

THE RELIGIONS OF COMTE AND SPENCER: A NEW SYNTHESIS SUGGESTED.¹

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SOME people might say that Comte and Spencer had no religions. It is certain that they had no theologies. And yet these two remarkable prophets of the age of science were men of great earnestness, and each thought that he had a religion. Each considered his own faith to be, not only true and reasonable in itself, but a great improvement on Christian orthodoxy, and quite adequate to satisfy the legitimate cravings of the human soul. But what could be stranger than the contrast between the religious outlooks of these two thinkers; outlooks so much more incompatible than their respective systems of philosophy?

Their philosophic systems are indeed very different, and yet have much in common. They agree with one another and with the writings of J. S. Mill, who occupies a somewhat intermediate position, in a determined attempt to bring philosophy into line with science, to found it anew on strictly scientific data, to limit

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recognized knowledge to the relations of phenomena and banish all speculation on the older metaphysical and theological lines. Both are dominated by the idea of a progressive and generally ascending process of change in the universe, and both apply this idea, though in different ways and with somewhat varying results, to the growth of human knowledge and civilization. These two thinkers were alike engaged in creating the science of sociology, although they could not foresee, and we cannot foresee, its ultimate developments.

There are, however, some outstanding differences of philosophic method, which may partly account for the differences of religious outlook to which I must shortly allude. Spencer was a psychologist—a student of the changeful combinations of sensation, thought, emotion, and desire, as they appear in the diurnally renewed flow of conscious life. Comte eschewed psychology on principle, regarding knowledge as a subjective synthesis made from the point of view of humanity rather than from that of the individual thinker. He accordingly started with logical discourse as the common instrument of all human inquiries, and with the “positive” method of employing this instrument.

Again, Spencer was a strong individualist in sociology, while Comte was an ardent collectivist. Lastly, Spencer was bent on applying a single mechanical law of evolution throughout the various spheres of natural knowledge; while Comte emphasized the unbridged (if not unbridgeable) differences between the points of view of the chief sciences. According to him each of the transitions from mathematics to physics, physics to chemistry, chemistry to biology, biology to sociology, if not also that from sociology to ethics, involves the bringing in of fresh data, with a new and higher scientific outlook. The top rung of his “ladder of the sciences”—the moral or moral-sociological point of view—is that from which he habitually looks forth.

Let us now glance at Comte’s religion, with its characteristic differences from Christian orthodoxy on the one hand and abstract ethicism on the other. It is clear that we have no positive knowledge of individual objects higher in the scale of being than men and women; but human persons differ enormously in physique, in mental endowment, and in moral character, so that the highest individual object we can conceive is not a human being, as such, but what we take to be the best type of—or the ideal—human being.

Most Christians suppose that Jesus, the Messiah, was a morally

ideal man, and there are some rationalizing Christians who hold that his ideal humanity constitutes his whole title to divinity. For Comte, however, Jesus was simply one of the great and good reformers of morals and religion who have, from time to time, appeared in the world. His character, like that of every one else, was partly due to his natural ancestry, and partly due to the human environment and circumstances into which he was born, and to which his thoughts and feelings reacted more strongly and fruitfully than those of a lesser man would have done.

All men and women of historical eminence are moulded in mind and character (though not independently of their own conscious activity) by the social influence of their contemporaries; but they are also powerfully affected by that of their forerunners, through the standard literature and traditions, and the creations of art and industry, to which they have access. The really valuable and permanent elements of culture, which are passed on from century to century and extended from nation to nation, are a product not solely of the more celebrated individuals with whose names many of them are connected. They are also a result of the upward strivings of the great mass of human beings who think not only of what concerns themselves, but also of what is good for others or for all men. Very many of these people contribute directly to the common stores of knowledge, art, and practical wisdom, without attaining notoriety; and all of them exercise a subtle influence in spurring the greater geniuses to achieve the best that is in them.

From these and like considerations Comte arrived at the conception of a Great Being, Humanity, which is not merely the collective multitude of living human individuals, but the efficient unity of all men and women who have ever striven, however vaguely, for the common good. The dead still cooperate with the living in producing one great and growing historical fact: the collective life of the nations to whom the earth belongs, headed by those powerful nations of the West who inherit the science and art of Greece, the legal and moral codes of Rome and Judea.

Humanity, taken in the above sense, is certainly the most directly beneficent thing of which we have any clear knowledge; for its far-reaching and persisting influence is compact of the varied achievements of all great personalities as well as of the unobtrusive goodness of the multitude whose names are forgotten. Comte, therefore, sought to institute a worship of this Humanity, which we know positively though imperfectly, in place of the wor-

ship of a God whom, according to him, we do not know at all. And, be it said, this religion of Humanity may be valid in its way and may survive in essence, even if the elaborate ritual with which Comte sought to surround it, and which caused it to be humorously described as Catholicism *minus* Christianity, cannot or should not be put into practice. The small bodies of positivists who look up to him as their spiritual master have among them thinkers who are by no means incapable of criticizing and setting aside some of his teaching, while it belongs to their avowed ideal to accept the later advances in science and practice which the continued progress of humanity must bring to light.

