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THE DECAY OF BELIEF.

——
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PRICE ONE PENNY.

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"If there is one thing which a comparative study of religions places in the clearest light, it is the inevitable decay to which every religion is exposed."

PROFESSOR MAX MULLER.

I.

MODERN Science impresses upon every careful student the universality of one process—change. Everywhere, in the heavens above and on the earth beneath, in the growth of Society, and in the development of ideas, we find change and decay, birth and death, going on side by side. Serfdom gives place to Feudalism, Feudalism to Industrialism, one system of thought succeeds another, but so gradually that it is impossible to say just where the old order ends and the new begins. So long as we confine ourselves to certain departments of life, it is tolerably easy to make this process plain—even to the ordinary understanding; it is when we attempt to apply the same comparative principle to current religious ideas that we find it met with bitter opposition. Nor is this surprising. The fundamental idea of religion—particularly of revealed religion—is antagonistic to change. Religion delivers its message, not as something to be improved upon as the race develops, but as a message which contains the beginning and end of all that may be said upon the subject. Infallibility and growth are contradictory terms. A system that claims to be infallible closes the door to development; and thus it is, that while in other departments of life we readily recognise that the past is full of error, and that our chief duty is to improve upon it, in religion we are taught—in effect if not in so many words—that as we value the past we are bound to perpetuate its follies and mistakes.

Yet the "Time Spirit" makes its presence felt in religion as in other matters, and as we look abroad we cannot but notice that the creed which satisfied men and women for so long is steadily crumbling away. A century and a half ago Bishop Berkeley could boast that Geology failed to demonstrate that man had existed upon the Globe for a longer period than the biblical 6,000 years, the doctrine of hell fire was being preached with all its primitive warmth, the genesaic days of creation were believed to be ordinary days of 24 hours each, Wesley was declaring that to give up the belief in witchcraft was to give up the bible, and educated Christians were asserting—as uneducated ones still assert—that a refusal to accept Christian doctrines was merely an excuse for

leading an immoral life. And now mark the change ; the vast antiquity of man is admitted by all who are capable of forming a correct judgment upon the matter ; witchcraft is admitted by Christians to be an imaginary crime ; the days of creation are extended to indefinite periods of may be millions of years each ; and, finally, even the bitterest opponents of Secularism are driven to admit that a large number of those who have rejected all religions lead lives that many (who pride themselves upon their Christianity) would do well to imitate. The breaking up of the old creed is observable in every direction. There is not a church in England that is not honey-combed with unbelief ; not a single doctrine of christianity which is not called into question by men and women whose characters are beyond reproach, and whose intellectual ability admits of no question. There is scarcely a prominent preacher in England who does not lament the unwillingness of people to attend church, and the lack of interest shewn in its teachings by those who do. A speaker at a recent church Congress, held at Newcastle, said : "Indifference to religion was prevalent among all classes of the community, even the churches were not free from the prevailing infection. If this indifference was old it had a new aspect ; it was instructed indifference. Many of its advocates knew the Bible as well as they did. This added enormously to the gravity of the situation." Another pointed out that while the seating accommodation in places of worship in England was only sufficient for one-fifteenth of the population, even that was not half taken up. General Booth laments that "A great wave of infidelity is sweeping over the country, and Humanitarianism is taking the place of soul saving." Archdeacon Farrar informs a reporter of the *Newcastle Leader* that : "It would require a prophet to arise to cause people to attend church." And prophets are scarce now-a-days. And meanwhile, in the hope of retaining a few within the fold, Christ and his gospel are compelled to play an ignominious second to a tea meeting, lantern entertainment, or a musical festival.

Nothing could demonstrate the decay of belief better than the attempts made, more or less successfully, to tone down, or explain away altogether, much that christianity once prided itself upon teaching. You read the Bible, the New Testament, early Christian literature, and then in sweet simplicity set out expecting to find something like the same sort of teaching, and something like the Jesus of the New Testament, believed in by those who still pass under the name of Christian. But do you? You discover from the lips of your religious teachers that it is not absolutely necessary to believe in future rewards and punishments, nor even in miracles ; the Bible is not all inspired, only a part, though which part emanates from God and which from man—God only knows. As for Jesus, he undergoes a parallel transformation. In apologetic literature he appears in a quite up-to-date costume ; and a fitting introduction to many of the volumes of sermons upon such subjects as "Christianity and the Social Question" would be a picture of Jesus in corduroy and slouch hat, addressing the mob of Jerusalem upon the "Living Wage." Jesus, we learn, was a communist and a conservative : a socialist and an individualist ; an advocate of Papal infallibility and "The greatest Freethinker that ever lived ;" a charming variety of

characters to suit all classes—you pay your money and you have your choice. In the hands of modern apologists, the prophet of Nazareth becomes like one of the characters in "Pinafore,"—"A living ganglion of irreconcilable antagonisms."

