

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER.

VOL. XXXIII (No. 7)

JULY, 1919

NO. 758

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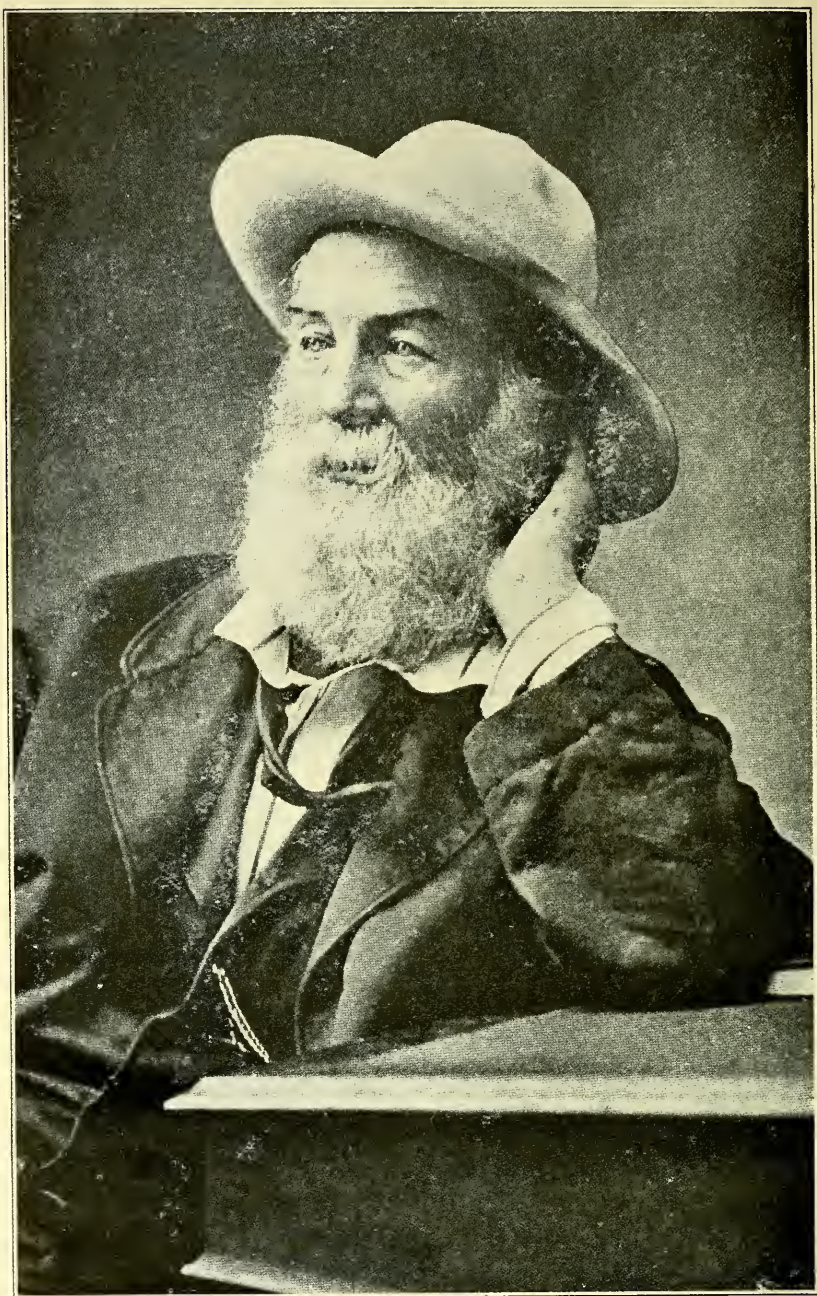
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CHICAGO

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Walt Whitman

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DEMOCRACY AS A RELIGION.

BY MAYNARD SHIPLEY.¹

"I say that the real and permanent grandeur
of these States must be their religion."

—Whitman.

