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# UNBELIEF:

ITS NATURE, CAUSE, AND CURE.

A DISCOURSE

GIVEN AT

SOUTH PLACE CHAPEL.

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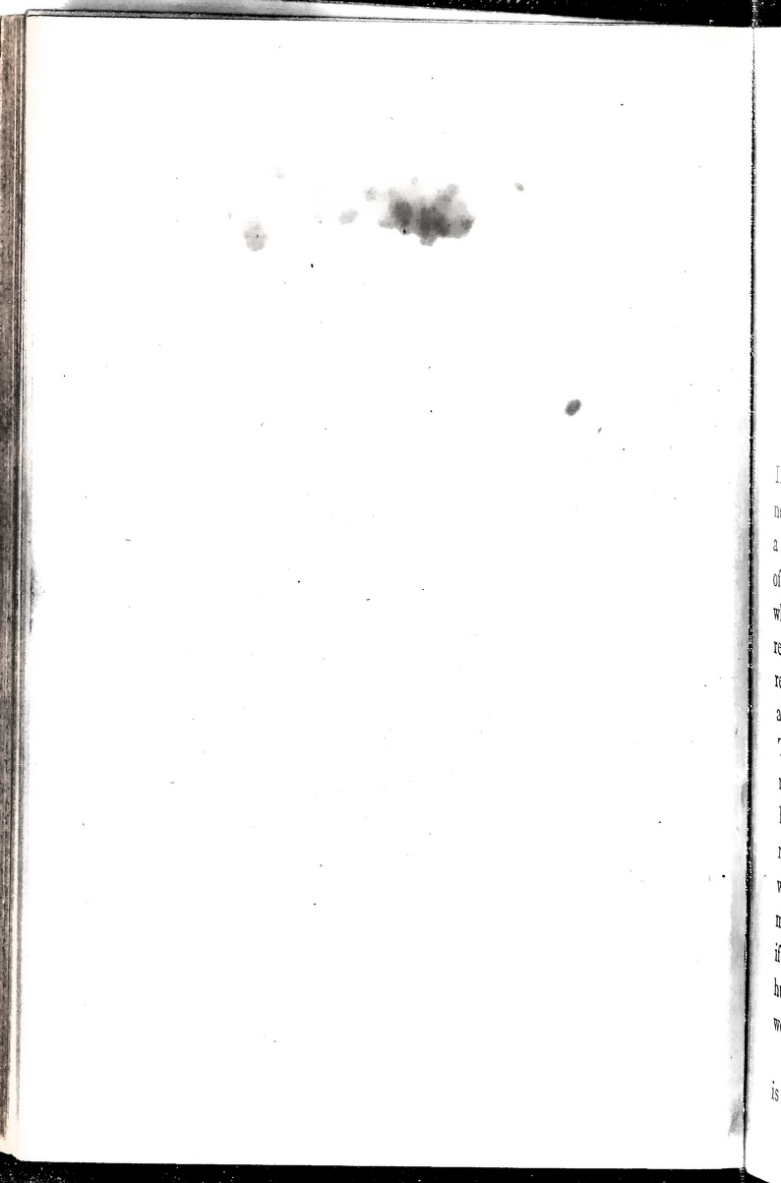
*APRIL 8th, 1877.*

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BY

*MONCURE D. CONWAY.*

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## UNBELIEF.

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IN the new magazine, the "Nineteenth Century," a new kind of article has been introduced. It is called a modern "Symposium." A group of eminent men of various schools of belief set themselves to consider whether, or how far, human morality depends upon religious belief. Most of the statements appear to me remarkable for the elaboration with which they beat about the heart of the problem without touching it. The simple question is, whether the religious belief is a revelation from without, or an evolution from within, human nature. If Christianity, for instance, is a supernatural revelation it must have been given to make the world better, and of course the world would lose morally if belief in it should fail. On the other hand, if Christianity be an evolution, a historic product of human nature, the same force which created it will work on as it disappears and bear us above it.

As to the plain proposition whether a man's morality is related to his belief, there is no question at all.

The experience of mankind in every age and place is that recorded in the Bible, "As a man thinketh in his heart so is he." But he must think it in his heart. It must be a genuine conviction. The "Symposium" would never have been written if this genuineness had not departed from the popular faith in the theology whose forms stand around us. "All that we are is founded in our thought," said Buddha. Our moral systems are so because man so thought. He once thought hanging the right punishment for theft, and then men were hung for stealing. That once moral law has become immoral because the underlying belief has changed. Men still think hanging necessary to prevent murder, and so long as they think so men will be hung for murder. Man once thought men could be made moral by threats of hell and promises of heaven; he has found out that these threats and promises easily disconnected themselves from morality, and even encouraged immorality by persuading men that by priestly conjuration they could pass from the worst life, from the very scaffold, straight to the arms of Jesus.

