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THE TRANSFIGURATION  
OF RELIGION:

A DISCOURSE

BY

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DELIVERED AT

South Place Chapel, Finsbury,

On *SUNDAY, JUNE 2nd, 1878.*

PRICE TWOPENCE.

LONDON :  
PRINTED BY WATERLOW AND SONS LIMITED,  
LONDON WALL.

## THE TRANSFIGURATION OF RELIGION.

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WE are told by the Gospels that on a certain occasion Jesus took three privileged disciples with him to a high mountain apart; and there a wonder happened. For they saw no longer the carpenter of Nazareth, or the heretical Rabbi of Capernaum, but a shining angel of God. "An inner glory rent the veil" that obscured his divine dignity, and they saw him, not as he seemed to be, but as he really was. He had passed out of the shadows of time into the open day of eternity. Therefore "his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light." Therefore, also, he was no longer bound by the vulgar limits of the little sect that oppressed him by their dulness. The spirits of bygone times appeared, and talked with him of a

mysterious future. So strange and distant did he seem, that at first the disciples could not speak; and when they did, it was with a sort of trembling joy, which only asked for time to know itself aright. "Master," said Peter, "it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles"—"for," says one evangelist, "he wist not what to say, for he was sore afraid."

Such is the gospel story, and it does not concern us in the least now to enter into any critical enquiries as to its origin. Its use to me is the same in any case. It is a parable for the church to the end of time. But, without adventuring any criticism, I have my own thoughts about it, and I think we may discern in this sacred legend the resultant, or the relief, whichever you will, of two opposing elements in the feelings of the disciples toward their master. On the one hand were love, reverence, and devotion such as probably never were felt by man for man, before or since. On the other hand there was the familiarity which generally brings about an occasional creeping of shame at the suspicion of exaggerated feeling. On the one side was the import of an amazing personal supremacy; on the other were the plain rough facts of poverty and contempt. The highest expression of their wonder and devotion was a half-formed, and,



as they often felt, too daring hope, that this Jesus might be the very Christ, the hope of all their fathers. But the form of his ministry was utterly incongruous with their dreams of the Messiah. Thus there was a conflict between their feelings and the facts. The facts could not be denied, and the feelings would not be silenced. Yet they could not live together, and it would have required little prophetic insight to be assured that one or other must give way or be transformed. What happened with some of Christ's hearers we know. They said "whence hath this man wisdom, having never learned?" They said "Is not this the carpenter's son?" "And they were offended in him." The offensive outward facts marred, in their ears, all the music of his words, and impoverished the wonder of his character. But the case of those who laid the foundations of the church was very different. They came to discern an inner worth and a spiritual majesty which, shining from within, transfigured outward circumstances of poverty and contempt into raiment of purity, "white as snow, so as no fuller on earth can white them." And the visage that was so marred more than any man's was, to their fond contemplation, irradiated by the character, so that it shone like a very sun of righteousness. In other words, the feelings of the primitive

disciples pierced the rude facts by the fire of love, and discovered an inward splendour that in process of time transfigured unconformable surroundings into spiritual miracles.

As I have said, it is not my purpose here to elaborate or defend any particular theory of such traditions as the transfiguration and the resurrection of Jesus in a glorified form. In any case it will be allowed that, in the view of Christian faith, the transfiguration was not a disguise, but a revelation. It was the unveiling of the real Christ. And, whether regarded as historic visions or legends gradually evolved, I take it that herein the Christian faith is right. Whether it be to personal emotion or to impersonal evolution that we owe these traditions, there is no falsehood in them, except to the thin, pragmatic intellect of the literalist. In a parabolic way they picture the real truth, that it was the charm and the power of Christ's spirit which irradiated the mean surroundings of his earthly life, and made him the very brightness of God's glory to the church.

Now it is from this point of view that I take the transfiguration as a type of much that is happening to Christianity in these times. We have heard of the phases of faith, and of the eclipse of faith, but there is also such a thing as its transfiguration,

and this is far more significant than either. For in transfiguration, its life, hidden rather than revealed, by insufficient symbols, irradiates those symbols with its own brightness, and, without destruction of their form, converts them into spiritual substance. Let me try to make plainer the general process I have in view, before I proceed to particular illustration.

