

"THE RELIGION OF THE DAY"

"Let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire."

(Hebrews 12: 28-29)

In every age of Christianity, since it was first preached, there has been what may be called a *religion of the world*, which so far imitates the one true religion, as to deceive the unstable and unwary. The world does not oppose religion *as such*. I may say, it never has opposed it. It has, in all ages, acknowledged in one sense or other the Gospel of Christ, fastened on one or other of its characteristics, and professed to embody this in its practice; while by neglecting the other parts of the holy doctrine, it has, in fact, distorted and corrupted even that portion of it which it has exclusively put forward, and so has contrived to explain away the whole.

He who cultivates only one precept of the Gospel to the exclusion of the rest, in reality attends to no part at all.

Our duties balance each other; and though we are too sinful to perform them all perfectly, yet we may in some measure be performing them all, and preserving the balance on the whole.

Whereas, to give ourselves only to this or that commandment, is to incline our minds in a wrong direction, and at length to pull them down to the earth, which is the aim of our adversary, the Devil.

It is his *aim* to break our strength; to force us down to the earth, to bind us there. The world is his instrument for this purpose; but he is too wise to set it in open opposition to the Word of God. No! he affects to be a prophet like the prophets of God. He calls his servants also prophets; and they mix with the scattered remnant of the true Church, with the solitary Micaiahs who are left upon the earth, and speak in the name of the Lord.

And in one sense they speak the truth; but it is not the whole truth; and we know, even from the common experience of life, that half the truth is often the most gross and mischievous of falsehoods.

Even in the first age of the Church, while persecution still raged, he set up a counter religion among the philosophers of the day, partly like Christianity, but in truth a bitter foe to it; and it deceived and made shipwreck of the faith of those who had not the love of God in their hearts.

Time went on, and he devised a second idol of the true Christ, and it remained in the temple of God for many a year. The age was rude and fierce. Satan took the darker side of the

Gospel: its awful mysteriousness, its fearful glory, its sovereign inflexible justice; and here *his* picture of the truth ended.

"God is a consuming fire." So declares the text, and we know it. But we know more; namely, that God is love also.

But Satan did not add this to his religion, which became one of fear. The religion of the world was then a fearful religion. Superstitions abounded, and cruelties. The noble firmness, the graceful austerity of the true Christian were superseded by forbidding specters, harsh of eye, and haughty of brow; and these were the patterns or the tyrants of a beguiled people.

What is Satan's device in this day? A far different one, perhaps a more pernicious one. I will attempt to expose what the world's religion is now.

It has taken the brighter side of the Gospel, its tidings of comfort, its precepts of love; all darker, deeper views of man's condition and prospects being comparatively forgotten. This is the religion *natural* to a civilized age, and well has Satan dressed and completed it into an idol of the Truth.

As the reason is cultivated, the taste formed, the affections and sentiments refined, a general decency and grace will of course spread over the face of society, quite independently of the influence of Revelation. That beauty and delicacy of thought, which is so attractive in books, then extends to the conduct of life, to all we have, all we do, all we are. Our manners are courteous; we avoid giving pain or offense; our words become correct; our relative duties are carefully performed. Our sense of propriety shows itself even in our domestic arrangements, in the embellishments of our houses, in our amusements, and so also in our religious profession.

Vice now becomes unseemly and hideous to the imagination, or, as it is sometimes familiarly said, "out of taste." Thus elegance is gradually made the test and standard of virtue, which is no longer thought to possess an intrinsic claim on

our hearts, or to exist, *further than* it leads to the quiet and comfort of others.

Conscience is no longer recognized as an independent arbiter of actions, its authority is explained away; partly it is superseded in the minds of men by the so-called moral sense, which is regarded merely as the love of the beautiful; partly by the rule of expediency, which is forthwith substituted for it in the details of conduct.

Now conscience, a stern, gloomy principle, tells us of guilt and of prospective punishment. Accordingly when its terrors disappear, then disappear also, in the creed of the day, those fearful images of Divine wrath with which the Scriptures abound. They are explained away. Religion is pleasant and easy; benevolence is the chief virtue; intolerance, bigotry, excess of zeal, are its first of sins. Austerity is an absurdity; even firmness is looked on with an unfriendly, suspicious eye. On the other hand, open profligacy is discountenanced; drunkenness is accounted a disgrace; cursing and swearing are vulgarities.

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Moreover, to a cultivated mind, which recreates itself in the varieties of literature and knowledge and is interested in the ever-accumulating discoveries of science, and the ever-fresh accessions of information, religion commonly seems to be dull, from want of novelty. Hence excitements are eagerly sought out and rewarded. New objects of religion, new systems and plans, new doctrines, new preachers are necessary to satisfy that craving which the so-called spread of knowledge has created. The mind becomes morbidly sensitive and fastidious; dissatisfied with things as they are, desirous of change *as such*, as if alteration must of itself be a relief.