A TRUE democracy, according to Walt Whitman, is a common-wealth founded upon the beneficent law of love and mutual aid, the law of life, even as the law of hatred is the way of death. Such a society of comrades would naturally develop an ennobling spiritual background, with a new religion,—or at least an old religion made new, the religion of Jesus, a religion in which love, fidelity, social service, and generous comradeship are the passwords of discipleship.

Whitman cared nothing for lip service and mere Puritanical piety, the holiness of not doing certain things, and yet leaving so many things undone. "What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?" asks Whitman. His answer is that—

"What behaved well in the past, or behaves well to-day, is not such a wonder; The wonder is, always and always, how there can be a mean man or an infidel."

Religion in *Leaves of Grass* is very different from the so-called religion of orthodoxy. Whitman declares he can learn more of true religion from a cow than from an ecclesiastic. The animals are so

¹ [Mr. Maynard Shipley is widely known in two diverging lines of literary effort. As a writer on criminal law and criminology, he has contributed monographs to the leading technical journals of this country and Europe, and is the author of a comprehensive work on the history of the death penalty, as yet only partly published. On the other hand, his popular science lectures are well known all over the United States, and he has published articles on astronomy and kindred topics in various scientific magazines. Mr. Shipley's first volume of *From Star-Dust to Aeroplane*, a book on evolution, is expected to be ready for publication early in 1920.—Ed.]

"placid and self-contain'd" he could "stand and look at them long and long," taking example from them. Says he:

"They do not sweat and whine about their condition;
 They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins;
 They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God;
 Not one is dissatisfied—not one is demented with the mania of owning things;
 Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago;
 Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth."

Ignoring theologians, Whitman asks,

"Why should I pray? Why should I venerate and be ceremonious?"

He "chants the chant of dilation or pride," declaring that "We have had ducking and deprecating enough." Praying and venerating, fearing hell and dodging the Devil do not make a Christian, nor is religion composed of sermons and Bibles and conformity.

Leaves of Grass proclaims a religion of humanity, based not upon traditions and creeds, but upon the needs and aspirations of an enlightened intelligence, upon the cravings of the human heart itself. Whitman declares that his is "the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths." While rejecting none of the prophets and seers of the past who have contributed in any way to the spiritual uplift of man,

"Taking them all for what they were worth and not a cent more,
 Admitting that they were alive and did the work of their days,"

yet—

"Discovering as much, or more, in a framer framing a house;
 Putting higher claims for him there with his roll'd-up sleeves, driving the mallet and chisel;
 Not objecting to special revelation, considering a curl of smoke or a hair on the back of my hand just as curious as any revelation."

Nor does Whitman reject "redeemers." They, too, are with us always. We are redeemed—

"By the mechanic's wife with her babe at her nipple interceding for every person born,
 Three scythes at harvest whizzing in a row from three lusty angels with shirts bagg'd out at the waists,
 The snag-tooth'd hostler with red hair redeeming sins past and to come,
 Selling all he possesses, traveling on foot to fee lawyers for his brother and sit by him while he is being tried for forgery."

We get here very close to the heart of the Four Gospels, where the religion of Jesus is, in spirit, preserved for humanity.

In reading *Leaves of Grass* we soon learn to feel Whitman's joy in religion as a phase of democracy. For him democracy includes all the essentials of all religions, of all times and places. Religion is not a set of statements to be believed, but a kind of life to be lived. Religion is the sum of our human relations and social activities under the law of love. This is what Whitman means when he cries exultingly—

"My comrade!

For you to share with me two greatnesses, and a third one rising inclusive and more resplendent,

The greatness of Love and Democracy, and the greatness of Religion."