The growing schism between traditional theology and the actual facts of the world's history has become a commonplace. But what is not so much recognised is the incongruity between the best inspirations of religion and the body of belief imposed by authority. "Whatsoever things are true," says religion, "think on these things." "Buy the truth, and sell it not,"—no, not for social comfort, nor even for respectability. Not so, says the system of opinion supposed to be inseparable from religion; it is better not to think on material facts, lest they stifle spiritual affections; and even truth may be bought too dear if it is won at the loss of usefulness. "Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts," says religion, in a strain of real worship. But what passes for Christian opinion insists that doubt is to be commanded down, if need be, by a resolute effort of the will. "In every nation," says the voice of religion, "he that feareth God and worketh

righteousness is accepted of him." But ecclesiastical systems explain this away by so defining righteousness as to make it impossible, and then show that it is not the character but right belief, at least on "fundamentals," as they are called, which makes a man acceptable to God.

The sense of sin, the solemn conviction that it always demands and gets its sacrifice, the feeling at once of personal insignificance and of ultra-personal grandeur that comes with a perception of the divine unity of things, the enthusiasm of humanity, the inspirations of progress, all of them surely are *religious affections*. Their fountain is the infinite, their temple is the universe, their shrine is the heart. But they are first shocked, then paralysed by the poor prosaic forms imposed by an emasculated Westminster confession, or by the helpless metaphysics of the Athanasian creed. The results of this incongruity have been generally worked out in one or two directions. Either under its strain the lessons of science and criticism receive a morbid interpretation, and religion perishes in the ruins of theology; or else these solvent forces are resisted by an arbitrary effort of the will, and, to a greater or a less extent according to circumstances, religion is degraded into superstition. But I maintain that another alternative is possible, that which I have

called the transfiguration of religion. In this process the old form in a great measure remains, if not intact, at least sufficiently to preserve its identity. But it is, so to speak, transformed from an earthly to a spiritual substance, and becomes a transparency giving finite form to an infinite light.

It was thus that Philo and the Alexandrian school treated the Mosaic religion; and their method has been traditional among those who may be called Platonic christians. The Garden of Eden became the pure life of reason, and the forbidden tree the delights of sense. The national Jehovah was transfigured into formless and eternal being. The creative and prophetic word, the Jewish *memra*, became the *logos*, the divine reason. The vitalizing breath or spirit of God became the emerging love that completed the Platonic trinity. The narratives of the Old Testament were regarded as interpretable after a spiritual manner, so as to make them parables of things heavenly, rather than histories of things earthly. But this method was usually applied in a hesitating, inconsistent, and even arbitrary manner. The allegorical sense was allowed, but the literal sense was almost universally insisted on as well, and the incongruity of the two was often startling. Eden, and its rivers and groves, might be a dream of the delights of reason; but to



insist at the same time on the historical reality of the talking serpent and the miraculous tree was to refuse all relief to the understanding. The theory of double, or treble, or even sevenfold senses to be discovered in the sacred text was entirely irrational. There was no touch of nature in such a forced and arbitrary system. There was no attempt to find out what it was in humanity or in the constitution of the universe which had evolved the old traditions, and so to find their significance in this root principle. The light was not looked for from within, but from without, and therefore no real transfiguration was possible.

But in modern times the study of religion has been very greatly affected by the adoption of the historic method. We are coming to believe that continuity of development has been the law in the story of mankind, as well as in the world about us. No institution, no custom, no opinion springs suddenly and causelessly into being without parentage, or without passing through the stages of germination, embryo, infancy and youth. Even those revolutions that startle the world like the rush of a tornado, have been brooding silently in the air for long before, or they are but the re-combination of old forces. Thus for instance, both the French Revolution and Mahommedanism, for all they burst

upon the world so suddenly, had their origins far back in time and deep in the bosom of humanity. And such is far more evidently the case with religious ideas, feelings and beliefs, that have spread slowly and grown for ages by some inherent and enduring force of life. In regard to these, neither mind nor heart, if healthily constituted, finds any satisfaction at all in the coldly negative conclusion that the belief is contrary to fact, or the idea incongruous with modern progress. What we want much more to know is the place that the *feeling* has in the life of humanity, how it attained that place, what has been its value, and what is its real relation to the belief now shown to be false. Supposing these questions answered, it will probably be found that the answer throws considerable light on the beliefs and ceremonies by which that feeling has been expressed. At least they no longer appear meaningless or absurd, and it is more than possible that though they have to be surrendered as dogmas or supernaturally imposed duties, they may still commend themselves to us as convenient expressions and exercises of spiritual life. Now in this case the new light thrown upon them comes not from without but from within. There is no far-fetched theory of inspired allegory or divine condescension to human forms of speech. The historic method has simply

revealed the order of nature, and in doing so has traced back the belief or the observance to some permanent and universal element in human life. Thus the belief or observance becomes luminous with significance and may even be transfigured into real sacredness and beauty.