If Comte considered himself, and is considered by his followers, to be the founder of a new era in human civilization, it must not be forgotten that his whole teaching precludes the idea of there being any miraculous prophet or sage whose authority ought to outweigh the growing experience and science of mankind.

It will, I think, be admitted that, while humanity, taken in its essential solidarity, is morally the grandest thing we know, human selfishness and folly, human vindictiveness and depravity, are the worst things knowable; and we have only too much evidence of their existence. Hence some people think that, if a strictly natural religion be possible, it should be a religion of pure ethics; not of humanity as such, but of what we are convinced is good in human character and social relations; no matter whether this good be destined to triumph in the dim future or to be swallowed up in the tragedy of a deteriorating world.

To this heroic type of ethicism a positivist might object that it is the general consensus of enlightened opinion which causes certain conduct and certain motives to be recognized as good, and other conduct and motives as bad. Humanity, rather than the individual, with his possibly and quite probably prejudiced type of conscientiousness, is the arbiter, because it is the maker, of morality. Moreover, there would be little inspiration for ethical religion if we could not feel that mankind is in fact progressing in the direction of true human betterment; that the passions which man inherits from his animal ancestry, and still more perhaps from the ages of tyrannical force, ruthless predatory warfare and savage superstition, are indeed being brought under the strong control of rational and humane sentiments, expressed in juster laws and better relations between individuals, classes, and nations.

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Comte's doctrine of Humanity has made a much wider appeal

to modern thought than is evidenced by the small band of his nominal followers. It has doubtless exercised a powerful influence upon theistic and Christian thinkers who are not too orthodox; while, for those who no longer believe in a superhuman providence or a divine revelation, but who do believe in the gospel of human advancement, it becomes an increasingly inspiring idea.

Many, however, cannot accept the religion of Humanity at Comte's own valuation, because, while they are willing at times to stand beside him on the top rung of the scientific ladder, and view everything from the moral-sociological standpoint, they like also to view things from some of the lower rungs which, strange to say, give glimpses of a universe altogether greater than humanity; greater by the immensities of time and space; by endless process and limitless substance; by boundless potentialities of form and motion, life and consciousness. They discover that self-conscious humanity is the child of savage races; these the offspring of an animal ancestry; that, of more primitive types of life; also that all are children of mother earth, and earth dependent on the sovereign sun and conditioned by the all-enfolding ether. Thus, while they may recognize that the slowly integrating being of Humanity, ever striving toward the good, is the thing most worthy to be worshiped with love, they cannot withhold all veneration from those mysterious sources of energy, life, and organic progress which have undoubtedly been necessary, even if they have not alone sufficed, to make humanity all that it is, and all that it may become. To venerate them as though they were human and moral would be mere anthropomorphism; but not to venerate them at all seems to disclose a somewhat narrow attitude of self-satisfaction in human achievements. It is as if the child, mankind, were still in the womb of primitive nature, conscious only of itself and caring nothing for the mother who is to bring it forth; whereas, the relative independence of pre-sociological conditions which man undoubtedly possesses argues his ability to reflect on pre-sociological nature, and to see that it is indeed his mother and deserves some at least of his reverence.

When we have learned to forgive nature for not being human (which many people seem unable to do) we shall perhaps begin to revere her for being what she is. This attitude might seem more consonant with the robust monism of Professor Haeckel than with Spencer's austere doctrine of the Unknowable; and yet that doctrine undoubtedly asserts the value of an ultimate reality which is not specifically human.

The pervading mystery of the universe which meant little to Comte's predominantly social spirit meant much to Spencer. He came to suppose that science and religion might be ultimately reconciled in the recognition of a great First Cause or Inscrutable Absolute; a reality underlying at once the facts of consciousness and the facts of matter in motion, but not to be identified with either, nor yet with both taken together at their phenomenal value. His religion is thus a sort of modern sphinx-worship; but be it said without sarcasm; for the sphinx was a profoundly symbolic monster. Probably I am not alone in thinking that where he erred was in objectifying the pervading mystery of being under such titles as Cause, Power, and Absolute, and supposing that it contrasts radically with a sphere of phenomena which can be definitely known; whereas the very fact of knowing, in the true or intellectual sense, involves a relation of subjective ideas and judgments to some object-matter with which they are not commensurate; something which they *mean* but do *not* equate with or substantially resemble. The mystery of being is seen to lurk in all those things that are called phenomena, and even in the simplest sensations, when we try to understand them in their manifold real relations, and do not satisfy ourselves with the familiarity of their *names*, as though this familiarity were true knowledge of them.

It is fairly certain that the chapters on the Unknowable in Spencer's *First Principles* do not appeal strongly either to persons of religious or to persons of scientific temperament. There are, however, various incontrovertible truths contained in those chapters, and if Spencer had contented himself with showing how many of the questions which men formulate are verbal rather than conceptual, and had preached, instead of the Inscrutable Absolute, *that Infinite Reality to which knowledge is ever more nearly approximating, but which thought can never fully represent*, many who withhold assent from his doctrine as it stands would have freely gone along with him.

