaugural Meeting of the Cambridge Society of "Heretics," on December 7, 1909. My thanks are due to the Editor of the *Englishwoman* for permission to reprint it.

² See Dr. Frazer, *Lectures on the Early History of the Kingship*, p. 84.

tolerated? Why is it not only not disastrous, but for a time, as a stage, desirable?

Because, at the outset, what draws society together is sympathy, similarity, uniformity. In the fierce struggle for existence, for food, for protection, the herd and the homogeneity of the herd, its *collective*, unreflecting action, are all-important. If you are in danger of extinction, you must act swiftly, all together, all but automatically, you must not be a heretic.

We see this clearly in that noblest of latter-day survivals, the "good soldier." The good soldier is not a heretic; he does not, and may not, reflect and make personal choice. To him the order of his commanding officer voicing the herd is *sacrosanct*. Be it contrary to reason, be it contrary to humanity, it must still be obeyed. War has many horrors. To me not the least is this—that it must turn a thinking human being into an at least temporary automaton; it bids a man forego his human heritage of heresy.

What I want for the moment to emphasise is this: that only certain elements in civilisation, which later will be particularised, make heresy safe and desirable; primitive man is always, and rightly, suspicious of heresy. The instinct to burn a heretic was in a sense, and for a season, socially sound; the practice went on perhaps needlessly long. The instinct of savage law is the defence of *collective*, the repression of individual, opinion and action.

The milder forms of heresy-hunting, those that most

of us remember in our childhood, deserve consideration.

It has puzzled—it has, alas! exasperated—many that society should be so alert and angry, should feel so intensely, about heterodoxy. If I deny the law of gravitation, no one will worry me about it. Privately, and rightly, they will think me a fool; but they will not come and argue at, and browbeat, and socially ostracise me. But if I doubt the existence of a God, or even, in the days of my childhood, if I doubted the doctrine of eternal damnation—well, I become a “moral leper.” The expression has now gone out; its mild, modern substitute is looking at you sadly.

Such treatment naturally makes the honest patient boil with indignation; but the young science of sociology comes to smooth him down by explaining how this *is*, and, so long as the strength of society is in its collective homogeneity, *must* be.

Religious views, sociology teaches us, and many other views on matters social and political—in fact, all traditional views—are held with such tenacity, such almost ferocity, because they belong to the class of views induced not by individual experience, still less by reason, but by collective, or, as it is sometimes called, “herd,” suggestion. This used to be called faith. The beliefs so held may or may not be true; collective suggestion is not in the least necessarily collective hallucination. Mere collective suggestions—that is the interesting point—have the quality of obviousness; they do not issue from the individual, but seem imposed from outside,

and ineluctable; they have all the inevitableness of instinctive opinion; they are what Mr. William James would call "*a priori* syntheses of the most perfect sort." Hence they are held with an intensity of emotion far beyond any reasoned conviction.¹ To doubt them is at once idiocy and irreverence. Inquiry into their rational bases is naturally, and in a sense rightly, resented, because they are not rationally based, though they may be rationally supported. It is by convictions such as this that a society of the homogeneous kind—a society based on and held together by uniformity—lives and thrives; to attack them is to cripple and endanger its inmost life.

To realise this is clear gain. We feel at once quieter and kinder; all, or most, of the sting is gone from the intolerance, or even ostracism, of our friends. When they look sad, and hint that certain views are not respectable, we no longer think of our friends as unreasonable and cruel. They are *non*-reasonable, *pre*-reasonable, and they are hypnotised by herd-suggestion. They become, not cruel, but curious and interesting, even heroic; they are fighting for the existence of the homogeneous type of herd—a forlorn hope, we believe, but still intelligible. Further, we begin to see what we, as heretics, must do; not reason with our opponents—that would be absurd—but try, so far as we can, to get on to the side we believe to be right

¹ See especially a valuable paper by Mr. W. Trotter on "The Sociological Application of the Psychology of Herd Instinct," in the *Sociological Review*, January, 1909, p. 37.

this immense force of herd-suggestion. Suggest to people that an unverifiable opinion is as unsatisfactory an implement as, say, a loose tooth ; and as to a mental prejudice, it is simply a source of rottenness, a decayed fang—out with it !

Why, and how, has heresy ceased or almost ceased to be disreputable ?

Two causes have brought this about, Science and another movement towards what I will call Humanity, and which I shall try later to define.

