

A FREETHINKER ON THE RELIGION OF SCIENCE.

BY L. L.

THE TROUBLE with all reformers seems to be that they try to fit old ideas and systems to entirely new conditions, instead of looking the problem squarely in the face, setting aside all pre-conceived notions, and starting with a free field and an open horizon.

You try to unearth forgotten and worn-out theories, mostly based on the densest ignorance, and with these to patch up the many systems of religion in use, which systems, however, you recognize are slowly going to pieces.

Now, I am a machinist and it often happens that I want a screw to use in some contrivance that I am making. I have any amount of old and new screws, but somehow none of them are what I want,—some are too short, some too thick or too thin, others have the wrong thread, while in the rest the head will not do. After searching a good deal I generally find out that I am losing my time, and then I go to work to get a proper sized piece of the right metal and make a good screw of the kind and form that I require, and the job is a good one. Many machinists will use any screw in their jobs just because they are too lazy to make a proper one, and others will pass their time hunting for one to fit, cutting it off, forcing the threads and filing the head with the ordinary result that in time they get a loose screw.

It is just the same with religion. A man's religion must fit his ideas and his intelligence in order to be of any use to him. Every man has the religion he deserves, you can no more imagine a religion that will fit every one, than you could make a shoe that would fit every foot. As it is, in spite of the many sizes and kinds of shoes made, many people have corns from wearing footgear that doesn't fit. It is just the same with religions, except that the religious corns are harder to get rid of.

Another point is that you are always trying to find the beginning and the end of everything, and it seems that it can not enter your heads that there are things that have no beginning nor end. You remind me of old Golay, the foreman in our shop when I was an apprentice in the Old Country. He was a very careful old fellow and as methodical as they make them. Well he had a roll of fine brass wire of a special kind used in our trade and used to get mad if we cut a piece off from the middle of it; he wanted us to cut pieces from the end only. One day he received a new hank of wire and while he was busy elsewhere we apprentices got hold of it, soldered the two ends together and finished it so nicely that he could not see the joint. Presently he came back and wanted a piece of wire, and then the fun began. He hunted for the end of that hank for the better part of an hour till the boss came in and asked him what he was doing. Golay explained. Our boss who was a practical man grabbed a pair of nippers, cut the wire and told Golay that there he had all the ends he required.

There are plenty of Golays in religion and philosophy. All the ends you want are right here. The end of time is now; look at your watch—that is it, the present moment. You can work along backwards as far as you can remember or find out, and you can look along forwards as far as you can foresee or prophesy, but there is not any end in either direction, and it is no use looking for it. 'Tis the same for space and size, the end of size for you is yourself and the ordinary scale of your surroundings. There are bigger things, and others larger than those, and so everlastingly, there is not any end to bigness. On the other side there are smaller things and others smaller still, far past the power of the microscope. There is no end in that direction either, so it is not any use in searching for it.

When I say there is no use in searching for the end I do not mean that you should not try to find out what there is, quite the contrary; but begin where you are and work backwards or forwards from your base, then you will have some point of comparison to begin with.

Some time ago I was not contented with my religion and started to investigate. The trouble was that there were a whole lot of things in it that did not hang together, so that if some were true, the others were lies and *vice versa*. I asked some of the official explainers to expound these points to me, and was told that they were mysteries past human comprehension, which I suppose means that

they did not know; and also that it was a sin to try and find out, which I did not believe.

I investigated as well as I could and found the subject pretty extensive. I found out that there were many religions besides the one I started from, and that except for little differences of detail and local flavor they were all alike, but used different names for everything. I found that each religion went back to some founder which its partisans declared to be the only original inventor of morality. They also say their founder had all the virtues and no vices and that he could not be wrong. On investigating further, I found that each founder of a religion had taken his morality ready-made from somebody else, most likely from his mother; that morality was public property of mankind and that no one held a valid patent of invention for it, and further that the only real originality that each founder had, was some system that he had imagined would explain the beginning and end of things. As there is no such beginning or end the explanation was not of much account. I also found out that these founders were remarkably bright, intelligent, and good men acting in good faith; but also that as a rule none of their followers acted up to their teaching and generally did just what their masters told them not to do.

I found that each religion had an immense library of books to explain what stuff the soul of man was made of, where it came from and where it went to, the sex, form, color, shape, size, dress, and walking sticks of its gods, and how men ought to act in every conceivable circumstance; but I also found out that except for the teaching of morality all the rest was pure moonshine; the followers of each religion had never seen their gods except in nightmares, nobody had ever come back after death to recount his thrilling experiences, and no one remembered much of what had happened to him before he was born.

Some of this literature is pretty, some interesting, some even poetical; but in general there is a certain sameness and lack of originality all through. The books may be in Sanskrit, in Greek, in Chinese, in Latin, in Pali or in Katakana; but one finds in all the same old characters doing the same old wonders for the same unaccountable reasons, and descriptions of the same old heaven and of the same old hell which no one ever saw, the only difference being in the local trimmings.

As a rule the morality of each religion is good for the people it belongs to, and in that line there is not much difference between them, although some are a little stricter than others. Anyhow the

standard of morality is not of much importance,—the amount of practice is the point.

Each religion seems practically to admit a number of gods, while declaring that they have only one; but there is one god that the followers of all religions worship with the greatest unity and unanimity, at whose respected name every ear is opened, and whom they all love and desire, whose name is the Almighty Dollar.

