

AN EXPLANATION.¹

BY VICTOR CHARBONNEL.

IN *The Open Court* for May, 1898, following a generous article by Mr. Theodore Stanton, in which he gave an account of my rupture with the Catholic Church, you placed before your readers what appeared to you to be the reasons for the check I received in my attempt to organise a parliament of religions in Paris, and for my subsequent withdrawal from Catholicism. I wish to thank you for the generous sympathy which you manifested for me personally in that article, and also to compliment you on the discretion with which you treated some very delicate questions. But at the same time I must confess that your reproaches, although expressed in a friendly spirit, affected me profoundly.

You think that I am wanting in calmness and prudence, that I am an enthusiast, that I acted impatiently, and that from all these causes I was incapable of so difficult an undertaking as the organisation of a parliament of religions. This criticism, to be sure, was enveloped in a eulogy. The graceful terms in which it was written prevent my taking offence. And yet it nettled me.

It is perhaps true that I have not the qualifications of a skilful organiser; but I have never had an excessive ambition to organise a parliament of religions at Paris. Such a work could not depend upon me, nor upon any one man. A committee would have been necessary for the undertaking. All that I ever pretended to do on my own account was to broach the idea, to propose it for examination, and to have it discussed. I wished only to play the rôle of a writer who advocates what he believes to be a good thing, nothing more. Others, I thought, would come after me, wiser and more influential, who would realise the idea in a practical organisation.

¹ Translated from the MS. of M. Charbonnel by I. W. Howerth, Ph.D., the University of Chicago.

Now you may see in a book I published under the title of *Congrès universel des religions en 1900: histoire d'une idée*, how this great idea of a new Parliament of Religions was welcomed by the Catholic world of Europe. Scarcely had I published an article upon the subject in the *Revue de Paris* (Sept. 1, 1895) when the bishops expressed their most emphatic disapproval. The cardinal archbishop of Paris, M. Richard, declared that he would inflict upon me severe punishment if I continued to advocate such a project, a project which he pronounced "heretical."

Now you must admit that even with some patience I was justified in finding this rigid prohibition of presenting in Europe as worthy of consideration what was an accomplished fact in America, a bit tyrannical. I was to be severely punished for merely saying a word in favor of a Parliament of Religions in Europe, a project which you had realised easily in America, even with the participation of Catholic bishops. Frankly, the difference between us was too great. I maintained with tenacity my right to place before the public through the journals and the reviews, and by means of lectures, this religious and social question. If I appeared to put into my work too much passion it was doubtless because I was aware of the extraordinary restraint which the Catholic authorities wished to exercise over my words prior to any action in the matter.

The government of the Catholic Church in Latin countries has become purely political and administrative. It is a bureaucracy without any true religious vitality. Everything is decided by an arbitrary act of power, by authority. Ideas are not left to free public discussion. No, everything is ordered or prohibited at once without letting in the light upon it. It is merely an absolute authority which demands blind, unreflecting submission. When in Anglo-Saxon countries you admit authority in matters religious it is only after the problem has been examined by individuals independently, and then only for announcing a supreme decision. Authority does not precede nor suppress free thought: it follows and sanctions it. It was my wish that in Latin countries authority should wait before pronouncing upon a parliament of religions the outcome of a full and moderate discussion, as in Anglo-Saxon countries. That was not an extraordinary desire, you must admit. But it was strenuously combated and rejected by Catholic prelates. You will understand, then, why I felt some indignation, and how it came that I thought there was some deception practised. It must have seemed to you, however, that I could easily raise the

question of a Parliament of Religions, for in your article in *The Open Court* you asserted that I wished to draw from it consequences too large, and in place of making it, as in Chicago, "a presentation pure and simple," I wished to utilise it as a means of renovating the Church by insinuating into it a more liberal spirit. I failed, according to you, because the dignity and integrity of each church represented in a parliament must remain intact, and you believe that I was wrong to pretend to change through this reunion of 1900 the Catholic Church and its traditions.