Science is from the outset the sworn foe of herd-suggestion. Herd-suggestion, being a strange blend of the emotions and imaginings of many men, is always tolerant of contradictions ; religion revels in them ; with God all things are possible. Science classifies, draws ever clearer distinctions ; herd-suggestion is always in a haze. Herd-suggestion is all for tradition, authority ; science has for its very essence the exercise of free thought. So long as we will not take the trouble to *know* exactly and intimately, we may not—must not—choose. We must advance as nature prescribes, by slow, laborious imitation ; we must follow custom ; we must accept the mandates of the *Gerontes*—the old men who embody and enforce tradition. We must be content to move slowly.

We must not be unjust to collective opinion ; it does move, though slowly, and moves even without the actual protest of open heresy. Things were said and written a century or two ago which, though no definite

protest has been made, could not be written or said now. There has been a slow, unconscious shift. In the regulations of the University of Cambridge it is still enacted that every year a prize be offered for the best poem on the Attributes of the Deity, and that this prize be annually awarded until such time as in the opinion of the Master of *x* College the said Attributes shall have been exhausted. Somehow, nowadays, we should word our regulations differently.

Collective opinion, then, advances, but very slowly. Many people think that to be slow is sure; but our wise copybooks used to say, "Delays are dangerous." You may prop up an ancient building till it topples about your ears; adherence to tradition may land you in straits made desperate by the advancing tide of knowledge. You may delay a reform till the exacerbation caused by your delay is worse than the original evil.

Heresy, then, is the child of Science; and so long as the child holds fast her mother's hand, she may run her swiftest, she will not faint or fall.

Science opens wide the doors that turned so slowly on tradition's hinges, and opens them on clean, quiet places where we breathe a larger air. If heresy has in it too much of the fever and fret of self-assertion and personal choice, our remedy is to enter that "great kingdom where the strain of disturbing passion grows quiet, and even the persecuting whisper of egotism dies at last almost completely away."¹

¹ Professor Gilbert Murray.

It is well to remember our debt to science—our inward and spiritual as well as material debt, because the generation is passed or passing which saw and was well-nigh blinded by the great flood of light that came last century. But the complete heretic needs more than science, he needs humanity, and this in no vague general sense, but after a fashion that it is important to understand as exactly as may be.

Science broke the binding spell of herd-suggestion. For that great boon let us now and ever bless and praise her holy name. She cleared the collective haze, she drew sharp distinctions, appealing to individual actual experience, to individual powers of reasoning. But by neither individual sense-perception nor ratiocination alone do we live; our keenest emotional life is through the herd, and hence it was that, at the close of last century, the flame of scientific hope, the glory of scientific individualism that had blazed so brightly, somehow died down and left a strange chill. Man rose up from the banquet of reason and law unfed. He hungered half-unconsciously for the herd. It seemed an *impasse*: on the one side orthodoxy, tradition, authority, practical slavery; on the other science, individual freedom, reason, and an aching loneliness.

But life meanwhile was feeling its way blindly to a solution, to what was literally a harmony. Something happened akin to what goes on in biology. The old primitive form of society grew by segmentation, by mere multiplication of homogeneous units; the new

and higher form was to develop by differentiation of function—a differentiation that would unite, not divide. Instead of a mechanical homogeneous unity we get a disparate organism. We live now just at the transition moment; we have broken with the old, we have not quite adjusted ourselves to the new. It is not so much the breaking with old faiths that makes us restless as the living in a new social structure.

What is actually meant by organic as opposed to mechanical unity is seen, of course, very clearly—has long been seen, though not rightly understood—in the ever-increasing development of the Division of Labour. M. Durkheim¹ has shown that the real significance of this is social and moral rather than economic. Its best result is not material wealth, but the closer, more vital, sympathy and interdependence of man with and on his fellow man. Its influence extends far beyond the supply of material needs. If one man depends on you for his supply of butter and you on him for your supply of tea, you are drawn into a real relation; but if the interchange be of thought and sympathy induced by that material commerce, the links are closer, more vital. This is no metaphor; it is a blessed and sometimes bitter reality. A close companionship withdrawn is a wound to our actual spiritual life: if our egotism and self-sufficiency be robust, we recover from it; if weak, we go maimed and halting, with minished personality.

Division of labour has often been supposed to damage

¹ To the specialist, my debt throughout this paper to the writings of MM. Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl will be evident.

the individual. Anthropology corrects this mistake. To the savage division of labour is almost unknown; each man builds his own boat, carves his own weapons, and makes them scrupulously, religiously, as his fathers made them before him. Yet the savage has the minimum of individuality. It is not in his case that individuality is crushed out by the herd, but that it has not begun to exist, or only in faint degree, because the savage has not begun to co-operate. It is through this co-operation that we at once differentiate and organically unite. This is our new gospel: we are saved, not by science, not by abstraction, but by a new mode of life.

