

CT4

UNIVERSAL RELIGION.

A SERMON,

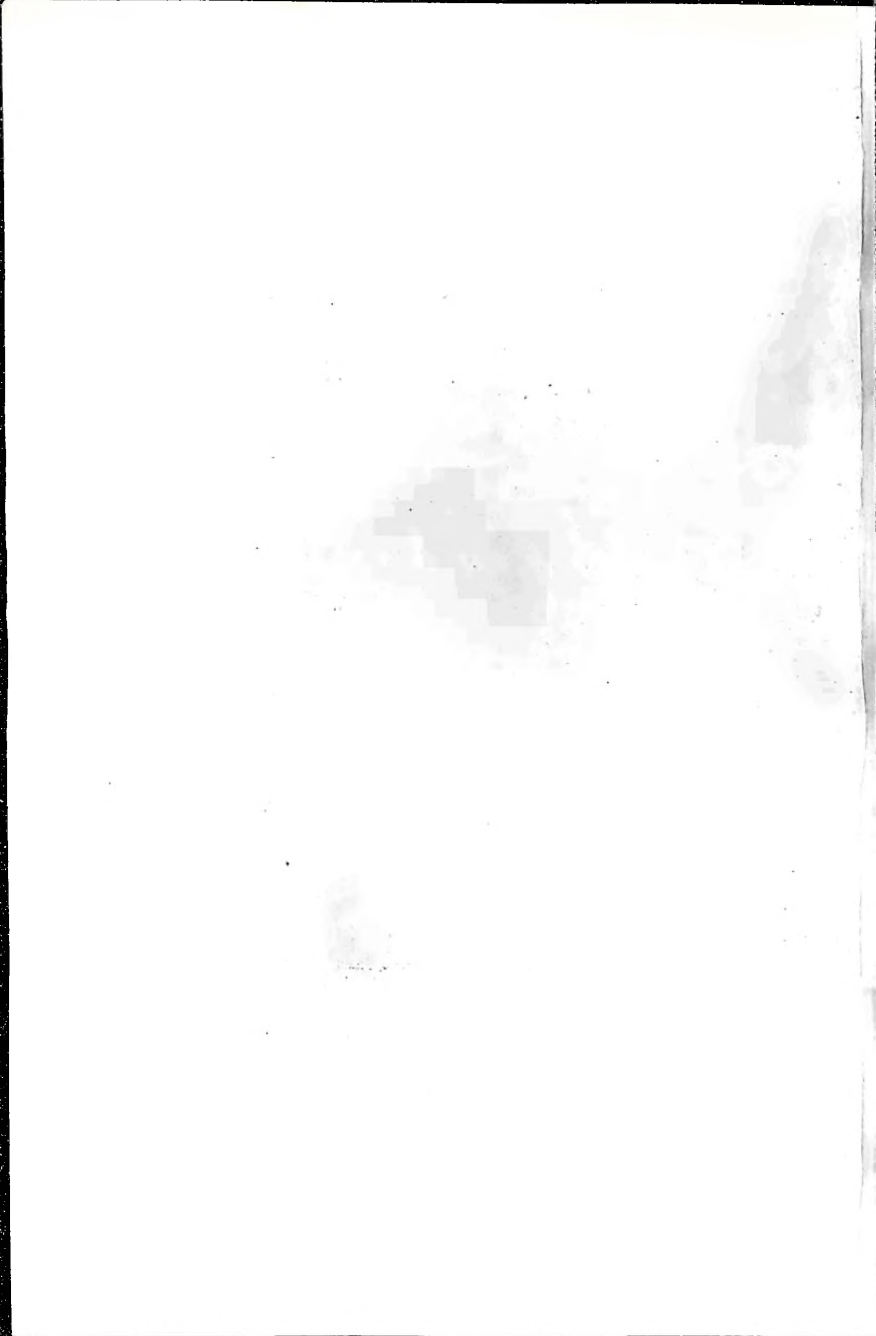
DELIVERED IN THE UNITARIAN CHAPEL, PRESTON,
FEBRUARY 20TH, 1876.