Now I would have you put Christianity for an instant out of your thoughts. Consider whether such a state of refinement as I have attempted to describe, is not that to which men might be brought, quite independent of religion, by the mere influence of education and civilization; and then again, whether, nevertheless, this mere refinement of mind is not more or less all this that is called religion at this day.

In other words, is it not the case, that Satan has so composed and dressed out what is the mere natural produce of the human heart under certain circumstances, as serve his purposes as the counterfeit of the Truth? I do not at all deny that this spirit of the world uses words, and makes provisions, which it would not adopt except for the suggestions in Scripture; nor do I deny that it takes its general coloring from Christianity, so as really to be modified by it, nay, in a measure enlightened and exalted by it. Again, I fully grant that many persons in whom this bad spirit shows itself are but partially infected by it, and at bottom, good Christians, though imperfect.

Still, after all, here is an existing teaching, only partially evangelical, built upon worldly principle, yet pretending to be the Gospel, dropping one whole side of the Gospel – its austere character – and considering it enough to be benevolent, courteous, candid, correct in conduct, delicate, though it includes no true fear of God, no fervent zeal for His honor, no deep hatred of sin, no horror at the sight of sinners, no indignation and compassion at the blasphemies of heretics, no jealous adherence to doctrinal truth, no especial sensitiveness about the particular means of gaining ends, provided the ends be good, no loyalty to the Holy Apostolic Church, of which the Creed speaks, no sense of the authority of religion as external to the mind. In a word, no seriousness, and therefore, neither hot nor cold, but (in Scripture language) *lukewarm*.

Thus the present age is the very contrary to what are commonly called the dark ages; and together with the faults of those ages we have lost their virtues. I say their virtues; for even the errors then prevalent, a persecuting spirit, for instance, fear of religious inquiry, bigotry, these were, after all, but perversions and excesses of *real virtues*, such as zeal and reverence; and we, instead of limiting and purifying them, have taken them away root and branch. Why? because we have not acted from a love of the Truth, but from the influence of

the Age.

The old generation has passed, and its character with it; a new order of things has arisen. Human society has a new framework, and fosters and develops a new character of mind; and this new character is made by the enemy of our souls, to resemble the Christian's obedience as near as it may, its likeness all the time being but accidental.

Meanwhile the Holy Church of God, as from the beginning, continues her course heavenward; despised by the world, yet influencing it, partly correcting it, partly restraining it, and in some happy cases reclaiming its victims, and fixing them firmly and for ever within the lines of the faithful host militant here on earth, which journeys towards the City of the Great King. God give us grace to search our hearts, lest we be blinded by the deceitfulness of sin! lest we serve Satan transformed into an Angel of light, while we think we are pursuing true knowledge; lest, over-looking and ill-treating the elect of

Christ here, we have to ask that awful question at the last day, while the truth is bursting upon us, "Lord, when saw we Thee a stranger and a prisoner?" When saw we Thy sacred Word and Servants despised and oppressed, "and did not minister unto Thee?" (Matthew 25: 44)

Nothing shows more strikingly the power of *the world's religion*, than to consider the very different classes of men whom it influences. It will be found to extend its sway and teaching both over the professedly religious and the irreligious. Many religious men, rightly or not, have long been expecting a millennium of purity and peace for the Church. I will not say, whether or not with reason, for good men may differ on such a subject. But, any how, in the case of those who have expected it, it has become a



temptation to take up and recognize the world's religion as I have already delineated it. They have more or less identified their vision of Christ's kingdom with the elegance and refinement of mere human civilization and have hailed every evidence of improved decency, every wholesome civil regulation, every beneficent and enlightened act of state policy, as signs of their coming Lord. Bent upon achieving their object, an extensive and glorious diffusion and profession of the Gospel, they have been little solicitous about *the means* employed. They have countenanced and acted with men who openly professed un-Christian principles. They have accepted and defended what they considered to be reformations and ameliorations of the existing state of things, though injustice must be perpetrated in order to effect them, or cherished rules of conduct... consecrated by long usage, must be violated. They have sacrificed Truth to expedience. They have strangely imagined that bad men are to be the immediate instruments of the approaching advent of Christ....

