1896

The religion of humanity

THESIS.

THE RELIGION OF HUMANITY.

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(As presented by August Comte and elaborated by Frederic Harrison).

As a distinct religious movement the Religion of Humanity is not of great importance. It is rather a curious phenomenon in man's religious history. Certain relations, however, which it sustains to the general world of religious life and thought give it significance. It is for one thing properly regarded as a formal expression of the widely diffused humanitarian sentimant of this age. Then again its central idea is, and must always be, as Mr. Mallock points out, the main ingredient of every scientific religion. Considered, then, in the light of these wider relations the Religion of Humanity gains importance and its study comes to have more than a curious interest.

The present paper has for its purpose an exposition and criticism of this religion as it is presented by August Comte, its founder, and by Frederic Harrison, his most eminent English follower. In all essentials these two men agree. It will ~~not~~ only be in incidental matters therefore that we will have occasion to notice differences between them.

The philosophical basis of the Religion of Humanity is Positivism, its founder being also the famous author of

the Positivist Philosophy. The fundamental contention of this system of philosophy is that nothing can be known save phenomena. The human mind is confined to them, to registering their succession and coexistence. All inquiry after causes is wholly futile, is but "an illusory play of the imagination." Theology and metaphysics, therefore, are to be looked upon as mistaken endeavors. It was natural, even necessary, in the course of human development that these endeavors should be made. But now that Positivism has shown their futility they are to be discarded. The new philosophy knows nothing of causes or of Being distinct from appearance.

Now such a philosophy as this would seem to be necessarily fatal to all religion. And such, of course, it would be to all religions based on a belief in God or gods, since it denies the existence of such a Being or beings, or, what is practically the same, the knowledge of them if they do exist. Comte saw that very clearly. But from his study of human history and from his own experience he became convinced that religion was a human necessity. It met a felt want in the human heart, and served an important purpose in the world. He, therefore, turned his back upon religious scepticism and determined to reconstruct religion upon a Positivist basis. Gods had long since ceased to exist for him, but he would found a religion

without a God.

Such a religion as that would seem to be a contradiction in terms, but it was not such to Comte. In his analysis of man's religious history he came to the conclusion that what the term religion denotes is "complete harmony in human life whether individual or social." Anything, then, that could produce that result or tend to produce it would be entitled to the name religion.

What, then, Comte set about to do was to frame such a system of belief and life and government as would lead to this result.

Now to accomplish this purpose it was evident that there was need of some principle of unity. There had ~~been~~ to be something which would bind men's hearts together and which would harmonize the interests of the individual. In the old religions God or the gods, so long as they were believed in, had in a measure served this purpose. But belief in God was now obsolete and destined soon to disappear altogether. A new principle of unity must, therefore, be discovered. A new object of faith must be introduced to take the place of the imaginary ~~duty~~ deity or deities. This new object, it was clear, must be of such a nature as to command the reverence and love of men. It must be a "power without us so superior to ourselves as to

command the complete submission of our entire life."

Now in all the visible world nothing seemed better fitted to serve as such a power than Humanity. Here was a real Being, disclosed to us by science, with all the elements necessary to make it the object of men's reverence and devotion and the center of their affection. At first it might seem that Humanity thus taken as a whole is a mere abstraction having no real existence. But this is a mistake. Science teaches us that Humanity is itself "a being, an organism with every quality of organic life." The individual man in and by himself has no existence. He, says Comte, "is an abstraction and there is nothing real but Humanity."

But in order to form the centre of a religious system this conception of Humanity needs further exposition. So Comte tells us that we are to understand by Humanity "the whole of human beings, past, present and future." We are not, however, to interpret this as including all individuals, "but those only who are really capable of assimilation in virtue of a real cooperation on their part in furthering the common good." Evil persons are excluded, but in their stead are introduced "all animals that lend a noble aid." There is, however, nothing arbitrary in this exclusion. It is a simple scientific fact,

says Frederic Harrison, that "the good energies alone find permanent incorporation in the course of civilization." Now to understand the relation that the men of the past sustain to Humanity we are to conceive of this great being as having two forms of existence, "one objective made up of living men, the other subjective made up of the surviving influences of the dead." The men of the past, then, exist as influences in living Humanity. They, together with those of the future, are introduced into the conception, says Harrison, to bring into prominence the idea of progress. The transmitted influences of past generations have largely made Humanity what it is and the incorporation of future generations insures an indefinite progress in the time to come.

To sum up, then, the Positivist's conception of Humanity in Comte's own words, it is that of "an immense and eternal Being....destined by sociological laws to constant development under the preponderating influences of biological and cosmological necessities."

Now so conceived Humanity, we are told, is fitted to call forth the reverence and affection and devotion of men. It is not, it is true, an absolute Being, but unlike such a Being it is real, and is the greatest and grandest and wisest

The one great difference already referred to between it and the theological God, is that it is not absolute. The God of theology is the absolute centre of human thought. But it is only relatively to human needs that Humanity becomes the centre of man's thought. It is only from the point of view of utility that knowledge finds its systematizing principle in Humanity. So the God of theology is also an absolute Providence. But Humanity is only a relative Providence. It cares for men and helps them, but only in a limited way. Likewise the God of theology is absolutely eternal and from that point of view man is absolutely immortal. But Humanity is not absolutely eternal, nor are men under this scheme of thought absolutely immortal. The fact is Humanity is encompassed by physical laws which limit it and make certain its final extinction.