II.

The two principal causes responsible for this decay of religious belief, are,—The growth of scientific knowledge, and the development of industrial life. By familiarising the mind with the conception of undeviating natural law, Science has, in the most effectual manner, sapped the foundations of religion. Doctrines that possessed a certain air of plausibility so long as men's knowledge of natural processes was small, became utterly ridiculous in the light of the positive knowledge afterwards acquired. Previous to the development of Modern Science, it was comparatively easy to entertain a belief in miracles, the efficacy of prayer, and kindred doctrines; but now that our scientific knowledge is becoming more perfect with each successive generation, we find the acceptance of such beliefs becoming increasingly difficult. It may be said to be almost a law of the mind,—answering to the first of Comte's three stages—that whenever the causes producing phenomena are unknown, there is a tendency to endow such phenomena with intelligence and will similar to our own. This tendency, noticeable among even educated people, finds actual expression among uneducated races, in the growth of their religious doctrines—from which our own are remotely descended. We find this principle illustrated in the deification of all natural forces by primitive man; and universally, we find a decline in this personification of Nature wherever positive knowledge is allowed to develop.

So long as Astronomy was in its infancy the planets were viewed, and worshipped, as living beings. The demoniacal theory of disease, as taught in the New Testament by Jesus, was believed in only so long as the causes inducing disease were unknown. Not one to-day views a comet as a messenger from God, shaking war and pestilence from its hair—a conception dominant in the Christian world as late as the fifteenth century. The reason why these beliefs, once universally accepted, are now rejected by all educated people, is obvious—every advance in our knowledge of the order in which phenomena occur has involved the overthrow of the conception of intelligent agencies at work in the world around us, and the recognition of nature in all its departments as a beautiful piece of machinery, unconscious, self-adjusting, self-repairing, and self-regulating. And thus it happens that as Science has developed, religious beliefs have declined. The fundamental ideas of religion and science are thoroughly antagonistic; one can only develop at the expense of the other; and just as history shows that periods of great religious activity have also been periods during which positive knowledge made but small progress, so a study of the development of the human mind shows that step by step with the growth of scientific investigation then has gone on a decline of the religious sentiment. And this brings me to a vital distinction between the present religious

conflict and preceding ones. In previous contests the fight has been between rival religions, involving as a result the acceptance of Paganism on the one hand or Christianity on the other, or a selection of one of the many forms of Christianity itself. The difference between the contending parties was thus a difference of degree only, to-day it is a difference of kind. The present struggle involves as a final issue the affirmation of religion as a fundamental article of our social creed, of its rejection as something artificial, hysterical, and useless; the issue involves the supremacy of either the volitional or the scientific theory of the universe. In previous contests the result has been decided quickly, because the same type of mind sufficed for either side; the struggle is longer to-day because a certain mental discipline is necessary before one can rank oneself intelligently with the new order.

The second cause I have mentioned as producing the decay of belief operates in a more direct manner. Broadly it shows itself in binding together people who were formerly leading isolated lives. Sydney Smith who gave utterance to some very wise sayings—for a clergyman—once said that, "If Bears were only to meet together occasionally and growl out their ursine grievances, their general behaviour would undergo an improvement." This applies with equal truth to human beings. While people are separated they are unsocial; it is chiefly by association that we become civilised; in associating with people of different habits and temperaments we acquire a breadth of character which it is almost an impossibility to acquire in any other manner. The sharp corners are rubbed off, our characters are rounded by this social friction, we begin to have sympathy with each other's failings, and to admire each other's virtues. But in addition to this the development of our modern industrial and commercial life which necessitates a rapidity and ease of communication unknown to earlier times, introduces, almost unconsciously, a new principle by which to estimate conduct. Men begin to judge their fellows by an altogether different standard; the very man who, formerly, would have drawn back in horror at the bare idea of associating with an Atheist, now finds himself embarked in the same enterprises, working on the same platform, and cherishing the same political and social ideals. The man whom he views, religiously, with horror, he regards socially with respect—and even admiration. These conflicting feelings at first neutralise each other, but gradually one of them gains the ascendant, and from the whole tenor of our modern lives, that one is bound to be the secular estimate of life and its duties. Thus a new standard by means of which to judge conduct, is introduced; instead of judging men and women by their adherence to a stereotyped code, a tendency—and one which becomes more powerful year by year—develops to judge them upon the grounds of the intrinsic worth of their actions. Every social reform that helps to break down class distinction, and to bring into closer relation different frames of mind hitherto isolated, is thus helping to disintegrate religious beliefs. Historically, civilisation has always followed the lines of commercial enterprise, and in our own day we can note how each successive step in the development of industrial life, or in the social emancipation of the people, has involved a decrease of the religious sentiment.