2. On the other hand, the form of doctrine, which I have called the religion of the day, is especially adapted to please men of skeptical minds, who have never been careful to obey their conscience, who cultivate the intellect without disciplining the heart, and who allow themselves to speculate freely

about what religion *ought to be*, without going to Scripture to discover what it really is. Some persons of this character almost consider religion to be an obstacle in the advance of our social and political well being. But they know human nature requires it, therefore they select the most *rational* form of religion (so they call it) which they can find. Others are far more seriously disposed, but are corrupted by bad example or other cause. But they all discard (what they call) gloomy views of religion; they all trust themselves more than God's word, and thus may be classed together, and are ready to embrace the pleasant consoling religion natural to a polished age.

They lay much stress on works of *Natural Theology*, and think that all religion is contained in these. In truth, there is no greater fallacy than to suppose such works to be in themselves in any true sense religious at all. Religion, it has been well observed, is something *relative to us*, a system of commands and promises from God *towards us*. But how are we concerned with the sun, moon, and stars? or with the laws of the universe? How will they teach us our *duty*? How will they speak to *sinners*? They do not speak to sinners at all. They were created *before* Adam fell. They "declare the *glory* of God," but not His *will*. They are all perfect, all harmonious; but that brightness and excellence which they exhibit in their own creation, and the Divine benevolence therein seen, are of little moment to fallen man. We see nothing there of God's *wrath*, of which the conscience of a sinner loudly speaks. So that there cannot be a more dangerous (though a common) device of Satan, than to carry us off from our own secret thoughts, to make us forget our own hearts, which tell us of a God of justice and holiness, and to fix our attention merely on the God who made the heavens; who is *our* God indeed, but not God as manifested to us sinners, but as He shines forth to His Angels, and to His elect hereafter.

When a man has so far deceived himself as to trust his destiny to what the heavens tell him of it, instead of consulting and obeying his conscience, what is the consequence? He at once misinterprets and perverts the whole tenor of Scripture. It cannot be denied that, pleasant as religious observances are declared in Scripture to be to the holy, yet to men in general they are said to be difficult and distasteful, to all men *naturally* impossible... Religion is pronounced to be against nature, to be against our original will, to require God's aid to make us love and obey it, and to be commonly refused and opposed in spite of that aid. We are expressly told, that "strait is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life, and few there be that find it"; that we must "*strive*" or struggle "to enter in at the strait gate," for that "many shall *seek* to enter in," but that is not enough, they merely seek and therefore do not find; and further, that they who do not obtain everlasting life, "shall go into everlasting punishment."

This is the dark side of religion, and the men I have been describing cannot bear to think of it. They shrink from it as

too terrible. They easily get themselves to believe that those strong declarations of Scripture do not belong to the present day, or that they are figurative. They have no language within their heart responding to them. Conscience has been silenced.

The only information they have received concerning God has been from Natural Theology, and that speaks only of benevolence and harmony; so they will not credit the plain word of Scripture.

They seize on such parts of Scripture as seem to countenance their own opinions.

They insist on its being commanded us to "rejoice ever more," and they argue that it is our duty to solace ourselves here (in moderation, of course) with the goods of this life – that we have only to be thankful while we use them, that we need not alarm ourselves, that God is a merciful God, that amendment is quite sufficient to atone for our offenses, that though we have been irregular in our youth, yet that is a thing gone by, that we forget it and therefore God forgets it, that the world is, on the whole, very well disposed towards religion, that we should avoid enthusiasm, that we should not be over serious, that we should have large views on the subject of human nature, and that we should love all men.

This indeed is the creed of shallow men, in *every* age, who reason a little, and feel not at all, and who think themselves enlightened and philosophical. Part of what they say is false, part is true, but misapplied; but why I have noticed it here, is to show how exactly it fits in with what I have already described as the peculiar religion of a civilized age.

One further remark I will make about these professedly rational Christians; who, be it observed, often go on to deny the mysteries of the Gospel. Let us take the text: "Our God is a consuming fire." Now supposing these persons fell upon these words, or heard them urged as an argument against their own doctrine of the unmixed satisfactory character of our prospects in the world to come, and supposing they did not know what part of the Bible they occurred in, what would they say? (Matt. 7:14; Luke 8:24; Matt. 25:46)

Doubtless they would confidently say that they applied only to the Jews, not to Christians; that they only described the Divine Author of the Mosaic Law; that God formerly spoke in terrors to the Jews, because they were a gross and brutish people, but that civilization has made us quite other men; that *our reason*, not our fears, is appealed to, and that the Gospel is love.

And yet, in spite of all this argument, the text occurs in the Epistle to the Hebrews, written by an Apostle of Christ.

I shall conclude with stating more fully what I mean by the dark side of religion; and what judgment ought to be passed on the superstitious and gloomy.

