

47.

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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THE CENTENARY OF THEOPHILANTHROPY.

BY DR. MONCURE D. CONWAY.

ON JANUARY 16, 1796, the Theophilanthropists held their first public meeting. It was in the chapel of an ancient hospital (St. Catharine), which stood at the corner of St. Denis and Lombard street, Paris. Early in the Revolution a part of the hospital had been assigned to penitent "Magdalens" (so miscalled), and another part to the blind. The teacher of the blind was a Catholic of Russian origin named Haüy, and it was he who made arrangements for the Theophilanthropists, whose first public meeting seems to have been addressed by Thomas Paine. There, amid the blind and the ostracised, was cradled this religion of blended love for God and Man.

After the reign of terror was passed, after the tempest, and earthquake, and fire, this still small voice made itself audible. In the two previous years there often met in a small café a little company of leading men who during the terror had tried to stem the bloodshed; they had now come from their prisons and refuges to find most of their old homes and haunts empty, their friends dead or dispersed. Like survivors from a foundered ship, stranded on some strange island, they made more intimate acquaintance, and, with whatever differences of opinion, were united by memories of a common martyrdom, and by their common love of humanity. There was the long-imprisoned Thomas Paine in close friendship with the democratic Bishop Grégoire, and the devout Bernardin St. Pierre heart to heart with the rationalist Dupuis, the socialistic nobleman De Bonneville, the poet Mercier. Their old theologic and other partition walls had crumbled under the revolution. Their common enthusiasm was now for the religion of humanity, and this was diffusing itself among many families. But meanwhile parents

were lamenting that they had no church in which their families might cultivate the higher religion. This want led to several gatherings in private houses, in September 1796, and in that month a Manual of Theophilanthropy was compiled by M. Chemin-Depontès. This was followed in the autumn by a small book of hymns and canticles. The first hymn—I must translate in prose—begins :

“O God, whose bounty and greatness the Universe proclaims,
Thou who hast given us life, receive the incense of our hearts.”

This is followed by a canticle beginning, “Descend from the Heavens, Divine Tolerance,” whose closing lines are :

“ Never hate ; for hatred is grievous,
It poisons and withers our spirit.
If the terrible tongue of an evil man
Sows thy days with thorns and vexations,
Lower not thy generous soul,
Though reason permits thy scorn.”

In an original copy before me, evidently used by one of the Society, this last line permitting scorn is cancelled by a pen, and there is written under it in French : “Show a good heart even to thy enemies.”

The third canticle invokes the “God Creator, Soul of Nature,” and a verse says :

“ While blaming error, let us plead with the offender :
Heaven alone has the right to punish him ;
With the sweetness that mingles love with instruction
Forgive, without malice :
The art of being happy is to love thy kind :
Ah, what duty is more sweet to fulfil !”

In other hymns are such expressions as “Father of the Universe, Supreme Intelligence !”—“Embrace us with thy love,” etc.

From the Manual I translate two extracts :

“Our opinions depend on so many circumstances of which we are not the masters, that the Theophilanthropists are persuaded that God, just and good, will not judge us after our opinions, nor after our different forms of worship, but from the sincerity of our hearts and from our actions.”

“What God is, what is the soul, how he rewards the good and punishes the evil, Theophilanthropists attempt not rashly to penetrate into. They feel that there is too great a distance between God and the creature that it should try to comprehend him. They are content with the knowledge, from the magnificence and order of the universe, from the testimony of every people, and of their own conscience, that there exists a God ; that they cannot conceive a deity without the idea of every perfection ; that, consequently God is good, is just, and therefore virtue will be rewarded and vice punished.”

The private houses having become too small for the numbers interested, it was resolved that Theophilanthropy should appear as a public movement, and so it happened that on January 16, 1797, this name, combining God, Love, Man, appeared on the door of St. Catharine's chapel. As a gesture in the same direction the "Philadelphians," who founded in London what is now the South Place Society (February 14, 1793), might claim precedence, but these, though bolder in negation, were not of equally wide views. While Elhanan Winchester, who founded the London "Philadelphians," was publishing his reply to the *Age of Reason*, the Theophilanthropists were welcoming the author of this temple-shaking book as an inaugurator, though they probably pruned his address of some aggressiveness. The Philadelphian "love of the brethren" was not up to the "love of man," and Theophilanthropy merits homage as the first church in Christendom to place man by the side of God,—man as man, without regard to race or creed.

As an indication of the catholicity of this movement it may be mentioned that its meetings were fixed at an hour which would not bring them in conflict with the hours of other religious assemblies.