And yet Whitman's religion is not without its elements of faith, a faith that arises from sympathetic comradeship and love just as perfume is breathed forth by the living, growing flower. Man is not only to be compassionate, but he must be full of the "faith that never balks," faith in the power of Nature to turn evil into good, because the earth "has no conceivable failures." "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses," says Whitman. Did you see the poor wretch in the chain gang, serving sentence for society's derelictions? Did you see the manacled hands at the insane asylum? Did you imagine that these souls were forever crushed and ruined? Whitman finds them only disguised a few moments for reasons. Says he:

"I saw the face of the most smear'd and slobbering idiot that they had at the asylum, and I knew for my own consolation what they knew not;

I knew of the agents that emptied and broke my brother; the same wait to clear the rubbish from the fallen tenement, and I shall look again, in a score or two of ages, and I shall meet the real landlord perfect, and un-harm'd, every inch as good as myself."

The insane, the criminal, the fallen, even the liar and hypocrite, are all included in Whitman's sympathy and love: "The weakest and shallowest is deathless with me," he declares.

"Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you;

Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the leaves to rustle for you,
do my words refuse to glisten and rustle for you."

"Because you are greasy or pimples, or that you were once drunk, or a thief,
Or diseas'd, or rheumatic, or a prostitute—or are so now;

.

Do you give in that you are any less immortal?"

Knowing how all men are what they are by reason of circumstances mostly fortuitous, the victims of vicious environment on the one hand or the happy inheritors of wealth and boundless opportunities on the other, Whitman sees in the unfortunate merely what he himself would have become under the same conditions of life and heredity. He asks—

"Who am I too that I am not on trial or in prison?

Me ruthless and devilish as any, that my wrists are not chain'd with iron,
or my ankles with iron?"

"If you become degraded and criminal, then I become so for your sake;

If you remember your foolish and outlaw'd deeds, do you think I cannot
remember my own foolish and outlaw'd deeds?"

"Not a mutineer walks handcuff'd to jail, but I am handcuff'd to him and
walk by his side;

(I am less the jolly one there, and more the silent one, with sweat on my
twitching lips.)

Not a youngster is taken for larceny, but I go up too, and am tried and
sentenced."

Here, then, is true democracy applied, true religion finding expression in the widest and loftiest sympathy and charity,—real holiness, the antidote to weakness, sin, suffering, and shame.

And "the weakest and shallowest is deathless," declares our poet. Can Whitman prove this to be true? Let us see.

Leaves of Grass appeared at a time when many thoughtful men and women were coming more and more to distrust the tenets of all formal religions, and when the "revelations" upon which belief in immortality was founded were beginning to be subjected to a rigorous scientific criticism. But rejection of the traditional evidences of immortality by no means implied a total negation of immortality itself.

Concurrently with the waning of faith in theological dogma, there was growing up a large body of sincere thinkers who, while accepting the general theory of evolution as formulated by Spencer, Darwin, Haeckel, and others, could not rest content with a philosophy which left unsatisfied the soul's yearning for an interpretation of Nature which included "plan and purpose" in the universe. Rejecting the Bible as containing any special revelation from God to man, believing that proofs of plan and purpose are to be sought in Nature herself, or in the intuitions of the soul, that there never were any more miracles than there are now, the new school of tran-

scandalism based their faith upon the principle that the unseen is proved by the seen, that wisdom is not susceptible of proof, is its own proof, and cannot be passed from one having it to one not having it, as one might buy or exchange merchandise. Undoubtedly the most powerful and convincing exponent of this school of philosophy was Walt Whitman. To him there was nothing more certain than that "The orbs and the systems of orbs play their swift sports through the air on purpose." He asks:

"Have you reckon'd that the landscape took substance and form that it might
be painted in a picture?

Or men and women that they might be written of, and songs sung?

Or the attraction of gravity, and the great laws and harmonious combinations and the fluids of the air, as subjects for savons?

Or the brown land and the blue sea for maps and charts?

Or the stars to be put in constellations and named fancy names?"

Thus, to Whitman, the justification for belief in plan and purpose in the universe is the seeming absurdity of a contrary view: "Did you suppose the cosmic laws were an accident?" he asks.

Whitman neither offers nor needs positive proof of a purposeful progress toward some divine end, much less does he ask for miracles attesting Divine Will behind appearances:

"Why, who makes much of miracles?