Let me give now one or two definite illustrations from Christianity itself, and then perhaps my meaning will be plainer. Take for instance the doctrines of the Fall and of Redemption, which can hardly be separated one from another. The former teaches in substance that in some primeval period mankind were innocent, holy, and happy, but by sin fell away into a state of corruption to which the memory of Eden gave the bitter pang of lost but unforgotten joy. The doctrine of redemption teaches that the love of God did not desert mankind in their low estate but extended, and is extending help from heaven, by which at last a new world shall be established where righteousness shall be supreme. Now, as to the former, the inductions legitimately drawn from geological records and prehistoric remains, are, to say the least, constantly accumulating difficulties in the way of the historic theory required by the alleged fall of man. And on the other hand, if by redemption be meant a miraculous interference



with the order of the world, the difficulties of believing it are steadily increasing toward the limit of impossibility. But what do you gain by these negations? Absolutely nothing more than freedom to follow the teachings of geology, anthropolgy, and physical philosophy, without conscious inconsistency. The gain is something, but it is not much when the highest ends of human life are considered. And that small gain is swallowed up in utter loss if those negations cut you off from communion with the grandest passions of human experience. It is satisfactory, no doubt, to substitute a catarrhine ape for Adam if Adam was a fiction and the catarrhine ape a fact. But, O, my friends, Augustine was a fact, and Thomas-a-Kempis was a fact, and there have been many such. Nay more, the books they left behind are living facts, and the feelings to which they appeal are mightier and more living still. Those homilies on St. John, can I recall them without feeling again the almost infinite perspective of depth they add to human life? Those confessions,—do they not rush past you like a very torrent of life, sweeping you along with their emotion, and swallowing you up in the personality of the man? But such books were evolved from minds not only impressed, but possessed by the ideas of a Fall and

Redemption. And more than that, these convictions were not individual peculiarities. They were characteristic of a great human movement, which in later times has been called progress, but which then was known as the coming of the kingdom of God. Now if the discovery that the so called history of the Fall is legend, and that the miracles heralding redemption were imaginary, involves an entire extirpation of the ideas both of a Fall and of a redemption, then the career of men like Augustine Tauler, Wycliffe and others was a morbid perversion of human life. And as with the pearl oyster so with man, the most splendid and precious products of his organization are the outcome not of its healthy working but of disease. But splendid,—precious? No; they cease to be so when emptied of reality. And there is nothing left for us but to lament the barren dreary centuries that produced only apostles, prophets and martyrs. I mean it for no sneer—I mention it only as a fact or whatever it is worth, in the problem before me, when I say that I do not feel the most luminous exposition of my relationship to our ancestral catarrhine ape to be a sufficient compensation for the loss. I accept him as a fact. I cannot help it, because the evidence is distinctly in his favour. But if I cannot resist evidence, so neither can I suppress

my spiritual sympathies, and I still feel that I should have very much preferred Augustine and the City of God.

And is the loss inevitable? I say no; not only is it preventible, but it is not even possible. When we put the question "whether man be an ape or an angel," and declare ourselves "on the side of the angels," we are only playing with words. What is represented by the ape and what is represented by the angel both remain in human nature, however we toss about the counters that symbolize them. And the changeful proportions in which they exist are not in the least degree affected by our words or our anthropological theories, but they are very much affected by our feelings and tempers, our aspirations and appetites. When the calendar in this country was reformed, one necessary part of the process was an enactment that the 6th of January should be called the 16th; whereupon the mob thought that their lives had been shortened by eleven days, and howled at the impiety of an infidel government that dared thus to interfere with the prerogatives of the Almighty. "Give us our eleven days!" they shouted. It was of no use to tell them that no Act of Parliament, unless indeed it called in the aid of the hangman, could have any influence on the number of their days; of no use

to explain that the 6th January was transfigured into the 16th, but otherwise remained just as available for all practical purposes. There was nothing for it but to let them shout themselves hoarse under proper guardianship; and when they came to themselves they found spring, summer, autumn and winter pursuing their course just as if nothing had happened. It seems to me that there is little more meaning in some of the theological cries now plaintive, now menacing that rend the air amidst inevitable readjustments of thought and speech to actual fact. "Give us back our souls!" cry some. "Give us back our father Adam and the Garden of Eden!" cry others. Above all and with much more meaning the unspeculative but suffering multitude wails aloud, "Give us back the hope of redemption!"