Yes, I did indeed embarrass the project of a parliament of religions, and I ought to have acted perhaps with less impetuosity. I feel myself that it was a bold thing to try to give it a liberal signification. But that is due to intellectual conditions peculiar to France. Ideas among us interest and arouse more than facts. We philosophise too much, perhaps, before acting, while you Americans act, looking later to the care of philosophising. No sooner had I published a few articles on the Parliament of Religions when all the press began to occupy itself with the religious philosophy connected with this interesting project. It began to discuss tolerance, liberty of conscience, Christianity, religions, God Himself, and also the actual conditions of the Catholic Church, the new Catholicism of the United States, Christian Socialism and a dozen other subjects more or less connected with the main idea of a Parliament of Religions. I was then induced forcibly to express my liberal understanding of modern Catholicism. If I did so with some heat it was in the face of the hostile bishops, and in defence of my freedom. Hence there resulted an appearance of revolt. And if I showed an excessive zeal in spreading liberalism, and in modifying the spirit of the Church, it was because the campaign of the press put me under the necessity of explaining the philosophical import of a Parliament. Hence, it appeared to you that I was preoccupied with my own personal sentiments of liberalism.

Moreover, who would have dreamt that this struggle would have lasted two years—from September, 1895, to October, 1897, the date at which I left the Church? In these two years, by articles and lectures, in which I sought to reason with my adversaries, and to which the bishops replied only by threats, there were numerous occasions for losing patience. "Singular thing"! the non-Catholic journals remarked, when at last I made known my determination, which I had too long postponed. I am very desirous of recognising the justice of your criticisms, but I find that they are

in contradiction to the judgment of all the liberal minds in France which have followed my struggles, and my evolution of conscience.

I come now to what I believe you most severely condemn in your article in *The Open Court*, that is, the accusation of duplicity which I made against certain Catholic prelates, and particularly against Cardinal Gibbons. "Duplicity" is a strong word, and I do not remember ever to have used it in controversy. But I still affirm that bishops who were at first favorable to a parliament of religions did not show themselves firm enough when other bishops of an uncompromising spirit opposed the project strongly, and that they used too much skill and diplomacy in freeing themselves from responsibility. They went so far as to deny words which they had spoken in the presence of others. They abandoned me after having encouraged me and urged me into the struggle. The whole matter is all a painful history which the Catholics of Europe themselves have severely judged and condemned.

I do not wish to recriminate as to Cardinal Gibbons, for whom I have always had the greatest respect, but as to what concerns him I must place before your eyes and under the eyes of your readers two documents which will enable you to judge the case without any long comments from me.

I had written in the *Revue de Paris*, September 1, 1895, that Cardinal Gibbons, passing through Paris on his way to Rome, had encouraged me to propose publicly the question of a parliament of religions in 1900, and that on his return from Rome in a personal interview he had assured me of the good disposition of Leo XIII. toward the project.

On the 10th of September, 1897 (two years after), Cardinal Gibbons sent this letter to the editor of the *Revue de Paris*:

"My attention has been recently called to an Italian translation of a passage in the *Revue de Paris* which personally concerns me. In this passage there is put into my mouth words of encouragement to M. Charbonnel on the subject of a parliament of religions at Paris in the year 1900, and I am made to say to him 'The Pope will be with you, I am sure of it.' I was very much astonished and troubled by these purely gratuitous assertions. I have already formally denied them in the journal *Le Monde*, affirming that they represent thoughts which I have never had, words which I never pronounced, sentiments which I have never entertained. I renew to-day this denial in regard to all that is affirmed in the passage referred to, and in particular the sentence 'The Pope,' etc."

Now my visit to Cardinal Gibbons took place in the *Seminaire Saint-Sulpice* in Paris, and M. Bonet-Maury, professor in the faculty of Protestant theology, was present at one of these visits as representing the Protestants in the preliminary conference in regard to the organisation of a parliament of religions. He wrote to M. Ernest La Visse, editor of the *Revue de Paris*, to confirm the report which I had made of the words of Cardinal Gibbons, and M. La Visse published the following note in reply to the Cardinal's letter: "We publish a letter in which Cardinal Gibbons formally denies the allegation of M. Charbonnel in his article upon the *Congrès Universel des Religions en 1900*. M. Charbonnel requests us to say that he maintains all his assertions. The words of encouragement given by the Cardinal to the idea of a new congress of religions are attested expressly by M. Bonet-Maury, professor in the faculty of Protestant theology, who was present at the interview." (*Revue de Paris*, Feb 1, 1898.)