Now this important truth with reference to Humanity might seem to unfit it for being the central object of religion. And Comte, in fact, felt that it would be a hindrance to the full play of the religious emotions. He, therefore, instituted a worship of the Earth and Space along with Humanity, the three forming a kind of Trinity. He did not, however, intend that they should be thought to be Beings in the same sense

as Humanity. That were simply to be treated as though they were such in order that the religious imagination might see in "all that surrounds us the free auxiliaries of Humanity." In this way by a permissible poetic deceit he thought to avoid the difficulty which he felt existed in the relative and limited character of Humanity. But Frederic Harrison does not admit this as a necessary difficulty, and hence nowhere resorts to Comte's poetic subterfuge. He insists that the relative is all that man can have and that, therefore, he must learn to be content with it. The longing for the Absolute, he says, is the "evil legacy of theology," and is not natural to the instincts of "healthy, practical and energetic men." When, therefore, it is generally understood that deities are unrealities, and when "the promises of the churches are known to be false," then people will find no difficulty in accepting Humanity as the centre of life and thought because it is not absolute.

This exposition, which we have given at some length, of Humanity as the unifying principle of life, as the object of man's reverence and the centre of his affection, constitutes properly the Doctrine of the Religion of Humanity.

In order, however, to make this doctrine a living religious creed, Comte believed that a form of worship and a

system of government, in harmony with it, were necessary. In his reconstruction of religion, therefore, he included these. The model which he followed in framing them was Mediaeval Roman Catholicism for which he had great admiration. It would be impossible and unnecessary here to give the details of the elaborate ritual and regime which Comte worked out. A summary statement will suffice.

Prayer, or "effusion of gratitude and love," as Comte defines it, was to be the central feature of the worship. In public it was to be addressed to the great Being, Humanity, symbolized in art as "a woman of the age of thirty with her son in her arms." In private it was to be addressed to the idea of a woman conceived in the three relations of mother, wife and daughter who were regarded as one's guardian angels. Comte himself addressed his private prayers to his mother, his friend Madame Clotilde and his cook. Further instructions with reference to the frequency and length and place and character of prayers were given. Nine sacraments were furthermore ordained. Direction was also given as to the building of temples, their location and ~~ornamentation~~ orientation. An ecclesiastical calendar was also formed with its saint days and its festivals.

The government was to be administered by a priestly

hierarchy, the qualifications, orders and duties of which are given in detail. The most important work of the priest was to be that of education which was to be given in accordance with the supposed fact that for the first seven years a boy is a fetichist, the next seven a polytheist, then for the next seven a monotheist and finally a positivist.

Much ridicule has been cast upon the "Religion of Humanity" in consequence of these details of worship and government. Huxley has spoken of it as an "eviscerated papistry" and as "Romanism with christianity left out." Frederic Harrison himself has not attempted defence of this part of Comte's system save in a general way. He has simply insisted that Comte was right in holding that a form of worship and a system of governmentwere essential to religion and in making provision for them. As for the details he says that Comte himself has garded them as"provisional" and that he himself has always treated them as in a large part "~~tutelaire~~ tentative and Utopian" and has constantly protested against any "mint and anise of Comtist ritual."

We have thus far used the word "worship" without defining it, but an explanation of its meaning is almost necessary to avoid misconception. Comte appears to use it in its

common signification. But Frederic Harrison tells us that it is not so to be understood. The worship of Humanity, he says, means "simply the honor and gratitude every decent man ought to feel for what he has received of good from the human race. Nothing mystical or ecstatic attaches to the word at all. The same is to be said with reference to all the religious terms used by Comte. They have lost their old theological signification. The reason they are used is simply to direct the old associations of reverence toward the new objects of gratitude and respect.

Space now remains for only a summary criticism of the "religion" we have been explaining.

The first suspicious thing that strikes us with reference to it is its artificiality as evidenced in its origin. It was manifestly a religion made to order. Comte imagined that he saw the old religious faiths tumbling to the ground and thinking that as much as possible of them ought to be preserved, seems to have said, "Let us gather up the fragments that none be lost" and out of these he pieced together a new religion.

The second criticism to be passed on it is with respect to Humanity as the object of man's affection and devotion.

In spite of what science tells us about the human organism it must be admitted that Humanity is a mere abstraction. There is no universal corresponding to man. There is no universal human consciousness, nor universal human intellect nor universal human goodness. These are all abstractions and a Being made up of them is certainly not calculated to awaken our affection or devotion. But laying aside this conception of a universal human Being, take humanity as it is, made up of individual beings. As such it certainly cannot be the object of every man's affection for that would require a stretch of sympathy to which the average man is wholly unable to respond.

But the most decisive criticism is yet to be made. It is this. A relative religion, such as the "Religion of Humanity," is no religion at all. If there is one realm where men have believed that they had the truth, that is the realm of religion. There nothing, save what at least professes to be absolute truth, has ever maintained itself, or ever will. Comte, as we have seen, felt this defect in his religion and tried to avoid it by resorting to poetic self-deception. Frederic Harrison sees that this will not do and so condemns the common longing for the absolute as "unfit for healthy, energetic and practical men." But this native instinct of the human mind is not thus to be put down. It will assert itself. Even if men, however,

should give up the search after the absolute in the philosophical sense of the term, the revelations of science, which the "Religion of Humanity" boasts to be its creed, would be fatal to its claims. The very essence of this religion is that Humanity gives something of coherent and collective meaning to human life. But science teaches us that Humanity is to have its end and this necessarily deprives human life of ~~its~~ permanent meaning. Frederic Harrison stigmatizes such considerations as these as"unhealthy and unmanly musings", but in so doing he is only illustrating Hobbes" pithy dictum that "when reason is against a man he will be against reason."

The fact is that in his attempt to reconstruct religion upon a purely scientific basis the positivist has an impossible task before him. Either there will be no religion or religion will have its supernatural postulates.