Here I will not shrink from uttering my firm conviction, that it would be a gain to this country, were it vastly more superstitious, more bigoted, more gloomy, more fierce in its religion, than at present it shows itself to be. Not, of course,

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that I think the tempers of mind herein implied desirable, which would be an evident absurdity; but I think them infinitely more desirable and more promising than a heathen obduracy, and a cold, self-sufficient, self-wise tranquillity. Doubtless, peace of mind, a quiet conscience, and a cheerful countenance are the gift of the Gospel, and the sign of a Christian; but the same effects (or, rather, what appear to be the same) may arise from very different causes. Jonah slept in the storm; so did our Blessed Lord. The one slept in an evil security, the Other in the "peace of God which passeth all understanding." The two states cannot be confounded together, they are perfectly distinct; and as distinct is the calm of the man of the world from that of the Christian.

Now take the case of the sailors on board the vessel; they cried to Jonah, "What meanest thou, O sleeper?" So the Apostles said to Christ, "Lord, we perish." This is the case of the superstitious; they stand between the false peace of Jonah and the true peace of Christ; they are better than the one, though far below the Other.

Applying this to the present religion of the educated world, full as it is of security and cheerfulness, and decorum, and benevolence, I observe that these appearances may arise either from a great deal of religion, or from the absence of it; they may be the fruits of shallowness of mind and a blinded conscience, or of that faith which has peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. And if this alternative be proposed, I might leave it to the common sense of men to decide (if they could get themselves to think seriously) to which of the two the temper of the age is to be referred.

For myself I cannot doubt, seeing what I see of the world, that it arises from the sleep of Jonah; and it is therefore but a dream of religion, far inferior in worth to the well-grounded alarm of the superstitious, who are awakened and see their danger, though they do not attain so far in faith as to embrace the remedy of it.

Think of this, I beseech you, my brethren, and lay it to heart, as far as you go with me, as you will answer for having heard it at the last day.

I would not willingly be harsh: but knowing "that the world lieth in wickedness," I think it highly probable that you, so far as you are in it (as you must be, and we all must be in our degree), are, most of you, partially infected with its existing error, that shallowness of religion, which is the result of a blinded conscience.

Therefore, I speak earnestly to you. Believing in the existence of a general plague in the land, I judge that you probably have your share in the sufferings, the voluntary sufferings, which it is spreading among us.

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom; till you see Him to be a consuming fire, and approach Him with reverence and godly fear, as being sinners, you are not even in sight of the strait gate.

I do not wish you to be able to point to any particular time

when you renounced the world (as it is called), and were converted; this is a deceit. Fear and love must go together; always fear, always love, to your dying day. Doubtless you must know what it is to sow in tears here, if you would reap in joy hereafter.

Till you know the weight of your sins, and that not in mere imagination, but in practice, not so as merely to confess it in a formal phrase of lamentation, but daily and in your heart in secret, you cannot embrace the offer of mercy held out to you in the Gospel, through the death of Christ.

Till you know what it is to fear with the terrified sailors or the Apostles, you cannot sleep with Christ at your Heavenly Father's feet.

Miserable as were the superstitions of the dark ages, revolting as are the tortures now in use among the heathen of the East, better, far better is it, to torture the body all one's days, and to make this life a hell upon earth, than to remain in a brief tranquillity here, till the pit at length opens under us, and awakens us to an eternal fruitless consciousness and remorse.

Think of Christ's own words: "What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" Again, He says, "Fear Him, who after He hath killed, hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, fear Him."

Dare not to think you have got to the bottom of your hearts; you do not know what evil lies there. How long and earnestly must you pray, how many years must you pass in careful obedience, before you have any right to lay aside sorrow, and to rejoice in the Lord?

In one sense, indeed, you may take comfort from the first; for, though you dare not yet anticipate you are in the number

of Christ's true elect, yet from the first you know He desires your salvation, has died for you, has washed away your sins by baptism, and will ever help you; and this thought must cheer you while you go on to examine and review your lives, and to turn to God in self-denial.

But, at the same time, you never can be sure of salvation while you are here; and therefore you must always fear while you hope.

Your knowledge of your sins increases with your view of God's mercy in Christ.

And this is the true Christian state, and the nearest approach to Christ's calm and placid sleep in the tempest; not perfect joy and certainty in heaven, but a deep resignation to God's will, a surrender of ourselves, soul and body, to Him; hoping indeed, that we shall be saved, but fixing our eyes more earnestly on Him than on ourselves; that is, acting for His glory, seeking to please Him, devoting ourselves to Him in all manly obedience and strenuous good works; and, when we do look within, thinking of ourselves with a certain abhorrence and contempt as being sinners, mortifying our flesh, scourging our appetites, and composedly awaiting that time when, if we be worthy, we shall be stripped of our present selves, and new made in the kingdom of Christ.

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