BY

F. W. WALTERS.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

PRESTON :
THE GUARDIAN PRINTING WORKS, FISHERGATE.
1876.



UNIVERSAL RELIGION.

A SERMON,

DELIVERED IN THE UNITARIAN CHAPEL, PRESTON,
FEBRUARY 20TH, 1876.

BY

F. W. WALTERS.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

PRESTON :
THE GUARDIAN PRINTING WORKS, FISHERGATE.
1876.

I am indebted for most of the quotations in this Sermon to a Lecture by a member of the "Free Religious Association" of America. The Lecture is not published in England, and I have therefore complied with the request of a venerable member of my Congregation to publish a Sermon which he believes will serve the cause of religious truth. I have added some passages omitted in the delivery.

F. W. W.

UNIVERSAL RELIGION.

“Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold.”—*John* x., 16.

NOTHING more deeply impresses us with the sense of the essential unity of Man than the universality of the religious consciousness.

However profoundly men differ from one another in other respects, you almost invariably find that, under one form or another, they possess some ideas answering to the words, RELIGION, GOD, DUTY, and IMMORTALITY.

It was once considered essential to Christian faith to denounce all other religions of the world as false, as great delusions invented by wicked men under temptation from the Devil. Through all history, it was supposed, the Spirit of truth had been confined to one narrow channel, and all beyond had been given up to falsehood. The Old and New Testaments were the only inspired scriptures; Judaism and Christianity were the only true religions. But of late years we have learnt better. We have come to look upon the whole development of human life as the gradual unfolding of One Divine Spirit; we have learnt that there can be no monopoly of God, but that to every age and nation there have come higher Voices, whose message is enshrined in old traditions and ancient books.

When I call myself a *Christian*, I do not deny the validity of other forms of the religious consciousness; but I merely express the *genesis* of my religious faith,—namely, that it can be traced along that line of spiritual movement inaugurated by Jesus of Nazareth. When I call myself an *Englishman*, I merely state my ancestry and nationality; I do not cut myself off from the Brotherhood of men throughout the world. Christianity, as we desire to understand it, is One Family in a great Community of Religions; and we shall better understand and appreciate our own faith when we see in it one form of a religious Consciousness common to the whole race of men.

Missionaries have told us so many tales of the idolatries of the ignorant and vulgar classes, among whom they chiefly labour, that it

is very difficult to realise the spiritual elements of the great Religions of the East. Who would like a foreigner to judge of Christianity by the materialistic worship of the Church of Rome, or the irrational and immoral doctrines of Mr. Moody? Judging Christianity by such samples, would not the foreigner return home to say that Christianity was either the Worship of Bread and Wine, or else Belief in a cruel Deity who could only be appeased by Human Sacrifice? Just as Christianity has spiritual elements which are frequently hidden beneath gross outward forms, so every ethnic religion is nobler than the superstitious forms of worship into which it is frequently degraded. An Englishman in India was one day watching the sacred images carried in pomp to be cast into the Ganges; and he said to a venerable Brahman standing near, "Behold your gods; made with hands; thrown into a river!" "What are they, sir?" replied the Brahman, "Only dolls? That is well enough for the ignorant, but not for the wise." Then he went on to quote from an ancient Hindu Scripture:—"The world lay in darkness, as asleep. Then He who exists for Himself, the most High, the Almighty, manifested Himself and dispelled the gloom. He whose nature is beyond our reach, whose being escapes our senses, who is invisible and eternal,—He, the all-pervading Spirit, whom the mind cannot grasp,—even He shone forth."