I do not pretend that these are the only causes operating against religion, only that they appear to me to be the principal ones; and I believe that all other causes, working in the same direction, will be found to be merely modifications of one—or both—of these two.

III.

Necessarily the disposition of the mind towards the same object varies from age to age, all mental growth implies this much. The beliefs of the wise men of one generation become fairy tales for the children of another. The Greek mythology was once believed in, so was the Roman, so was witchcraft believed in by many of the leading men of Europe two centuries ago. Who believes in these things now? The temper of the age has changed; it no longer discovers in the history of the Hebrew race the hand of divinity, nor in an earthquake the anger of God. The old beliefs no longer live because the type of mind which rendered their life possible is dying out. In the nursery there may be life in the old tales yet, the mind of the child is fitted for wonder, but in the church there is death. Tales that live in the child, die in the man; but the formulas belonging to the dead beliefs are not always buried with them, and the result is that divorce between belief and conduct which makes our modern English life such a living lie. During the Middle Ages the Christian world possessed two kinds of truth; truth according to philosophy, and truth according to theology! As a result of this convenient arrangement a statement might be true in one department and false in another. Without acknowledging it in so many words the modern Christian adopts the same vicious practice; principles taught in church have no place out in the world, and so we go on saying one thing and doing another. We shut out the Bible from our legislation, we exclude it in practical politics as much as is possible, we refuse to allow religion any place in five-sixths of our social life, and then utter the frightful lie that our civilization is based upon the Bible and its teachings. Ignoring, consciously or unconsciously, the fact that over each successive generation Christianity exerts a lessening influence, many of its adherents stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the signs of decay everywhere confronting them.

But it is not by limiting our view of Christianity to our own day or generation that we can hope to perceive how great the decline of that creed really is, We need to go further back and bring under our survey several centuries, and then we at once recognise what a poor insignificant thing Christianity has become. Time was when the Church held within its grasp the entire life of man, when art crawled to it for patronage, and music for shelter; when science and philosophy clipped their wings and worked humbly in the sphere to which theology had consigned them. To-day all is changed; people no longer believe, despite their protestations to the contrary, that the Church possesses any information that cannot be obtained by ordinary methods. Men die and go out into the great unknown with far less fear than they formerly did, when the priest stood at their bedsides croaking out his miserable message—concern for the spiritual welfare of the patient, not unmixed with the hope of becoming the possessor of his

worldly goods. Science, Art, Literature, and Music, are no longer provinces of the Church's kingdom. Science pursues its course and cares little whether the Church approves or disapproves; Art no longer depends upon Church parronage for its existence; Music has established a kingdom of its own, and no longer exists to illustrate Church doctrines, as it did only 300 years ago; while year by year the proportion of books published upon theology become less and less. Like a kingdom being dismembered, the Church has lost one province after another; it stands to-day, a mere shadow of its former self, a follower where it once led, obeying orders where it once issued commands, receiving thankfully a kind word, thrown to her like a bone to a hungry dog, from men whom she would have burned at the stake had they but lived when the Church was still strong.

Decay is as true of systems of thought as it is of inanimate objects. Just as the "everlasting hills" crumble away under the action of a number of hidden forces, so system after system of religion crumbles away before the advance of thought. It is not that the change is sudden or abrupt; on the contrary, it is so gradual as to be almost imperceptible. Like the sepulchre of Moses, no man knoweth the grave of a religion, but the change takes place all the same; and it is only after a long period has passed that we are able to look back and show that the fundamental character of the creed has changed. Just as the seed by sheer expansion breaks through the membrane that surrounds it, so a religion finds itself shattered by the steady growth of thought. It matters not the particular religion with which we are dealing, for all present substantially the same features. Everywhere, North, South, East, and West, in Ancient and Modern times, we find men sooner or later breaking through the bonds of ancient creeds and formulating rules of life born of human experience, and more in harmony with present needs and desires. In our own day we see this tendency at work stronger than ever; on all sides we find the old order breaking up and giving place to the new. Dogmatic authority has had its day; the future is for Freethought.

"Away, away from the darkened rooms,
Where they grudge you the light of day,
Where men low bowing in craven fear
To their mis-shapen idols pray.
Of superstitious worshippers
Enough in the years of old! To-day
Have done with portent, myth, and ghost,
Leave them to your teachers gray."—GOETHE.

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