Now as to the Fall and the Redemption, it is not without reason that they have played so large a part in the highest experiences of the greatest men. For they represent certain permanent and fundamental elements in humanity, so deep and vital that the most intensely human of men realise them most; so essential that the logical revolutions have as little effect upon them as political revolutions have on domestic affection or social instincts. The Fall—what is it but the pictorial projection of that

contrast between an imperative ideal on the one hand, and actual attainment on the other, which has thrown such tragic shadows and heroic lights over the story of mankind? Classic poets sang of a primeval golden age, and even the most barbarous races will tell of a time when their forefathers were bigger, braver, and better than themselves. So universal a characteristic must have its root in a common moral nature. However they come to be so, mankind are as a matter of fact so constituted that they always conceive as just beyond them and above them, tantalizingly within their reach, a mode of life at least a little better than that which they actually lead. And this better way of life is felt as a commanding law, which does not indeed secure obedience, but at least rebukes disobedience with hauntings of regret and with occasional pangs of remorse. Take this fact together with the instinct of filial reverence, and it is not difficult to understand how simple races have fabled to themselves better times gone by, when the nobler life from which the degenerate children shrink was actually lived by their remote fathers. Such a fable may take many forms, now of a golden age, now of the city of As-gard, now of the Garden of Eden; but in all forms alike its living germ is the contrast which a moral nature feels between an imperative

ideal and actual conduct. It is this spiritual fact, *not* the mythical serpent or miraculous tree, or easily beguiled woman—it was this spiritual fact that kindled repentance in the soul of Augustine and awoke the conflict that enthralls us in his confessions. It was this spiritual fact that harassed Luther, and tortured John Bunyan, and fired the passion of Whitfield. And though I no longer believe in Adam or Eve, or the serpent, or the stolen fruit, I feel myself as truly and as deeply as ever in communion with those heroes of the warfare against sin. I realise the discord, the shock, the original sin of the fall from good to evil within myself, whenever the ideal with which God inspires me comes into sharp contrast with the lower life I lead. I understand St. Paul, not by the study of theology, but by the comment of life's experience, when he speaks of the old Adam, or of the law of sin which is in our members bringing into captivity our better nature. And every earnest word written by such men on the calamity of the Fall and the hope of Redemption, finds a sincere response within me. For the doctrine that hitherto trod the world in the homely garb of fable—"the truth embodied in a tale"—has been transfigured to us, as it was to many before us. The light of the inner truth has transfused the outer garment, and



the familiar face shines self-luminous now without need of miracle to brighten it.

As with the memory of the Fall, so with the hope of Redemption, the miraculous accidents are losing their importance, but the essential truth remains behind. What is this modern notion of progress, so unfamiliar to the ancient world? Surely it is the secular and practical side of the Christian idea of redemption. The race that was once so brutal, so low, so stagnant, is inspired now by a veritable breath from heaven, stands erect, marches on with accelerating steps toward, what Jewish prophets called the glory of the latter day. Now, if you consider in detail the higher aspects of this human progress, you will find it consist of innumerable individual efforts to remedy the Fall, or in other words, to give to the imperative ideal a force to command the lower nature. John Howard, Wilberforce, Elizabeth Fry, and such people fought the fight in themselves before they fought it for the world. And the effort to give the better life sovereignty within themselves, enlarged their sympathy with their kind so that their hearts were wrung with desire to lessen some evils in the lot of man. Their sufferings were not ended by their own victory over sin. Indeed, their crucifixion only then began. For just in proportion to their inten-

sity of desire for human redemption was their grief at human indifference and their agony at the obstinacy of human sin. So it has always come to pass in this great work of redemption that the innocent suffer for the guilty, and vicarious sacrifices are made from age to age. Nay, oftener than not the madness of self-will has been irreclaimable until it has been brought, as the Jewish prophet said, to look on one whom it has pierced, and to mourn for him with the bitterness of remorse. This principle pre-eminently exemplified in the power wielded over the hearts of men by the crucified Jesus, is the vital truth which has made the doctrine of atonement so prominent in the Christian hope of redemption. And a right apprehension of it is at least a great help in conversion from a corrupt and selfish to a noble life supernatural. Time soon fails in so vast a subject; and the endeavour to accomplish too much easily betrays us into the accomplishment of nothing. If I have to any extent succeeded in explaining my own strong belief in the vitality of what I have elsewhere called the "Evangelical tradition," I have not spoken in vain. The disintegration of authority and creed is proceeding, if not so fast as some of us desire, at least quite as quickly as is safe for the world. Another anxiety demands some earnest



thought,—the fear lest victorious analysis should dissolve away the organic life that has made the unity and continuity of human progress. I surrender without regret the pretentious science and feeble criticism of by-gone days. But if I find myself cold to their spiritual aspirations, indifferent to their moral struggles, then I begin to suspect myself an alien from the commonwealth of humanity, and to tremble at the outer darkness that gathers round me. The true church and the true humanity are not opposed, but identical, and the highest hopes of both at the present time lie in the transfiguration of religion.

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