As to me I know of nothing else but miracles,

.

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,

And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,

.

And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels."

Whitman has been called atheist, anarchist, libertine, and what not. But, in reality, he was far from being any of these things. least of all was he an atheist, or "infidel," as all rebels were called twenty-five or more years ago. But he refused to believe that God walked in the gardens or on the mountain tops of the world for any one sooner than for himself, or that He was any more in evidence thousands of years ago than He is to-day. Whitman was, in a sense, a monist, a pantheist, believing that "objects gross and the unseen soul are one," and that God, or the creative and guiding Principle, the Reality that is behind the apparent, is merely the Whole of which we, human individuals, are self-conscious parts, being ourselves creators, redeemers, and miracle-workers of the

very highest order. Considered from this point of view, Whitman is not atheistical nor irreverent in saying:

"What do you suppose Creation is?

What do you suppose will satisfy the Soul, except to walk free, and own no superior?

What do you suppose I would intimate to you in a hundred ways, but that man or woman is as good as God?

And that there is no God any more divine than Yourself?

And that that is what the oldest and newest myths finally mean?"

So Whitman's God is a God without worshipers, without temples, creeds, prayers, Bibles, or punishments, or rewards, without any of the furniture and junk of past ages, minus everything except what waits intrinsically within us:

"When the psalm sings instead of the singer;

When the script preaches instead of the preacher;

.

I intend to reach them my hand, and make as much of them as I do of men and women like you."

In what form, then, does Whitman believe in God as existing? Is Nature herself God, with purpose and omnipotence, and omniscience? How is this possible? It isn't possible. Nothing is possible. Yet the impossible is with us always. It is precisely the impossible that is always being accomplished. In the dispute about God and eternity, Whitman prefers to be silent, declaring only—

"Ah more than any priest O soul we too believe in God,
But with the mystery of God we dare not dally."

Were man to believe only in what he can prove and explain, all mental processes would come to a standstill. Science is humbler to-day than it was fifty years ago. The impossible stands out with more defiant challenge than ever before. It may be just as well, or better, that Whitman has the power to make "downhearted sulkers and doubters" believe with him that there is a self-justified joy in the quenchless faith that man is deathless, and that the orbit of our lives "cannot be swept by a carpenter's compass." "I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured, and never will be measured," says Whitman.

Finding the earth "rude, silent, incomprehensible at first," Whitman declares that he is not discouraged, reading a message of hope and good cheer in the strange hieroglyphics of sea, sky, and land. What a strange persuasiveness in the following lines:

"The sun and stars that float in the open air,
The apple-shaped earth, and we upon it—surely the drift of them is something grand!

I do not know what it is except that it is grand, and that it is happiness.
And that the enclosing purport of us here is not a speculation, or bon-mot, or reconnoissance,

And that it is not something which by luck may turn out well for us, and without luck must be a failure for us,

And not something which may be retracted in a certain contingency."

Leaves of Grass is fragrant with the thought that mere material progress, the accumulation of iron and steel, brick and mortar, palaces and hovels, furniture and bric-à-brac, jewelry and paintings, are all so much junk apart from the spiritual development of the common man:

"Yet again lo! the soul, above all science,
For it has history gathered like husks around the globe,
For it the entire star-myriads roll through the sky."

Facts, religions, trades, improvements, all have their parts to play in the drama of life, and are unequivocally real, declares Whitman:

"But the soul is also real, it too is positive and direct,
No reasoning, no proof has established it,
Undeniable growth has established it."

The optimism of *Leaves of Grass* is diffusive, boundless, and contagious, because genuine. Through sickness and poverty, the object at once of fervent adulation and of virulent abuse, Whitman's supreme faith, love, and joy remained an unanswerable affirmative that life, affectionately spent, is worth living, proving in his own person the truth of his declaration that it is as great a joy to live as it is to die—

"And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier."

"For not life's joy alone I sing, repeating—the joy of death!

