

EPILOGUE TO "CHRISTIANITY AS THE PLE- ROMA."

IN ANSWER TO LETTERS FROM CORRESPONDENTS.

BY THE EDITOR.

NOW the question arises, "What will become of Christianity?" If the historical events of the past are to be taken as precedents, religions come and pass away according to definite conditions. They will have their beginning and their end, and Christianity may disappear just as the religions of antiquity died out. Christianity had its origin. It reached the heights of its dogmatic unfoldment, it passed through several phases, and at present the current views of its most essential doctrines are fast changing. We have lost the naïveté of our forefathers. Some dogmas have been considerably modified, others have been silently dropped and not a few have become purely symbolical. Upon the whole we may say that we no longer believe in the letter of the credo.

Are these facts to be considered as symptoms of decay which indicate the end of Christianity? We do not think so; all depends upon Christianity and its representatives. If Christianity possesses sufficient innate strength to assimilate the new truths of science, it will survive and emerge from the present crisis stronger than before; but if it rejects the new revelation it is doomed.

It has been customary to characterize scientific truth as secular and purely human, and contrast it with theological truth as divine, but this conception is based upon an error. The truth of science, if it is but genuine truth, is not made by man, it is superhuman. Scientific truths are not fashioned by scientists, they are discovered, and being the eternalities of existence, they represent the divine thoughts that sway the world. Science is a genuine revelation, and we may lock upon it, to use theological language, as the revelation of the Holy Spirit. There is a great truth in the saying that all

sins may be forgiven, but not the sin against the Holy Spirit. If a portion of mankind—a church or a sect, or individuals—harden themselves against the light of science, if they shut out progress, if they deny truth, they will necessarily stunt their individual and moral growth. Thereby their souls will be crippled, they will cut themselves off from the tree of life, and refuse guidance by God's truth. But the question before us is whether it is an essential feature of Christianity to shut out the light of science, to repudiate progress, and refuse to learn from the living revelation of God's eternal truths.

Christianity has adapted itself to new conditions again and again; it has grown thereby and gradually developed into the religion that it is to-day, and there is no reason to doubt that it will do so again. The Christianity of the future will be broader, deeper, and more in accord with scientific truth.

It is true enough that the confessions of faith made in former centuries are antiquated, or better, they must be regarded as historical documents; they were good for their time, but must make way for a more scientific comprehension. We grant the claim of those who cling to the old manner of thinking, that a scientific comprehension is no longer Christianity as it was originally understood, that it is something entirely new which in many respects destroys the childlike spirit of a literal belief; but did not the God of Christianity himself proclaim: "Lo, I make all things new"?

We who have passed from the old to the new sometimes become homesick for the old comfortable belief when man was so easily satisfied with the symbol, with the parable, with a poetical figure and pious sentiment. Even the remembrance of these days has remained dear to us. Goethe who had experienced this change of mind himself has repeatedly described this attitude in glowing terms. Faust, on hearing the Easter bells proclaiming the resurrection of Christ, thinks of the faith of his childhood, and he regrets that the message has no longer a meaning for him since his belief is gone. Yet the vision of the faith of his earlier days haunts him. He thinks of his unbounded trust in God's eternal love, of seeking communion with Him in solitude and of the unspeakable rapture of fervid prayer:

"Und ein Gebet war brünstiger Genuss."

If the belief in the dogma is gone, shall we at the same time discard that religious sentiment which has been so important a guide to mankind in former centuries? Is that rapturous devotion which thrills the individual and adjusts his relation to the cosmos really

a fantastic illusion, of which in the future we must rid ourselves? Christianity has been the sacred vessel in which the noble sentiments of religion have been treasured; and will not the contents be spilled if the cup is broken? Thus it seems unavoidable that the breakdown of dogmatism really forebodes the end of religion.

A prominent French scholar, Yves Guyot, has written a book which created a sensation, and its tenets have been adopted by innumerable freethinkers the world over. It is entitled "The Irreligion of the Future" and Guyot claims in it that in ages to come mankind will be without any religion, for science will destroy the strongholds of the old faith one after another until nothing is left and the formulae of natural law will rule supreme. His views seem quite plausible to those who have grown up in a country where people have only the choice between the irreconcilable contrast of ultramontaniam on the one hand and the *libres penseurs* on the other. In France people who hold a middle ground are so rare that during the last half century they have played no prominent part in public life. In Protestant countries conditions are different. The large majorities do not favor either extreme but are in a state of transition, which will result in a new and higher conception. Protestantism has its weak points but it has guided mankind on the right path and prepares a faith which will no longer stand in contradiction to science.