Supernatural religion was of old the rival of morality. Its wrath was poured out on those who trusted in morality and good works. We have among us two totally different and discordant religions. One is for the glory and pacification of God; the other is for the improvement of man and the culture of this

world. One is a religion whose legitimate embodiment is in sacraments, ceremonies, mysterious creeds, all related to man's estate in another world. The embodiment of the other is in social duties, charities, law and order, equal justice, and the pursuit of happiness. If belief in either of these religions were to fail, the institutions growing out of it would fail. If the root of belief in the other-world religion were cut, its foliage and fruit would wither—that is, sacraments, supplications, mysterious dogmas, priests, bishops, and a vast number of litigations and quarrels, whose cessation would hardly demoralise society however deplored by the lawyers. If belief in the religion of morality were uprooted, then the corresponding growths would decay—love and truth, charity and sympathy, justice and purity, all the social and civic duties.

Because the branches of these two trees mingle in society they must not be supposed to have one root. The priest and the moralist are both interested in the preservation of peace and social order. The priest cannot carry on his temple amid social chaos, and he borrows the ethical system. The moralist finds mankind selfish and passionate, so he borrows some of the menaces of the priest to frighten people into obedience. By this alliance our Society has been formed in which morality is labelled Christian, and Christianity is warranted moral.

Nevertheless, it was never an alliance of equals. Christianity at an early period gained the upper hand, because it was believed to command the more terrible sanctions of reward and punishment. Morality could threaten or bribe a man for only the few years of life ; but the binding and loosing of the priest extended through endless ages. He could always look down on kings and laws, and say to the people "Fear not them that at most can only kill the body ; but fear us who have power to cast both soul and body into hell for ever."

So Christianity became a throned ecclesiasticism : the priest became supreme. He denied that morality was any religion at all ; it was only a policeman. He would not deny it might be valuable if it supported his ceremonies and authority, but if it claimed to be the main thing, he made war against it.

So poor Morality had to make the best terms it could ; and it has gone on until now conceding that Christianity was the main thing, itself a dependent ; prayer it agreed was more important than justice, belief in the Trinity more essential to life than kindness, and theft a mere peccadillo compared with confounding the substance or dividing the persons of the godhead.

By this subordination the two as master and servant managed to get on peaceably until now. But now—

even in our own day—a tremendous break has occurred between them. And it came about in this way. The progress of knowledge discovered and proved that the fundamental dogmas of supernatural religion are untrue,—the speculations and dreams of ancient, ignorant tribes. This discovery has brought on a new set of moral questions altogether. The servant has been called suddenly to judge the character of his master. Does his master speak the truth? Certainly he has not in the past. Will he in the future? What! and admit all his divine knowledge to have been a pretence! Impossible. Then, says Morality, can I remain moral and still support untruth? Theology suggests, Why not shut your eyes to this discovery of untruth in your old master, or at least wink at it? But is *that* moral? asks Morality, anxiously. Is there not a morality beside that of conduct,—a morality for the intellect? If there are mental duties, then to assent to a fiction is as immoral as adultery. To believe a proposition aside from its truth, to believe it merely because of some advantage, becomes intellectual prostitution. The purity of the mind is bargained away.

It is vain now to claim the old authority of religion over morality: it is a part of the new discovery that there can be no authority but truth. So the system which sits in the seat of a religion, but finds itself opposed in the name of morality, has been compelled



to try and save itself by claiming to be the very soul and self of popular morality. Disbelieve, it says, if you must, but keep quiet about it; for if the masses come to disbelieve with you, they will break all restraints. They hold what morality they have, only because the priest has adopted morality, and told them it is part of their means of escaping hell; but if you take away all their præternatural terrors, they will not be restrained by mere considerations of public good, or the beauty of virtue.

To this Morality, merely as a prudential thing, confidently replies: Admitting your old hopes and fears still bind the ignorant, it is only the ignorant. You leave the educated world suspended between the old and the new; what is to keep the keepers—to lead the leaders—to prevent the cultivated class from sinking into mere hypocrisy, luxury, selfishness? Nay, the obligations your superstition imposes on the ignorant must become ever weaker even for them. The spread of knowledge, which is inevitable, will mean the spread of lawlessness. Every new schoolhouse we are building must prove a centre to radiate recklessness. As a mere practical policy your attempt to keep up the delusions is itself a delusion.

But Morality has a higher answer than that. As superstitious religion crumbles, Morality itself has ascended to be a religion. From being servant it



assumes to be master ; it claims to be itself a faith, a belief, and affirms that truth is to be maintained on principle and apart from any possible overt acts. It is not mere outward rule and law, but contains an inward life which inspires it to believe in what it affirms, and to religiously trust that the fruit of right will never be wrong, whatever may be the appearances to the contrary.