Indeed, it would not be difficult to prove that all the great Religions of the world involve the doctrine of the Unity of God. Just as behind the Christian Unity of Persons there is held to be One Primal Divine Nature, so the philosophers of India have always proclaimed an Essential Unity behind the multitudinous deities worshipped by the common people. Rammohun Roy said,—“If Christians affirm God to be One, though in three Persons, they ought in conscience to refrain from accusing Hindus of Polytheism; for every Hindu, we daily observe, confesses the Unity of the Godhead, even while making it consist of millions of substances assuming offices according to the various forms of Divine Providence.” In thus speaking of the *Unity* of God, we must always remember that we do not use the word in the vulgar *arithmetical* sense. It would be as reasonable to speak of God as a Thousand or a Million as to say He is One in this sense. An Infinite Being must include within His nature all numbers, not only Unity but likewise Multiplicity. In the highest region of thought we lose sight of *number* and *quantity*, and deal only with *being* and *quality*. I confess, I see much greater breadth of religious thought in

the Eastern theology, which teaches that God has repeatedly become incarnate, and may be worshipped under a thousand different forms, than in that Western faith which monopolises God to one man, and admits only a triune expression of the Divine nature. When we speak of the *Unity* of God, we use the word in the sense of *CONSISTENCY* and *ORDER*, as opposed to *Contradiction* and *Caprice*. The more we know of the Universe, the more we are assured it is governed by unchanging Law ; and the more we know of History, the more are we assured that Freedom and Will are within the sphere of an over-ruling Providence. And these conceptions of Law and Providence guide our minds to the sublime generalisation of the unity of God.

The most ancient collection of Hindu hymns, the Rig Veda, says, "They call God Indra, Mithra, Varuna, Agni ; that which is One the wise call in divers manners."

A later Hindu poem, the Bhagavat Gita, speaks of God as "the Supreme Universal Spirit, the Eternal Person, divine, before all gods, omnipresent, Creator and Lord of all that exists, God of gods, Lord of the Universe."

Amid the polytheistic mythology of Greece and Rome, the faith of the Unity of God was held by such theists as Socrates and Cicero. we are told that Xenophanes, casting his eyes upward to the heavens, declared, "The One is God ;" and that he taught that "there is One Supreme God among beings divine and human . . . He governs all things by power of reason."

Listen to the sublime Theism of the "heathen" Plutarch :—
 "There are not different gods for different nations. As there is one and the same sun, moon, sky, earth, sea, for all men, though they call them by different names ; so the One Spirit which governs the universe, the Universal Providence, receives among different nations different names." And again,—
 "We say to God, 'ΤΗΟΥ ΑΡΤ : ' giving Him thus His true name, the name which belongs alone to Him. For what truly *is* ? That which is Eternal, which has never had beginning by birth, never will have end by death,—that to which time brings no change. It would be wrong to say of *Him who is*, that he was or will be, for these words express changes and vicissitudes. But God *is* : He is, not after the fashion of things measured by time, but in an immovable and unchanging Eternity. By a single Now He fills the *For-ever*. For Deity is not many, but that which is, must be One." And yet we have been accustomed to regard Plutarch as a benighted heathen !

And still further. We often speak of Christianity as the religion which is specially distinguished by the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God. Listen to this Hindu hymn, written 1,500 years before Christ :—
 “May our Father, Heaven, be favourable to us. May that Eternal One protect us evermore. We have no other friend, no other Father. The Father of Heaven, who is the Father of men.” Horace calls God “Father and Guardian of the human race.” Seneca writes,—“He, the glorious Parent, tries the good man and prepares him for Himself.” Listen to the confident faith of Epictetus, and tell me whether Jesus ever spoke a more comforting doctrine :—“If what philosophers say of the kinship between God and man be true, why should not a man call himself a citizen of the universe? why not a son of God? Shall not having God for our Maker, Father, and Guardian free us from griefs and alarms? *No human being is an orphan; there is a Father who incessantly cares for all.*”

All religions likewise teach that union with God is to be attained through the moral being.

