

## THE RELIGION OF SCIENCE: THE WORSHIP OF BENEFICENCE.

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AUGUSTE COMTE wrote his *Positive Philosophy* and *Positive Polity* before the doctrine of Evolution had been presented in systematic form. In his time a general idea of development was entertained by many thinkers and a "nebular" hypothesis to account for the formation of the solar system had been worked out. But before Darwin and Wallace had contributed the results of their observations and thought upon the "Origin of Species," a correct general view of evolution was unattainable. Hence, although Comte actually used the term "evolution" to indicate the course of human development, it remained for Mr. Herbert Spencer to formulate the law of evolution.

But Comte's philosophic grasp of the history of civilisation enabled him to give to the world a brilliant illustration of the law which Mr. Spencer afterwards enunciated. He showed that the process of theological evolution was a progress from what he termed fetishism to monotheism: it was a progressive integration of beings and differentiation of functions—confusion giving place to coherence of thought.

Primitive men deemed themselves the slaves of a multitude of supra-human powers actuated by passions like their own. Their religious ideas, if we may call them religious, represented a superstitious and confused perception of the powers of their ancestors and of nature: a confusion of ancestor-worship and nature-worship. But they regarded these powers with fear rather than with reverence, being in constant terror of superior force—the awe-inspiring and terrific in nature, the fierce and cruel in man.

In the struggles between families and tribes the inferior, with their beliefs, were overthrown and sometimes exterminated; with

the result that the fetishes of the conquering tribes were held in supreme regard by increasing numbers. The objects of superstitious regard were gradually reduced in number. Instead of each natural operation being referred to a separate power, phenomena were gradually grouped, and each department of nature was regarded as under the presidency of a distinct being. In this way, and by the survival of those tribes whose beliefs and conduct were best adjusted to conditions within the tribe and outside it, the original incoherent superstition gave place to polytheism. Whilst the Asiatic and Egyptian polytheisms were coercive, that of Rome—tolerant of the gods of conquered peoples—promoted order and permitted progress; and Greek polytheism, accompanying a large amount of independence, developed a worship of freedom, strength and beauty. With the growth of a free exercise of intelligence, differences of power amongst the traditional gods were recognised. The inferior were disregarded, and in course of time all others were subordinated to a supreme One. But Greek development was arrested by the Roman conquest. Some of the gods of Greece had already been appropriated by the Romans, who, in their political and social decay, increasingly subordinated ethics to pleasure.

In the meantime the Hebrew god of battles came to be regarded as a righteous judge, and later, by Jesus of Nazareth, was revealed as a god of love, the father of all men.

Some of the disciples of Jesus visited Rome, whose people were perishing for want of a new ethical inspiration, and introduced Christianity, which subordinated the present life and happiness of each worshipper to a future and greater happiness.

Christianity was gradually established amidst the ruins of the Roman Empire. It exercised a restraining and purifying influence, and even aspired to international authority. It was most effective for good when it exerted least direct political power, and when it appealed most exclusively to the hearts and consciences of its worshippers. But its doctrines, brought together from different sources in prescientific times, were confused and incapable of retaining intellectual authority in the presence of free criticism and the advance of knowledge. Group after group of earnest religious people protested against dogmas which, from time to time, had become untenable. Sect after sect arose with a modified form of religious belief: and many a sect, whose difference from others was not of permanent value, disappeared.

Until within recent times the religious evolution had not proceeded beyond an imperfect monotheism; a stage of belief in

which all good was referred to the action of a good spirit, God, all pain and misery were referred to the action of an evil spirit, the Devil, and in which nature was regarded as the arena for the exercise of the powers of God and the Devil and their subordinates. But with the growth of a more scientific habit of thought, an increasing number of people now perceive that pain and misery are unavoidable consequences of certain modes of natural operation ; that ignorance and selfishness account for a great deal ; and that to personify evil is no more logical than to personify color or sound. Hence few people (who think) now believe in a personal devil.