This is the living faith of the present ; it will be the commanding faith of the future. Theologians call it unbelief, but in no sense is it that. Its attitude towards the superstition which sometime superseded it is that of disbelief ; but there is a vast difference between disbelief and unbelief. The unbeliever is one who has not accepted a thing ; the disbeliever has positively rejected it. The unbeliever may not believe a thing because he never heard of, or never examined it, or does not wish to admit it ; the disbeliever has considered and denied. Consequently unbelief does not imply that there is any belief at all in the mind. Disbelief implies that a proposition has been rejected because there is something already in the mind which excludes it. Consequently a man cannot be a disbeliever of one thing without being a believer in some other thing. But unbelief is a mere blank, passive state of mind ; and it deserves some of the evil accent it bears to the religious mind, because it is generally

the counterpart of a torpid indifference. He who believes in science, he who believes in morality, he who worships humanity, or adores reason, cannot be called an unbeliever. He is a great believer. As to the rest, no intelligent mind exists which does not disbelieve something.

The Christian calls the man of science an infidel, or unbeliever; the Mussulman calls the Christian an infidel. Every religion is infidelity to other religions; and while sectarians thus call each other by hard names, all victims of idle words, the real enemy of all religion, unbelief,—systematic indifference, cynical contempt for all high principles,—is sapping the strength of every civilisation. No student of history can view without concern the moral dangers which attend the crumbling of any religion. We have before us the fearful scenes which followed the decline of the gods and goddesses of Rome in universal contempt and unbelief: amid the fragments of their statues and the blackened ruins of their temples stands Caligula knocking off the head of Jupiter and setting his own in its place, and Nero lighting up his orgies with burning Christians for his torches. When Vespasian came to rebuild the temples, repair the altars, and set the gods back in their shrines, what he could not bring back was belief in them. Titus tried the same. Titus was strong enough to carry to the temple of

Jerusalem the same desolation that Nero had brought on Rome, but Titus was not strong enough to carry into any mind the faith that had become a mythology. And amid those ruins Belief never sprang up again until called from its grave by the voice of a great soul, whom the old moral world crucified because he announced a new moral world—setting the religion of simple purity and love against established superstition and proud sacerdotalism.

There are not wanting prophets who remembering these things—remembering too the terrors amid which Romanism went down in France, Germany and England—predict that the decay of dogmas in the popular mind will be followed here too by the carnival of rapine and lust. I hope not. But if we are saved it will be because the real believers of our time—the disbelievers in superstition—have grown wise enough to anticipate and forestall the danger. The evil in those historic examples was that moral principles had not been cultivated in and for themselves. The light suddenly blazed on a long bandaged eye and inflamed it. The whole order of society had been made to rest on gods and goddesses, and when belief in them gave way the superstructure tumbled down. Undoubtedly the like fate would befall us if the people were still taught that the only motive to be honest is to get to heaven; that self-restraint is

only a prudent investment in paradise; that any crime may be outweighed by accepting the blood of Christ. If popular morality has no root of its own, if it is a mere graft on the decaying limb of a dying trunk, then when the dead tree falls, down goes all that was grafted on it.

But I would fain believe that such is not the case with our public morality. It has crept into our courts that a man may testify the truth without kissing the Bible, and may minister justice without believing in hell or heaven. It has made its way even into the admissions of the priest that his church presents no higher morality than the societies of those who reject his morality. The noble lives of the great disbelievers, who were yet the martyrs of their belief,—the Lyells and Grotes, Mills and Channings, Mazzinis, Strausses, Parkers, who sleep in honourable graves; the Emersons, Huxleys, Darwins, Carlyles, Spencers, at whose feet this living generation sits and learns not so much any theory as the great moral lesson of courage and fidelity,—these have not spoken to the world in vain. How far it has penetrated into the popular mind that virtue, kindness, truth and honesty, are independent of religious phantasms—good and essential in themselves—rooted in the honour of humanity;—this cannot be estimated. Our sanguine hopes that we shall escape the political Nemesis which has heretofore

pursued legally established falsehood may be disappointed.

Assuredly we cannot escape the moral Nemesis. Even now one phase of the decay of superstition is upon us,—a phase which in previous ages was represented in social ruin. It is the phase of mere unbelief: the general dropping out of belief of the old orthodoxy, accompanied by an indifference to all religion, chiefly shown in a pretence to believe what is not believed.