M. Ernest La Visse, professor in the Sorbonne and editor of the *Revue de Paris*, and M. Bonet-Maury are persons whose authority and good faith will not be questioned. Moreover, is it not natural to suppose that Cardinal Gibbons on being questioned in regard to a new parliament or congress of religions would encourage the promotion of such an idea? One who had taken so great a part in the parliament of religions in Chicago ought to be, unless he meant to deny his past, with the promoters of a second parliament at Paris. Again I say that I do not wish to be unjust towards Cardinal Gibbons. I only deplore that there is in Catholicism a *raison d'église* as there is in government a *raison d'état* which obliges men of power to use subterfuges, diplomacy, and reticence, and to suppress or deny their real sentiments.

You will accept, and your readers will accept, this *Explanation* in so far as it is just, but remember at least that the cause of a parliament of religions is more difficult to defend in Europe than in America, and that doubtless any one else besides myself, with a different personality, would have failed. During the years since I left the Church and abandoned the project no one has taken it up. There has been absolute silence.

Some liberal Catholics, such as M. Anatole, M. Le Roy-Beaulieu, M. Etienne Larny, M. l'abbé Fremont, wished indeed to act in concert with M. Auguste Sabatier, Dean of the Faculty of Protestant Theology, M. Bonet-Maury, professor in the same faculty, and M. Zadoc-Kahn, Grand Rabbi, to transform the first project

of a parliament to a universal congress of religions, and to hold such a universal congress.

Here are the very clear and broad declarations which we sought to have accepted by a committee of thirty adherents, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Independents:

A UNIVERSAL RELIGIOUS CONGRESS IN 1900.

The parliament of religions which was held in Chicago in 1893 on the fourth centennial of the discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus will be judged in the future as one of the most important events in the religious and moral history of humanity. The solemn assembly of one hundred and seventy representatives of the principal religions of the world proclaimed the modern aspiration of the soul after tolerance and religious peace, for a fraternal union of all men of good will. That was in the general order of civilisation a great and salutary advance.

Some generous minds have conceived the project of renewing at Paris in 1900 what took place in Chicago in 1893, and to affirm by a *Congress* of religions the work of peace so happily begun by the *Parliament* of religions. But an opposition difficult to meet and moreover respectable in its motives has been made by different theologians who see in the fact of a congress where all religions will be admitted on conditions of parliamentary equality the danger of recognising a sort of doctrinal equality and moral equivalence of religions. Historical events, however, would not be exactly reproduced at different dates and in countries profoundly different in ideas, customs, and national spirit.

The project of a congress of religions, that is to say, of a congress in which churches and religious confessions would be represented by official delegates, has therefore been given up.

However, the idea of a great religious manifestation in 1900 on the border line of the two centuries could not be abandoned without regret. If it is necessary to give up the idea of a representation regularly established by the religious societies, could not men of different religious beliefs have a reunion in which, in conditions of personal independence which should leave intact all rights and all confessional pretensions, they might study the many problems of the modern conscience?

Priests or laity, all those who are interested in the social and religious future of humanity, could be admitted to this reunion.

Their persons and their words would only represent them-

selves and not their religious confessions. They would be representatives in their moral influence without being in any degree official and responsible representatives. It would be a *congress* of religious men and not a *congress of religions* or of religious forms. It would be a *universal religious congress*.

These considerations have decided us, believers and religious thinkers, to take the initiative in a Universal Religious Congress to take place in 1900 in Paris or in Versailles.

I.

The moral ends of this Universal Religious Congress would be as follows :

1. To affirm the natural legitimacy and perpetual nature of the religious sentiment, the educative virtue and the social power of religion in the progressive realisation of the human ideal.

2. To proclaim religious liberty, the sacred right of every man to tolerance and respect, and to protest against all fanaticism of race, of religion or of irreligion.

3. To seek, in the absence of doctrinal unity, a fraternal union of all men established upon the single fact that they are religious, and to elevate in different religions the things which unite above those which divide, the sentiment of religious fraternity above differences of creed.

II.

The rules of this Universal Religious Congress are to be as follows :

1. The Universal Religious Congress which will meet in 1900 in Paris or Versailles will be organised by an international and inter-religious committee which will be made up so far as possible from representatives of all the great religions of humanity, and also from certain freethinkers who without belonging to any regular denomination are in sympathy with the manifestations of religious ideas.