Now in saying all this, I do not want to mention any religion in particular, to hurt any one's susceptibilities, nor to destroy any one's illusions. From what I see the people who follow the religion of Science have lost their illusions and are looking for a new stock. I notice that in every nation and under every religion, the better educated class does not believe in that which the vulgar accepts unconditionally, that they follow outwardly the practices of their sect, but are either too lazy or afraid to break with tradition, to investigate and to start anew; but at most pass their time digging up the dust and refuse of ancient and foreign religions in the vain hope of finding something adapted to the conditions of modern civilization and knowledge.

I do not know much, and all books on religion contain a good deal that I cannot understand, not so much because it is beyond my very ordinary intelligence, as because it is written in a style which seems especially intended to be obscure, mysterious, and equivocal. Also many hard words are used, and languages are ransacked to find words with misty meanings, and one is told that years of profound meditation are necessary in order to comprehend the inner secrets of a religion.

Now this is not so, but all is really very simple if we look at things in the right way. The problems of God, the soul, eternity, etc., are much easier to understand than people generally think. One has only to put aside preconceived illusions, and look at things in a practical way for one's eyes to open directly. I will try to explain myself.

We all say that God is unique, eternal both in past and future, absolutely just, all pervading, and grander than anything we can conceive, also allwise and full of love,—in fact the superlative of everything we consider good. Now among all the things, beings, and ideas with which we are acquainted there is only one that can possibly fill the bill, and that is the All, the Whole, the conjunction of everything that exists, the Universe in its very broadest sense. Nothing can be greater than that, and the human mind cannot possibly imagine anything outside of it. That is God. Nobody, no

atheist, no priest, can deny its existence. I say "It" not He or She because "It" is far beyond the idea of sex. "It" is we ourselves, we are all parts of God, good or bad, rich or poor, wise or foolish, each man is a part of the Whole, a part of the eternal and boundless Being.

You may object that there are bad things, ideas and acts in this world, and that as God is infinitely good and pure nothing bad can form part of "It." To that I say good and bad are human ideas local to man and have no effect on the Whole. They are part of the wonderful system that exists in the universe by which all is kept in constant life and progress. When one examines he finds that what is bad for one being is good for another; good and bad are one-sided views of the case; from the point of view of the whole, of absolute justice they do not exist, although for us they are necessary for our government through life.

Some say God is the Spirit of the universe but not the universe itself. To that I would answer by asking what is meant by spirit? The word does not really mean anything at all, although men have disputed over it for thousands of years. Now I say, there is no body without soul, and no soul without body, and the combined Body and Soul of the Universe is what I call God. If any one has a better one let him pull him out of his hiding place and show him up.

Some say God created the universe, therefore before the universe there was God, who knows? Was any one round about at the time looking on? No, that will not hold water. There never was any Creator, nor creation, if by that one understands making something out of nothing.

But notice that if I deny the creation in that sense, at the same time I recognize a transformer. The very existence of the All is continuous change and transformation and if by creation is meant the making of something out of what was before, I agree that that kind of creation is going on now, a ceaseless and everlasting change of form, which we call life. Death is only one of the links of the chain where we lose sight of one of the parts of the being and in our ignorance believe that the process has stopped.

We are all Sons of God, but "It" is not in Heaven. "It" is everywhere. The old idea that God is a kind of king who lives in a golden palace where he receives the good people while under the palace there are dungeons and bottomless pits for the wicked, will no longer do. We are part of God and God is composed of us and all the rest of infinity. The whole is, so to speak, a vast republic in

which every being has his place and duty, and if he knows his place and performs his duty it goes well with him,—if not he gets Hell.

EDITORIAL COMMENT.

We give publicity to the above criticisms of our work because the same objection is frequently repeated. As an instance we quote as follows from a letter which was received some months ago:

“But while writing, I wish to add that ‘freethinkers’ and cultivated people, mainly among the scientists and literati, do not believe in continuing the use of occult and mystic phraseology of the dark and unscientific ages of the past. Science has no use for such words as ‘God,’ ‘religion,’ ‘church,’ etc. They are words that should be used according to the dictionaries, and not in some modern, transcendental sense difficult to describe. The terminology of superstition handicaps clear thought. Nearly all the high-sounding words and phrases of the old religions are but euphemisms for superstition. In the unconscious evolution of the present age we are substituting scientific, literary and art associations for the church.”

If we take a radically new stand in matters of religion and reject the traditions of the Church, it might seem advisable to cut loose from them and make an absolutely new start, but we deem it unwise to do so, and our reasons are given in the editorial of the January number of the current year. We repeat here the main argument for our conservative position.

“We are too much convinced of the truth of evolution as a general principle of all life, not to apply it also to the spiritual domains of civilization, morality and religion.”

It is very strange that freethinkers who in other respects are thoroughgoing evolutionists do not apply the principle of evolution to religion, but for sheer hostility to tradition would here upset their own favorite theory. They mostly are opponents to all established religious institutions and instead of developing them higher, instead of purifying them from imperfections, they would destroy them altogether. It is as if physicians would abolish the whole bodily system on account of its insufficiencies and reject humanity as a whole because it is not yet in several respects perfectly adapted to the civilized conditions of the higher man.

For further details see “A Retrospect and a Prospect” in the January number of *The Open Court*.