The history of Religion is the history of the attempt to bring God and the Soul into atonement, to reach harmony between the Infinite and Finite, the Universal and Individual, the Social and Personal, the Spiritual and Natural. So intense is the longing to see this union realised between the Ideal and the Real, that most religions have crystallised around some Model Man, the Type of Perfection, in whom the Human and Divine were one, who was the great example to which all men must seek to rise. But that which Theology declares was miraculously realised in a unique Person, Spiritual Religion seeks to realise by natural development in humanity. Humanity is the ever-living Christ, who is to be perfected through suffering, strengthened by temptation, glorified by death, and at last made one with God.

This union of God and man is to be attained through the moral life. All great Religions proclaim Salvation by life and Atonement through obedience. “If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments”—that is the doctrine of every great religious teacher. “This is my religion,” said a Siamese nobleman to a Christian missionary, “to be so little tied to the world that I can leave it without regret; to keep my heart sound; to live doing no injustice to any, but deeds of compassion to all.” Here is a passage from a Hindu Scripture :—
 “God is most pleased with him who does good to others, who never utters calumny or falsehood, who never covets another’s wife or

another's goods, who does not smite or kill, who desires always the welfare of all creatures and of his own soul, whose pure heart taketh no pleasure in the imperfections of love and hatred. The man who conforms to the duties enjoined in the Scripture is he who best worships God : there is no other way."

We have been told that Moses gave the Ten Commandments by special inspiration ; yet Buddhism has these five moral rules :—"Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not commit adultery, nor any impurity. Thou shalt not lie. Thou shalt not intoxicate thyself with drink."

Cicero, likewise, has this noble commendation of the moral law :—"The true law is everywhere spread abroad, it is constant, eternal. It calls us to duty by its commandments ; it turns us away from wrongdoing by its prohibitions. We can take nothing from it, change nothing, abrogate nothing. Neither the Senate nor the People have the right to free us from it. It is not one thing at Rome, another thing at Athens ; one thing to-day, to-morrow another. But, eternal and immutable, the same law embraces all times and all nations. There is one Being who can teach it and impose it upon all : that is God." "God is just," says Plato, "and there is nothing that resembles Him more than the just man." We admire the words of Jesus,—“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect ;” yet Zeno used almost the same words,—“Men ought to seek after perfection, for God is perfect.” We speak of the Golden Rule of Jesus ; yet Confucius said,—“What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others.” Thales, the first Greek philosopher, taught,—“That which thou blamest in another do not thyself to thy neighbour.” Let me read to you two passages describing the Good Man. The first is from Epictetus.—“The good man must fence himself with virtuous shame. He must purify his soul. He must know that he is a messenger sent from God to men to teach them of good and evil. He must tell them the truth without fear. He must consult the Divinity, and attempt nothing without God. He will needs be smitten, yet he must love those who smite him, as being the Father, the Brother of all. When he rebukes he will do it as a Father, as a Brother, as the minister of the Father of all. He must have such patience as to seem insensible and like a stone to the vulgar. Instead of arms and guards, conscience will be his strength. For he knows that he has watched and toiled for mankind, that he has slept pure and waked purer, and that he has

regulated all his thoughts as the minister of Heaven." The second passage is from Marcus Aurelius.—"The good man is as a priest and minister of the gods ; devoted to that Divinity which hath its dwelling within him ; by virtue of which the man is incontaminable by any pleasure, invulnerable to every grief, inviolable to every injury, insensible to every malice ; a fighter in the noblest fight, dyed deep with justice, accepting with all his soul that which the Providence of the Universe appoints him. He remembers also that every rational being is his kinsman, and that to care for all men is in accordance with the nature of man."