One hundred years ago when Soame Jenyns wrote his hard dogmatic defence of Christianity, a certain clergyman wrote on it: “Almost thou persuadest me *not* to be a Christian.” Since then the dismal theology of Soame Jenyns has run its course; it has sought in nature signs of the vindictiveness of God; in hereditary disease proofs of God’s hatred of man for Adam’s sin; it has paraded human misery on earth as a happy augury of endless misery hereafter. It so completed in the real mind of this country the work Soame Jenyns began in that old clergyman,—it has quite persuaded men not to be Christians. Nobody can see the gay, smiling, money-getting, eating and drinking multitudes around us, from the merry-makers of Good Friday—once funereal—to the clergyman with his old port, and imagine that they believe in hell, or the devil, that riches hinder heaven, and the world is all accursed. But, alas, the departure of belief has left



them in mere unbelief. One thing untrue as another, they stick to that which is most convenient. They make religion a mere minister to their social, political, or even pecuniary advantages.

Now, because this phase of no-faith does not break out in blood and riot, let us not imagine that it can exist without serious harm. A reign of terror were hardly worse than a reign of chronic hypocrisy and selfishness. Real unbelief means heartlessness, and it must lower the whole character of both individual and national life. Maybe society can get along in that way ; a colony of ants gets along ; but there can be no grandeur in a country which has no faith, there can be no ascent of national genius where there is no moral earnestness. Also a man may get along in one way by cauterising conscience and burying enthusiasm. When a shrewd fellow once defended his base occupation by saying, "I must live," a wit replied, "I don't see the necessity." A man has indeed to justify his right to consume and occupy a part of nature. A weed has no right to soil and sunshine that might turn to corn and wine. But what good thing can grow in barren soil under a sunless roof?

Under no such murky atmosphere, shrouding every star of ideality, can we raise our own minds and hearts, or those of our children, to any high aims, or secure beautiful characters. It can not be done by a



spurious devotionism, the hectic spot of a dying faith ; it can as little be done by cold-hearted absorption in pleasures of life, which should be only its fringe. It is no true belief to have faith in the senses and their satisfactions. Belief is that which trusts in principles, recognises laws and obeys them, and whatsoever it finds to be true, raises that to be the pole-star of its progress. The man of unbelief is the mere organism of external influences. When you have found what is respectable in his neighbourhood—what is strongest—the biggest church, the successful party, you have found all there is of him. There is nothing in him to build on. In the far West, among rough adventurers, along the Mississippi, with all their oaths and vices, one often finds that after all they have some principle ; deep down there's something they'll fight for, some point of honour they'll die for. The half-savage pilot who swears and drinks, and then sinks with his boat to save the passengers ; that noted gambler who at the late St. Louis' fire lost his life in saving others,—you can build that man into your social wall. But you can do nothing with your smooth polished gentleman who believes in nothing, and holds himself ready to affirm or deny anything you please so long as the mellifluous flow of his self-seeking existence is undisturbed.

It should be recognised that the great ages have

always been ages of Belief, and though they have uttered their mighty disbelief, they have never sunk to the sunless gulf of Unbelief.

There are two etymologies of the word Belief,—some derive it from the old German *belieben* to *belove*; others making it *be-leben*,—to live by. But in either case it marks the height from which the ordinary use of the word has descended.

Whether belief was of old that which a man lives by, or whether that a man loves, or beloved,—such indeed must a true belief be to any man if it is to serve him or others. Eight hundred years ago two great French theologians were teaching the world. One Abelard, the other Anselm. Abelard said, *Intellege ut credas*; Anselm replied, *Crede ut intelligas*. The world turned from Abelard, who said “Understand, that you may believe,” to follow Anselm, who said “Believe, that you may understand.” So putting out their eyes that they might see better, they groped their way until, mad with disappointment in the thickening darkness, like blind Samson, they pulled down pillars of throne and temple in revolutionary wrath.

It is time now to remember the long-forgotten motto of Abelard,—“Understand, that you may believe!” He only reaches his aim to whom his aim is clear. You can only live by a belief when it has entered profoundly into both brain and heart. It is

something you are to believe, believe, live by. You shall fall in love with it. Where that faith goes there will you go, its people shall be your people, its God your God. And if amid all the great events and causes of our time you can find nothing that can so kindle your enthusiasm, it is because you are the victim of that organised Unreason which has set up a tyrant for men to worship, and made the merit of belief consist in the absurdity of the thing believed.

Wonderful, indeed, it would have been if after ages of monster-worship and compulsory belief of the incredible, the very organ of faith should not have suffered atrophy in many. But let none rest content with that mere despair—the suicide of faith—Unbelief. Let every mind know that it is its nature to believe. If a mind will only ascend from unbelief to disbelief, if it will face the fact that the dogmas do not fill it with conviction and joy, and ask itself *why not*; if it will consider and think, it will intelligently disbelieve, and that disbelief will be the other side of a belief. An aged authoress once told me—“I do not believe in miracles because I believe in God.” If you do not believe in jealous Jehovah it is because you believe in supreme Love. If not in depravity, it is because you believe in Man. Follow that earnest scepticism, and it shall fall like a blossom before the fair fruitage of a larger faith.