The beautiful touch of death, soothing and benumbing a few moments for reasons."

"The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,

And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it."

Whitman's faith in immortality never wavered, though he made little or no attempt to reason it out, his belief being, as he said, part of his "untold and untellable wisdom."

Not long before the great bard passed contentedly into the joys revealed by "what we call dissolution," his devoted friend and biographer, Mr. Horace L. Traubel, said to him: "I was asked to-day whether your belief in immortality persisted."

Whitman answered, "What did you say?"

Traubel replied: "I said that if immortality depended upon your or any man's belief in it you could not believe. I said that immortality is seen and felt. I said that you see it and feel it."

Whitman cried, "Amen."

Already in 1855 Whitman had written:

"I swear I think there is nothing but immortality!

That the exquisite scheme is for it, and the nebulous float is for it, and the cohering is for it;

And all preparation is for it! and identity is for it! and life and materials are altogether for it!"

"I swear I think that everything without exception has an eternal Soul!"

When science fails to illuminate, to cheer, and to comfort; when the savant has nothing to offer but a modest agnosticism, or some facts or figures inapplicable to the case,—I see now the dearly loved child in the coffin, and the anguished mother close by!—when cold logic fails to convince and the clinched hands of grief clutch spasmodically and reach out for hope, for assurances, I rush thither not with death lilies and poison-scented flowers, but with *Leaves of Grass* in my hand, and sit with the bereaved one long and long, reading of lovely and soothing death, of "Footsteps gently ascending—mystical breezes, wafted soft and low," and "Ripples of unseen rivers—tides of a current, flowing, forever flowing." Whitman confidently whispers:

"I do not doubt interiors have their interiors, and exteriors have their exteriors—and that the eyesight has another eyesight, and the hearing another hearing, and the voice another voice;

I do not doubt that the passionately-wept deaths of young men are provided for—and that the deaths of young women, and the deaths of little children, are provided for;

(Did you think Life was so well provided for—and Death, the purport of all Life, is not well provided for?)

I do not doubt that wrecks at sea, no matter what the horrors of them—no matter whose wife, child, husband, father, lover, has gone down, are provided for, to the minutest points;

I do not doubt that whatever can possibly happen, anywhere, at any time, is provided for, in the inferences of things;

I do not think Life provides for all, and for Time and Space—but I believe Heavenly Death provides for all."

Could the most rigorously scientific critic find fault with such consoling assurances on the ground that it is not true, or not proved? If it is not proved neither is it denied, or deniable. Again we meet the age-old question, "What is truth?" Whitman answers:

"All truths wait in all things;
 They neither hasten their own delivery, nor resist it;
 They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon;

 Logic and sermons never convince;

 Only what proves itself to every man and woman is so;
 Only what nobody denies is so."

Whitman declares that "the earth remains jagged and broken only to him or her who remains jagged and broken, and that for those to whom life has a meaning death also will have a meaning; for what is the significance of life and beauty apart from love and death—love the ameliorator of life, the breath of life, and death the great deliveress? Says Whitman:

"For now it is conveyed to me that you are the purports essential,
 That you hide in these shifting forms for reasons, and that they are mainly
 for you,
 That you beyond them come forth to remain, the real reality,
 That it may be you are what it is all for,

 Death or life I am then indifferent, my soul declines to prefer."

And so, Walt Whitman, taking from no books, nor laboratories, nor "special revelations," his faith, love, and charity; mildly but firmly in rebellion against all man-made creeds and dogmas; defiant of all set rules of conduct, looks out upon the universe afresh, and reads there the proof that love is the law of life, and that "affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet," because "Those who love each other shall become invincible," and that, in the long run, we shall surely see coming—

"Forth from their masks, no matter what,
 From the huge festering trunk, from craft and guile and tears,
 Health to emerge, joy, joy universal."

"Is it a dream?
 Nay, but the lack of it a dream,
 And lacking it life's lore and wealth a dream,
 And all the world a dream."