Although people are apt, for a time, to rest satisfied with the step in advance made by the displacement of a belief in a personal devil, yet "the logical necessities of the understanding" require us to treat in identical ways the causes of both good and evil. We soon learn that good also is a result of perfectly regular modes of operation of natural forces within us and without. "The Reign of Law," one of the chief discoveries of modern observation and thought, accounts for the production of love, truth, and duty, as well as of hate, superstition, and crime. Hence, under the light of modern scientific philosophy, the imperfect monotheism of the past—in which God, Nature, and the Devil were regarded as three distinct beings—gives place to "Monism," or a faith in "one existence of which all phenomena are modes."<sup>1</sup>

By a scientific use of the imagination we are able to form a clear general idea of the evolution of the world and man : we are led to regard the whole process—the cooling and rotation of the nebula, its shrinkage and the detachment of its revolving rings, their break-up and concentration into rotating globes revolving around the centre of the system, the cooling of our globe, the precipitation of the heavier matters from its gaseous envelope, the crumpling of the crust and subsidence of the waters into the hollows, the beginnings of life, the growth of vegetal and animal organisms, their differentiation, struggles, and survival of the fittest, and the whole course of human development—as the varied workings of one power possessing within itself the potency and motive of all that has been or shall be.

Professor Fiske, in his address on the "Destiny of Man," has shown that although strength and courage enabled brutes to conquer, yet in the course of evolution intelligence and loyalty became increasingly important : that eventually mental characteristics counted for more in the battle of life than physical force. Though

<sup>1</sup> The terms in which the late Charles Bradlaugh summarily defined his philosophic belief.

practical efficiency has always conquered, this efficiency has been, to an increasing extent, the result of loyalty to the whole community, guided by a progressively clearer appreciation of relevant facts. War and industry, conflict and competition, are always weeding out the incapable; and it is found, in the long run, that good-will, regard for facts, and loyalty survive.

Auguste Comte looked forward to a time when the dominant human motive will be love, and when the chief practical purpose will be human welfare.

Both Spencer and Comte, in their philosophical writings, show that war is being displaced more and more by industry, and that sympathy expands with peaceful intercourse. The ideal of "Peace on earth, good will to men," is not a mere dream, but a prevision justified by observation of the course of human development. We may hasten the advent of this noble future by working systematically for it; or we may retard it by subordinating the public good to our own ease and pleasure; but if the world lasts only a small part of the time we may reasonably hope it will, we cannot prevent this consummation.

Though we have to refer not only all good but also all evil to the operations of the one power whose modes of working are described in scientific laws, we cannot regard this power as non-ethical even if we continue to judge the world-process from an anthropocentric point of view. But as soon as we conceive of Nature as a unity, man's pleasure and the contingencies of his evolution can no longer be the final ethical standard. If the universe be one, then universal good—whatever that may be—must be regarded as superior to man's good; and man must be resigned to find his welfare in conforming to the conditions of universal good.

Sir Edwin Arnold, in his *Light of Asia*, presents the Buddhist idea that:

" Before beginning, and without an end,  
As space eternal and as surety sure,  
Is fixed a power divine which moves to good,  
Only its laws endure."

If we find, and we do find, in the world-process, that pain and evil, though always with us, are subordinate to a growing fulness of life; that not only strength and beauty, but love, truth, and duty are surely though slowly rising in the scale of efficiency; and that the reign of peace and good-will is a certainty for our successors though not for us; then we are justified in attributing a character of general beneficence to the universal power. And this quality of beneficence, which means so much to us, has undergone

noteworthy changes of meaning corresponding to the stages of human development. A god of battles was worshipped because he gave to his people the victory : success in battle being, in the opinion of a fighting people, the greatest good. The Olympian gods of freedom, strength, beauty, and enjoyment were worshipped because these qualities seemed to the Greeks most desirable. The Christian God of Love, who offered joy unspeakable in a future life in exchange for faithfulness for a few years on earth, was worshipped by people oppressed by tyrants and without escape from trouble in this world. Men have always worshipped beneficence, though they have meant different things by it.

Comte, the first to propose a scientific religion, offered as an object of worship "The Great Being" (chiefly humanity), which, in his *Positive Polity*, he defined as "the whole constituted by the beings, past, future, and present, which co-operate willingly in perfecting the order of the world." Here he distinguishes beneficence, chiefly beneficent human lives, from conduct which has impeded or opposed human development. The beneficent results of natural activity are as clearly distinguishable from those to which, for the time being, we cannot ascribe this character, as are the beneficent results of selected human activity ; and if the Great Being, or Humanity, be a proper object of worship, still more worthy is the character of the power represented by the evolution of all natural usefulness and beauty and all human excellence.