Protestantism is not the end or final state of religion. It is a movement which from the start was not conscious of its final aims. While its leaders tried only to bring about a reform, they actually introduced a new principle and led religion into a new phase of its development. It was originally a mere negation of some features in the administration of the Roman Catholic Church, the very name indicates that it started as a protest to the old; but it is bound to take the consequences of the first step which is the recognition of scientific truth, of the liberty of conscience, of the duty of inquiry. This will lead to a new assertion, and its position will be upon a firmer and more enduring foundation.

Unless the very nature of mankind changes, the future of history will not be irreligious. On the contrary it will be more truly religious than ever. It will discard those superstitious elements which are so often regarded as the essential features of religion, but it will with greater emphasis insist on its essential truths. We are bound to reach the bottom rock where religion will have nothing to fear from the critique of science.

We venture to say that the new movement will spring from the

very orthodox ranks, which bye and bye will unhesitatingly recognize all the truth of science and reinterpret the old in the spirit of the new. They will retain all the good of their traditions without making the slightest concession to either hypocrisy or equivocation, and without sacrificing the uplift of genuine devotion. In a word the future of religion will be a reinterpretation of the old, and it is natural that all religions will convergently tend toward the same goal.

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The religion of the future will have to satisfy the essential needs of the human heart. We drift tempest-tossed on the ocean of life, and we need guidance and comfort and encouragement. In the face of the unrest which surrounds us, we want to have the assurance of a firm ground where our anchor can catch. We want to know our goal and the direction in which we have to steer. All this must be supplied by religion, and where our knowledge is insufficient, faith steps in.

Religion is inborn in every soul in the same way as gravity is an inalienable part of all matter. Every particle that exists is interlinked with the whole of the cosmos. It is swayed by it, it is attached to it, its momentum is determined by it in the exact proportion of its weight, of its position, and generally of its relation to the All.

The innate energy of every particle, every molecule, every atom, presses forth in one direction or another beyond its own limits as if it were yearning beyond itself. No piece of matter is an existence in itself, its nature and its movements are conditioned by the rest of the universe and it can find the fulfilment of its longing only outside its own being. In the same way every sentient soul yearns beyond itself and becomes easily conscious of the fact that it is only a part of an immeasurably great whole, of the All that stretches forth into unknown infinitudes, and that the significance of its life lies outside the sphere of its ego. This All-feeling of the individual, this panpathy is religion, and religion is a natural presence in every human breast.

Religion grows up in unconscious spontaneity and it asserts itself first in sentiment. It is so strong that it may be counted as the deepest passion of which man is capable. It is possessed of a motive power which excels all other passions, even love not excepted, and can, if misdirected, lead to deeds which otherwise would be impossible, such as sacrifice of what is dearest to the heart, even the bodily sacrifice of oneself or of one's own children on the altar of a deity who is believed to demand such offerings.

But religion is not merely feeling. Religion enters into every fibre of man's spiritual existence, and throughout the development of human actions it remains the factor which adjusts the relation of the individual to the All. It grows and matures with the growth and maturity of man. It weaves out of his experiences a world-conception in which it appoints him to his place, assigns his duties and furnishes direction for his conduct.

Religion teaches us that we are parts only of a great whole. We are not alone in the world. Not only is our bodily existence at every moment determined by its surroundings, but our souls also are interlinked with the fate of others, of creatures more or less like us, sentient beings who have developed by our side as formations parallel to us, in whose company we have become such as we are. Our own destiny extends to them, and makes them parts of this, our extended self. Neither are we the beginning nor the end of life. We come into being and disappear, while the whole, from which we have emerged, remains. From this state of things we learn to treat our fellows with consideration, yea, with respect, to look upon the past with reverence and upon the future with solicitude.

Our neighbor is our alter-ego. No one is a stranger to us; all are our brothers and we cannot maltreat them without hurting ourselves. The same truth which holds good for space, is applicable to time. We are a mere phase in the life of the whole. We have grown from the past and we owe to it our entire existence. In fact we are the past as it continues in the present. The past has furnished even the potentialities from which we develop our noblest aspirations, our very selves which are the additions made by us in building up the future, and in the future we continue. The future is the harvest which we expect. It is our own existence as we mold it, and all the duties we have in life are for the future. In the future lie the mansions which our souls build up to live therein when our bodies have fallen to dust.