The ancient crucifix and other symbols of St. Catharine's altar had been cleared away by the Revolution, but the altar remained,—an altar naked and desolate, the primal foundation of all temples, laid deep in the sacred longing to sacrifice something, now awaiting the next offerings. These came in the form of flowers. Every one who entered laid thereon a flower, or a bunch of flowers: these were the only sacrament. In the *Agni Purana* it is written: "The Lord of Life [Vishnu] should not be worshipped with flowers that have faded: those that grow in thine own garden are best: with the flowers must be reverence, itself a flower." This I remembered when seeing the Buddhists in Ceylon carrying flowers to their temples, and from the same garden—the human heart—came the flowers which the Theophilanthropists, also the blind and the outcast, laid on the ancient altar of St. Catharine, denuded of crucifix, Madonna, and host. And with the flowers came more spiritual roses, lessons read from Jesus, Buddha, Zoroaster, Confucius, Epictetus, Aurelius, the Psalms. The lecturer for the day wore a pure white robe while speaking. There was never any regular Minister. There was a simple form of marriage, and the birth of a child was celebrated, though without any kind of christening. In their Manual were warnings against ceremonies, and the temple must have no ornament representing the deity, nor any of his attributes, nor any

figure representing a virtue or any person. There must be no particular holiday, but celebrations harmonious with the seasons.

Above the flower-laden altar the decalogue was replaced by five inscriptions:

"1. We believe in the existence of God, and in the immortality of the soul.

"2. Worship God, cherish your kind, render yourselves useful to the country.

"3. God is everything which tends to the preservation or the perfection of Man; Evil is everything which tends to destroy or deteriorate Man.

"4. Children, honor your fathers and mothers; obey them with affection, comfort their old age. Fathers and mothers, instruct your children.

"5. Wives, regard in your husbands the chiefs of your houses. Husbands, love your wives; and both render yourselves reciprocally happy."

The Theophilanthropists were especially careful not to censure the beliefs of others; every lecture had to undergo the revision of a committee to see that it contained no such criticism. In his opening address Paine said, "The views of this society extend to public good as well as to that of the individual, and . . . its principles can have no enemies." So indeed it seemed. The expansion of the society in its first public year exceeded anything known in religious history. Several statesmen who had been apprehensive that Catholicism would reoccupy the vacancy left by its overthrow favored the new movement. The first Minister of France, Larevellière-Lepeaux, in an address on Public Instruction, extolled Theophilanthropy, though he never ventured to its meetings, and this raised the movement to national importance. Twelve parish churches were allotted to Theophilanthropy in Paris, and it spread through the provinces. It is wonderful to recall that this new religion, of which Paine was one founder, for years held possession of Notre Dame cathedral itself!

The Theophilanthropists tried to bring flowers in their season. But what was to symbolise the divine love and loveliness when winter came? During all their summer of success a priestly winter was waiting and watching to wither all their flowers of hope and humanity. Their very success proved a fatal success. A sullen priesthood was not to be conciliated by permission to conduct their tolerated functions in a country where for ages they had reigned, with right to suppress all rivals. Their authority had deep roots in popular superstition, and indeed in something deeper: the plainness of Theophilanthropist worship could not compete with beautiful images, pictures, shrines, nor nature's smile in flowers make up for the lost smile of the Heavenly Mother.

Priesthood could not yet come out in the open, but it worked in secret,—circulating leaflets accusing the Theophilanthropists of

secret orgies, of political intrigues, and an intention to make Larevellière-Lepeaux Pontiff! When Bonaparte arose, the cynical Bishop Talleyrand was made his chief Minister. Larevellière-Lepeaux tried to interest Talleyrand in Theophilanthropy, but the Minister answered, "All you have to do is to get yourself crucified and buried, and rise the third day." The creeds had long become to Talleyrand a joke, but none knew better than he the tremendous machinery at hand in the Church.

Bonaparte easily took his hints. The wily Corsican said to Dupuis, "As for myself, I do not believe that any such man as Jesus Christ ever existed, but the people are inclined to superstition, and I do not think it right to oppose them." This involved the restoration of the Church, and it could not coexist with Theophilanthropy. In the first year of this century Theophilanthropy was crushed under that spurred heel which presently tried to crush Europe. Theophilanthropy has the honor of being the only religion which the nineteenth-century war-god found it necessary to suppress. I heard Victor Hugo say that Bonaparte fell because "he troubled God"; but the God of Theophilanthropy had troubled Bonaparte with peaceful ideals before he retaliated.

The history of Theophilanthropy has never been written. The account given of its rise by Paine ("Letter to Erskine") is the best, but most of this history I have had to pick out of old French pamphlets, journals, and manuscripts.

I have not dwelt on the limitations of Theophilanthropy, the chief one being its failure to grapple with any of the great problems besetting the human mind. To Catholic definiteness it opposed indefiniteness. On this account Paine who believed clear negations essential became somewhat alienated from it, and he with Elihu Palmer inaugurated a similar but more vigorous movement in New York which but for the death of both might have come to something. After Paine's death some of his last religious writings were published in a New York magazine called *The Theophilanthropist*. Eighty years ago there seems to have been a "Society of Theophilanthropists" in Glasgow, with a good hymn-book and a doxology which strikes an ethical note:

" The man whom virtue does not bind
No lasting pleasure knows;
Nor e'er enjoys that peace of mind
Which innocence bestows."