Still further, we find the doctrine of Immortality, in different forms, to be universal as the religious consciousness. Christian theologians frequently teach us that apart from the resurrection of the body of Jesus there is no proof of the immortality of the soul. Paul, in his Rabbinical arguments about the resurrection, in the 15th chapter of 1st Corinthians, tells us that, apart from the resuscitation of the wounded flesh and blood of Jesus, all religious faith and all hope of immortality are destroyed ; that we are of all men most miserable, and that our best wisdom is to live a sensual life,—“Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.” I believe that many persons who have gained a rational religious faith still find great difficulty in yielding up belief in the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus, because it has always been associated in their minds with the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Such Christians, who can only believe a spiritual doctrine on the ground of a physical wonder, might learn a lesson from the “heathen” Socrates. Listen to the words which Plato reports him to have spoken on the day of his death.—“Can the soul, then, which is invisible, and which goes to another place like itself, excellent, pure, and invisible, to the presence of a good and wise God (whither, if God will, my soul must shortly go), can this soul of ours, I ask, being such and of such a nature, when separated from the body, be immediately dispersed and destroyed? Far from it! The soul departs to that which resembles itself, the invisible, the divine, immortal, and wise. And on its arrival there it is its lot to be happy, free from error, ignorance, fears, wild passions, and all the other evils to which human nature is subject.”

And again, after elaborate arguments, he says,—“To affirm positively, indeed, that these things are exactly as I have described them, does not become a man of sense. That, however, this, or something

of the kind, takes place with respect to our souls and their habitations, —SINCE THE SOUL IS CERTAINLY IMMORTAL,—this appears to me most fitting to be believed, and worthy the hazard of one who trusts in its reality ; for the hazard is noble and the hope is great.”

Plutarch has this noble utterance :—“ Those who have lived in justice and piety fear nothing after death. They look for a divine felicity. As they who run a race are not crowned till they have conquered, so good men believe that the reward of virtue is not given them till after death. Eager to flee away from the body and from the world to a glorious and blessed abode, they free their thoughts as much as in them lies from the things that perish. Not by lamentations and mournful chants ought we to celebrate the funeral of the good man, but by hymns ; for, in ceasing to be numbered with mortals, he enters upon the heritage of a diviner life.”

Cicero has this expression of spiritual faith :—“ Although you do not see the soul of man, as you do not see God ; yet, as from His works you acknowledge Him, so from memory, from invention, from all the beauty of virtue, do thou acknowledge the divine nature of the soul. It cannot be destroyed.” To travel still further back into antiquity,—in the Egyptian “ Book of the Dead,” written 2,000 years before Christ, appear the following passages :—“ The Soul lives after he dies. Every god rejoices with life ; the Soul rejoices with life as they rejoice. Let the Soul go ; he passes from the gate, he sees his Father God ; he makes a way in the darkness to his Father ; he is His beloved ; he has come to see his Father ; he has pierced the heart of the Evil Spirit to do the things of his Father God ; he is the son beloved of his Father. He has come a prepared spirit. He moves as the never-resting gods in the heavens. The Soul says :—‘ Hail, Creator, self-created ! do not turn away, I am one of thy types on earth. I join myself with the noble spirits of the wise in Hades. O ye lords of truth, I have brought you truth ; I have not privily done evil against any man ; I have not been idle ; I have not made any to weep ; I have not murdered ; I have not defrauded ; I have not committed adultery : I am pure, I am pure !’ Let the Soul go ; he is without sin, without crime ; he lives upon truth ; he has made his delight in doing what men say and the gods wish ; he has given food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked ; his mouth is pure, his hands are pure, his heart goes to its place in the balance complete. The Father of the spirit has examined and proved him. He

has found that the departed fought on earth the battle of the good gods, as his Father, the Lord of the invisible world, had commanded him. O God, the protector of him who has brought his cry to Thee, he is Thine, let him have no harm ; let him be as one of Thy flying servants. Thou art he, he is Thou ! Make it well with him in the world of spirits."

In the Hindu Vedas we are told that the God of the dead waits, " Enthroned in immortal light to welcome the good into His kingdom of joy, into the homes He has gone to prepare for them ;" reminding us of the words ascribed to Jesus,— " In my Father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you."