2. The congress will have two kinds of sessions : first, those which will take place in the morning, closed to the public and reserved only for members of the conference ; second, those which will take place in the afternoon and be open to the public. The first will be devoted to the study of the condition of religion in the different countries and in different races, and the discussion of some of the more important religious problems of the present time. The second will have for their object the exposition by selected speakers of the general philosophy of religion.

3. The right will not be denied to any members of the congress who may claim the liberty of announcing their present faith or that of their co-religionists. But the length of their discussions will be limited.

4. All criticism, disputation, and polemic, doctrinal or personal, will be interdicted. Each speaker will be expected to speak in a positive sense, in an affirmative exposition of his faith or his thought, and never in a negative sense by talks against the faith or thought of others.

5. The congress, in short, will be directed in a spirit of large tolerance and mutual respect according to the rules of parliamentary equality. This equality will not imply the philosophic and moral equality of different religious doctrines nor indifference in the matter of faith, for the reason that it is not founded upon the value of religions but upon the respect due to the human soul.

III.

The programme of the Universal Religious Congress will be finally determined by a committee on organisation. From the ends to be accomplished by the congress it can be foreseen what the principal subjects of this programme will be.

1. The natural legitimacy and ineradicable nature of the religious sentiment.

The psychology of religious phenomena and the proof of their irrefutability can only be made after the testimony of all humanity in such a congress. No philosopher or sociologist could fail to recognise the greatness and importance of a declaration from men of all countries and every land that they are naturally and invincibly religious. They will set forth the profound relations of religion with the individual moral life, with the family life, with political and social life, with the arts, the sciences, and all the general progress of civilisation. Thus will be proclaimed the psychological, moral, social, and esthetic value of religion and the benefit of its influence.

2. Religious liberty.

It will be considered in its principle, in its history and its progress. The actual conditions of practical, religious tolerance in the entire world will be impartially discussed, as well as the obstacles which are still opposed to a universal respect of conscience.

3. The religious fraternity of all men.

The congress will declare that religion is, and ought to be,

among men a principle of love and peace, and not a principle of hatred and war, a bond and not a cause of discord; that humanity may, and ought to, find the sentiment of its moral unity in a common aspiration which lifts all hearts toward God, in a common seeking after that God who is nowhere left without a witness: And finally that there is a religious fraternity by which the idea of the brotherhood of man is completed and confirmed in the notion of the fatherhood of God.

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Mark well the spirit and conciliatory tone of this programme. When it came to signing it, before delivering it to the journals to be spread abroad over the entire world, Catholics (especially M. Anatole, M. Leroy Beaulieu, and M. Etienne Larny) demanded the privilege of submitting it to Pope Leo XIII. For this purpose they sent a messenger from Paris to the Pope. After his visit, in which they were given to understand that they would have formidable opposition at Rome, they renounced the attempt, refused to sign it, and withdrew without explanation.

I was profoundly saddened by this occurrence, for it is to me a proof that the best minds and most noble and generous souls will be in the future powerless to change the dogmatic absolutism and the political authority of the Catholic Church. There is to be seen here the bitter war which the Jesuits and a majority of the French bishops are making at this very moment against what is called "Americanism," that is to say, those ideas of American Catholicism such as are represented by Cardinal Gibbons and Archbishops Ireland and Keane. The life of Father Hecker, translated into French, has brought on an extremely bitter controversy. The Jesuits have tried to have this book put in the index, thus condemning Cardinal Gibbons and Mr. Ireland, who recommended the work by a letter of introduction. It has been said from a reliable source that Rome is near yielding. This is a grave affair, and shows the sad spectacle of the Church of Europe delivered into the hands of the Jesuits. You spoke in your article of the anguish I felt before breaking with the clergy and the Church of Rome. No one will ever know what a sorrow it was for me to lose, one after another, all my illusions, all my hopes, but I am sure I have accomplished, not without cruel conflicts of conscience, a great duty in separating myself from a Catholicism which is scarcely religious or Christian, and which is above all an ecclesiastical organisation for the oppression and destruction of all the intellectual, moral, and social energies, of a believing humanity.