The new positivism of *The Open Court*, or the Religion of Science, presents to us the idea of one universal power whose character is represented by the modes of its working, which are definable in scientific laws : and which Dr. Carus regards as a plexus of laws with ethical consequences. Avoiding the mistake made by Comte, who, in eliminating the idea of God from scientific religion, broke away from the past ; and avoiding also the error of Mr. Herbert Spencer in regarding the "Unknowable" as the basis of religion ; Dr. Carus maintains the religious continuity by regarding God as our conception of the everlasting and universal power whose modes of working, around us and within, condition the whole life of man and are the final ethical authority. God, in this sense, is the representation in feeling and thought of the only reality, and with the growth of knowledge and increased loyalty to a scientific and progressive ethical standard, the god-idea approximates more and more to this reality.

The Religion of Science cannot admit any confusion of quantity and quality : cannot sanction the worship of mere power as

such. Of absolute perfection and almightiness science knows nothing ; but beneficence is a demonstrable quality, though when regarded from the point of view of human welfare it does not appear to be coextensive with all natural activity. But we are obliged to abandon the anthropocentric point of view ; and yet to satisfy "the ethical demands of the soul as well as the logical necessities of the understanding" we seek a coherent idea of existence as a unity. As our powers of observation and reasoning enlarge, we have increasing ground for faith in the evolution of peace and goodwill in human affairs, in the continuous growth of love and understanding and righteousness. And we have increasing justification for the belief that a large amount of pain and unhappiness is a consequence of partial development, and that it will be progressively reduced as knowledge and social sympathy increase. Thus we have growing evidence of the beneficence of the One Existence of which all phenomena are modes ; and towards this beneficence worship is the inevitable emotional attitude. Combining the ideas of continuity, unity, and ethical value, we may conceive of God as *everlasting power working for universal good.*

The Religion of Science and the worship of beneficence are the logical and ethical aspects of religion as modified by modern knowledge and criticism. The religious revelation must be read in natural law, especially in the evolution of society and morals ; and it is the business of religion so to use the history of the past as to throw a clear light upon the paths of human improvement.

Comte taught that the evolution of humanity depends on the extension of sympathy, the adoption of a demonstrable faith, and the substitution of peaceful industry for war. He proposed the concert of the West for the preservation of peace, for the suppression of war and aggression, and for the development of all the powers of humanity. He trusted in the main to moral improvement, and initiated an ethical organisation to promote it.

Mr. Herbert Spencer has shown that, to a large extent, human development has depended on a progressive political incorporation : on the compounding and recompounding of groups in more stable and more effective political and industrial organisation.

Dr. Fiske, foreseeing the consequences of the progressive political incorporation and growth of sympathy, and relying on the law of evolution, prophesies the final union of all states in one world-wide federation and "the parliament of man."

It seems inevitable that, sooner or later,—sooner, if we under-

stand the laws of human development and systematically work for it,—humanity will be one complex organisation animated by one aim, working under the impulse of love or good-will and the guidance of science for the greatest good of all.

As all existence is one, though working in the various ways described in scientific laws, each one of us, being a part of this existence, should express in his life the character which gives ethical value to science. Nature, or God, works by regular methods towards beneficence; hence the final character of force is beneficent. It is difficult, perhaps beyond our power, to discover to what extent each natural movement conduces to good. But we know that our surviving needs and ideals which, except in degree of development, are the same now as they have been throughout historic time, are certain guides to the welfare of the race. Each one of us, in his own life, should consider himself a function of the everlasting power that impels man towards organised efficiency, beauty, love, truth, and duty. No one of us is without the potential beneficence, which is the most general ethical characteristic of universal power. Beneficence, therefore, should be our watchword and our standard of conduct. This character is needed in every walk of life: not mere ignorant sentimentalism—which often weakly does harm with the best intentions—but well-considered helpfulness which looks beyond immediate results to future consequences. The preservation of peace, the suppression of war, the promotion of international concert for progressive purposes, the cultivation of sympathy, truth, and duty, the appreciation of worth and scorn of wrong-doing and greed; all these enter into the character of beneficence, which each one of us should strive to exemplify. The Religion of Science implies that as there is only one existence, of which all phenomena are modes, so there should be only one character—Beneficence—dominating all activity.