By means of the Union of God and Man through the moral being, Universal Religion teaches the ultimate good of all creatures. Thus the doctrine of Immortality is a Blessed Gospel of the final triumph of Goodness and Truth. It is the hideous dream of Theology that Sin and Suffering are to be perpetuated for ever in a dreadful Hell. The Gospel of Development has for ever destroyed that blasphemous dogma, and opened up to our minds the transcendent possibilities of the future. Popular Christianity represents Jesus ascending to the right hand of God, and gathering his redeemed in crowds around his throne ; while he leaves the great majority of men for ever lost in hopeless misery. In this respect the Saviour of Buddhism far surpasses the Saviour of Christianity, for he registers a solemn vow " to manifest himself to every creature in the universe, and never to arrive at Buddha-hood till all are delivered from sin into divine rest, receiving answers to their prayers."

I make no apology for bringing these numerous extracts to you this morning. The discovery of them has greatly refreshed my own mind. There are " other sheep," not of the Christian fold. In the Father's house there are " many mansions," room for all the great family of mankind. Now we begin to see a deeper meaning in the words of the creed,— " I believe in the holy Catholic (universal) Church." The spiritual Communion to which we belong is larger, both in Time and Space, than we supposed ; we find its members in every age and every nation. We must give up the fond hope, which many have cherished, that some day the world will become Christian. Believe me, the Religion of the Future will be grander than the Faith held by any one race ; it will be a Religion based upon that deep Religious Consciousness common to all men.

We are told that in Japan a very remarkable movement is taking place. The educated people of that island have given up the popular doctrines of Buddhism, but find themselves at the same time unable to accept the Christianity taught by Protestant and Roman Catholic Missionaries. A Manchester paper, the other day, gave the following curious information with regard to this religious movement in Japan. —“A vernacular paper, anxious for a sure foothold somewhere, is quite unable to close with the Gospel of the missionaries. In the first place, its pride is hurt by the airs of superiority which some of the Missionaries assume. They are not content with proclaiming the principles of Christianity ; they must also give those among whom they are labouring to understand that they regard Asiatics as ‘barbarous and ignorant.’ But still more fatal to their success are the demands which they make upon the faith of the people whom they seek to instruct. *The miracles of the Bible are, according to this writer, the great obstacle to the spread of Christianity in Japan and in the East generally.* ‘To teach Asiatics such things,’ he says, ‘who have been for many generations steeped in their own superstitions, only tends to make them cling all the closer to their own beliefs, and, far from attracting them to it, only drives them further away from Christianity, for we have a mass of traditions of supernatural deeds in our own mythology.’ He has heard of the Unitarians—a sect ‘disliked by all the others ;’ and, if all he has been told about them be true, he has ‘little doubt that there are many Japanese of the middle class’ who would embrace the religion they teach.”

Now, such facts as these should make us exceedingly thankful that we profess a form of Christianity which is in perfect sympathy with spiritual religion throughout the world. “There is diversity of operation, but the same Spirit.” Though we may still think it well to retain the distinctive name of Christian, yet we are able to look beyond the bounds of our fold, and realise our union to those “other sheep” who are likewise being guided by the same Divine Providence.

The Moslem proverb says,—“The leaves of God’s book are the religious persuasions.” There are pages in that book which we have learnt by heart, there are others we have scarcely looked into ; but *all* the pages are sacred, *all* are the utterances of that great Religious Sentiment which lies beneath our outward differences, *all* are the expressions of that universal Soul that reveals itself in a thousand forms. As the intercourse of different races becomes more frequent

and intimate, there will arise a deeper sympathy between different worshippers ; the sense of the oneness of Human Nature will lead to a higher conception of the Unity of God ; and the two great doctrines of Universal Religion will be,—that ONE IS OUR FATHER, and that ALL MEN ARE BRETHEREN.

Then shall be fulfilled the intuition of Jesus, expressed in the words,—“The hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father. The hour cometh and *now is* when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth ; for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a Spirit ; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.”