As the individual emerges through co-operation and differentiation the force of tradition is gradually broken. What takes its place? The answer is at first depressing. Fashion, a new and modified collectivism. Under the sway of tradition, as M. Tarde has pointed out, *we copy our ancestors in all things*; under the sway of fashion *we follow our contemporaries in a few*. Fashion, it will escape no one, rules us now, not only in matters of dress or food, but in the things of the spirit; and more and more, it would seem, as we escape more completely from tradition. But the rule of fashion, though sometimes foolish and light-headed, is, on the whole, beneficent, and makes for freedom. It is better to be swayed by our contemporaries, because, unlike the ancients, they lack prestige, and never become sacrosanct; about their heads is no semi-religious halo. Moreover, fashion is fickle, swift to change; small movements and

associations grow up to promote particular fads, and die as swiftly as they rose; each association implies a dissociation, and by this frequency of association and dissociation we get rid of the permanent homogeneous class, that insistent incubus of progress. Each person belongs to many temporary associations; and at the cross-roads, as it were, his individuality emerges.

More strange still at first, but assuredly true, is the fact that only through and by this organic individuality can the real sense and value of Humanity emerge. We are humane so far as we are conscious or sensitive to individual life. Patriotism is collective herd-instinct; it is repressive² of individuality. You feel strongly because you feel alike; you are reinforced by the other homogeneous units; you sing the same song and wave the same flag. Humanity is sympathy with infinite differences, with utter individualism, with complete differentiation, and it is only possible through the mystery of organic spiritual union. We have come, most of us, now, to a sort of physical union by sympathy and imagination. To torture even an enemy's body would be to us physical pain, physical sickness; there will come the day when to hurt mentally and

² M. Durkheim (*De la Division du Travail Social*, pp. 35-73) has shown with great cogency, in his examination of criminal and civil law, that repression and vengeance are the characteristic and necessary notes of *solidarité mécanique*, and that the new justice of a society based on *solidarité organique* has quite other functions. The same thought has found fine expression in Mr. Galsworthy's *Justice*, and in two penetrating and beautiful articles by him on the Suffrage question in the *Nation*, March 19 and 20, 1910.

spiritually will be equally impossible, because the spiritual life will by enhanced sympathy be one. But this union is only possible through that organic differentiation that makes us have need one of the other.

In a word, if we are to be true and worthy heretics, we need not only new heads, but new hearts, and, most of all, that new emotional imagination, joint offspring of head and heart which is begotten of enlarged sympathies and a more sensitive habit of feeling. About the moral problem there is nothing mysterious; it is simply the old, old question of how best to live *together*. We no longer believe in an unchanging moral law imposed from without. We know that a harder incumbency is upon us; we must work out our law from within. The first crude attempt was by agglutination—*Qui se rassemble s'assemble*; differ at your peril. A long discipline of agglutination backed by religious sanctions was needful, it seems, to tame the tiger-cat, egotism within us. Primitive religion, most of us who investigate the subject are now agreed, has made for civilisation mainly because it is the emphasis of *social* values, or, to put it more exactly, of herd-instincts.

But in mere religious agglutination man was not to find his goal. We heretics believe the time for that is past, and that we must adventure a harder and higher spiritual task. Our new altruism involves a steady and even ardent recognition of the individual life, in its infinite variety, with its infinite inter-actions. We decline to be ourselves part of an undifferentiated mass; we refuse to deal with others in classes and masses. Parents no

longer treat their children as children, as a subject-class to be manipulated for their pleasure, but as human beings, with views, outlooks, lives of their own. Children, it may even be hoped, will learn in time to treat their parents not merely as parents—*i.e.*, as persons privileged to pay and to protect and at need to efface themselves, but as individual human beings, with their own passions and absorptions. We are dissatisfied now not only with the herd-sanctions of religion, but with many of those later sanctities of law to which some even emancipated thinkers ascribe a sort of divinity. We feel the inherent savagery of law in that it treats individuals as masses. Only in a civilised anarchy, we some of us feel, can the individual come to his full right and function.¹

Yet all the time we know that we can, with spiritual safety, rebel only in so far as we are personally sensitive to the claims of other individual lives that touch our own. The old herd-problem remains of how to live *together*; and as the union grows closer and more intricate the chances of mutual hurt are greater, and the sensitiveness must grow keener. Others are safe from and with us only when their pain is our pain, their joy ours; and that is not yet. Meantime, whenever the old tiger-cat egotism snarls within us we should resign our membership of the Society of Heretics, and go back for a season to the "godly discipline" of the herd.

JANE ELLEN HARRISON.

¹ My fellow Heretics are, needless to say, not committed to this personal view.

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