The function of religion, however, goes deeper still. This entire world is the actualization of eternal types. It develops according to law and brings into existence those possibilities which in philosophy are called Platonic Ideas. Accordingly man is not a mere congeries of atoms, he is more than a corporeal conglomeration of matter, he is the actualization of the type of his personality; his essential and characteristic being consists in the ideas he thinks, in the aims he pursues, and in the significance which he possesses for the great movement of human life.

In every one of us there is something eternal that has made its

appearance in corporeal and visible shape, and no thinking man will identify himself with the dust of his body, but he will seek his real being in the significance of his spiritual nature.

Religion reminds us of the eternal background against which the fleeting phenomena of the material world take shape. This eternal is the essential part of life that transfigures the transient in which it is actualized.

Man is not born a philosopher, but he grows up from primitive conditions and is compelled to act and adjust his conduct even before he knows the world or himself, and so religion, which as we have seen animates his entire being and unconsciously dominates all his sentiments from the very bottom of his heart, comes to him in the shape of allegories and symbols. He first feels religion before he formulates it in doctrines, and the first doctrines are naturally mere formulations of the symbols wherein truth first dawns on him. But the higher man rises, the better he understands how to distinguish between symbol and truth, between letter and spirit, between the parable and its meaning. In the dogmatic state we were like children, being nursed with fairy tales and parables; but in the state of manhood we shall see face to face and shall have a clear and unequivocal comprehension of the truth.

That state of the future which we know must come, will certainly not be less religious than its former phases. It will be simply the fulfilment of the former which we then shall regard as mere preparations for it, as mere stations on the road to the goal—the new pleroma, the pleroma expected to-day.

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We are aware that Christianity is not the only religion in the world, and its rivals from their standpoint have made honest endeavors to reach the truth in their own ways. In every part of the world man has used the light at his disposal. In consideration of this fact we can no longer look upon one religion as possessing the absolute truth, and upon all others as inventions of Satan. We know that all of them possess more or less of the truth and not one of them is perfect.

There is a stage in which we shall lose the desire to glorify our own religion at the expense of others, and we look upon the anxiety of the sectarian who magnifies the merit of his own sect and delights in defaming others, with a smile although he does it *in maiorem Dei gloriam* in the hope of thus pleasing the deity whom he serves. But there is a higher ideal than our own church affilia-

tion. It is the truth, and the God of truth is higher than our God, higher than our limited conception of the deity.

We learn more and more to give honor to the truth wherever it may be found, and under the influence of this sentiment a brotherly feeling has originated which gave birth to the Religious Parliament in 1893, in which even the most orthodox churches took part. It is an actual instance in which representatives of all the great faiths of the world came together in tolerance and kindness. Every one came to explain his own faith, not to disparage those of others; nor was there any intention to break down or to replace the old traditions by a new religion.

The new when it comes will have to develop from the old, and it will practically have to be the old in a new interpretation. We must build the future from the past, and we have to utilize the materials which we have on hand.

We deem it possible that several religions may continue side by side to the end of the world, and there would be no harm in a disparity in name, institutions and organization. These things are not the essential parts of religion. Perhaps it might be good for the world, if a rivalry would remain between different churches, different races, different nations. There can be no objection to a divergence of types; but after all whatever may be the names of these religions and denominations, their essential doctrines, the meaning of their ceremonies and above all their moral ideals will have to become the same throughout the world, for they represent the essentials of religion, and must accord with the eternal truths of cosmic existence.

The Church eternal of the future need not be one large centralized body, it need not be one power consolidated into one organization, it need not be governed from one central point, but it must be one in spirit, it must be one in love of truth, one in brotherhood, and one in the earnestness of moral endeavor.

I conclude these remarks on the nature of the religion of the future with the words which as secretary of the Religious Parliament Extension I pronounced at the decennial celebration of the World's Religious Parliament in 1903:

"Let us all join in the work of extending true religion. Let us greet not our brethren only, but those who in sincerity disagree with us, and let us thus prepare a home in our hearts for truth, love and charity, so that the kingdom of heaven, which is as near at hand as it was nineteen hundred years ago, may reside within us, and become more and more the reformatory power of our public and private life."