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To the Christian believer, or to any believer in supernaturally-grounded religion, the religions of Comte and Spencer must of course both seem unsatisfactory. It is, however, from the point of view of purely natural religion, and as making an appeal to the rationalist rather than to the orthodox that they have to be seriously considered.

Now it may be that the majority of rationalists are in fact, if not in profession, secularists; that they do not want a natural

any more than they want a revealed, religion. Certain rationalists, however, do feel that the individual soul should learn to link itself, in love and reverence, with realities greater than itself. Some, therefore, become positivists; while others, who may be not less zealous for human progress, reserve their religious emotion for what transcends humanity; for what they may, with Spencer, regard as the unknowable Absolute, or may view simply as the stupendous encompassing and indwelling mystery of nature. Each of these sorts of natural religion seems to me somewhat one-sided. Why should not the rationalist seek to unite the intimate worship of Humanity, as the most intensively beneficent reality known to him, with an imaginative veneration of that infinite Nature, in which the life of humanity has not only its external setting but its very being? Certainly there is a sense in which these two objects of reverence may seem opposed. Nature contains so many forces hostile to man and entails on man so many elements inimical to true humanity. But man himself is after all a part of nature, and the highest excellence of individual and social life can only be attained in and through nature. The superiority of man to his subhuman surroundings is not a superiority to that Reality which embraces the subhuman and human alike.

Thus nature is not essentially, though it may be accidentally, inimical to human ideals. Moreover, there is a third object of possible natural religion to be considered; one which is identical neither with nature nor with humanity, but is instrumental to our knowledge of both. Whatever we realize either of humanity or of nature over and above those inarticulate feelings for the good and the beautiful which are best expressed by music and the fine arts, is realized in that form of connected and mutually supported thoughts which is fairly described by the familiar word reason.

This reason is not simply reasoning, still less is it mere arguing; it is just the clearest understanding and the truest judgment of which we are personally capable. It is the circle of subjective ideas and opinions which at once link up with one another and reach out to an objective goal; be that some object of contemplation or of passive feelings evoked by contemplation, or be it some practical achievement which the moral sense approves and to which rational reflection points the way.

A truer appreciation of humanity, a fuller conception of nature, a humbler sense of that part of natural reality which lies beyond present knowledge, a better ability to serve mankind socially or to utilize the knowledge of physical forces for human good are all

alike dependent on an increase of individual understanding, which can be brought about only by training the person to think as widely and earnestly, as carefully and impartially, as possible. Such thinking, or exercise of reason, necessarily mediates between self and humanity, self and nature, and even in some sense between nature and humanity themselves. Must we not therefore consider reason as being closely linked with these, its greatest objects; a third term in the supreme natural trinity? Does not reason also deserve to be in some sort venerated? True, it does not possess the moral dignity, the social fulness, and the inspiring appeal of humanity; nor does it possess the infinite sublimity and manifold wonders and charms of nature; but what were humanity and nature to us without it? Simply nonentities!

I would therefore suggest that a reasonable religion for the avowed rationalist is to venerate Nature, as the supreme but never wholly revealed reality; to love Humanity as his own higher self and highest end; to reverence Reason as the essential means to the best that he can either think or do, and, in its collective exercise, to the best conditions that humanity itself can achieve.

If natural religion can exist at all, it can only exist as the complement of advancing knowledge. Whatever the inevitable limitations of reason may be, there is nothing too high or too sacred to be inquired into; provided the inquiry be, not a pursuit of arguments in favor of some foregone conclusion, but a sincere quest of truth, marked by willingness to relinquish or modify our old beliefs in the light of stronger evidence and clearer understanding.

A religion of Reason can be approved only if it hearten us to an ever-increasing exercise of the thing itself. The actual hard work of scientific observation, experiment and induction, of scholarly research, and of logical rearrangement of ideas should of course be undertaken in the mood of the workman, not in that of the devotee. Moreover those persons who, without pretending to be original investigators, would learn in broad outline what has actually been ascertained as to the constitution of nature and the history of mankind must be workmanlike in their studies, more especially as there is, under our present system of education, a lamentable dearth of sound instruction on these most important subjects.

We must really know something of the wonders of evolution, cosmic and biological, and of natural law, before the sublime mystery of Nature can become an object of religious feeling. We must form some fairly distinct mental picture of the world-history of which British history is only one comparatively modern and Amer-

ican history a much more modern section, before the ideal-ward striving spirit of Humanity, which has moulded all that is worth living in our lives can become for us a great and imperious reality.

It is, however, when we clearly perceive what an absurdly small distance can be traveled by personal knowledge toward conceiving the infinite reality of Nature or measuring the essential goodness and greatness of Humanity that natural religion may well arise to supplement natural knowledge, without in any degree supplanting scientific investigation or the patient learning of its results.

How much of that religion should take the form of ceremonial observance, or at least of the gathering together of like-minded worshipers, and how much is best left to the individual soul or to individual expression in poetry (which usually tends to view Nature and Humanity with true reverence, and may be expected to grow increasingly religious in this sense) is a question worth asking, though I shall not here attempt to answer it.