

THE FUTURE OF RELIGION.

TWO questions will profoundly disturb the closing years of this century—the social question and the religious question. The social question may be summed up in the claims of the working-classes for a larger share in the produce of labour. The religious question is the struggle between what is called the scientific spirit and religion. These two questions are in many ways bound up together. It was Christianity that spread abroad in the world the notion of equality, whence spring the equalizing aspirations now threatening the social order; it is also the influence of Christianity which now arrests the explosion of subversive forces, and its precepts, better understood and applied, will, by degrees, restore peace to the nations of the world.

If one reflects on the future of civilized countries, one is led to propose to one's self this serious question: Is religion destined to survive the crisis it is now passing through, and, if it do not perish, what form will it take in the future?

It is certain that it has never been subjected to a more severe ordeal than at the present time. Hostile winds blow on it from all sides, and threaten its destruction. Under the Roman Empire, religious belief was also greatly shaken. The old form of worship subsisted, and its rites were scrupulously practised, but the more enlightened of the population did not believe in them, and had recourse to one or other system of philosophy for rules of conduct, for consolation in affliction, and for the theory of human destiny. In the upper classes scepticism dominated, and they sought forgetfulness of moral and spiritual pre-occupations in sensual pleasures. It appeared then as if religion were destined wholly to disappear, though the lower orders preserved their attachment to it. Their ignorance raised a barrier between them and their superiors. The peasantry, *paganî*, remained so long faithful to

the old worship that the name we now give it, "paganism," is derived from them. But, on the one hand, the roughs, the peasantry, and the slaves, and, later, the German tribes; and, on the other, elevated minds purified by Platonism and Stoicism, were prepared to adopt a new form of worship.

To-day there is nothing whatever of this sort. No new race is at hand to restore youth to our worn-out society. There are no barriers between the classes; scepticism descends as a flood from one to the other. Philosophical doctrines are no longer what they were in ancient times, a life discipline and a rule of conduct; they form simply a subject of research for some few erudite persons; they interest and excite the curiosity of learned men, but furnish no spiritual sustenance to the higher classes of the population. Where, at the present day, are the crowds ready and eager to accept a new faith? Can one conceive, in our practical age, when the spirit of poetry is nearly extinguished, a religious movement like that which first threw the world into the arms of Christianity? The soil has become parched. The divine tree of faith, it seems, can find nothing to vivify its roots.

Three different causes are undermining religion in our day. The first of these is the principle of natural sciences applied to philosophy. I refer to what is known as Darwinism or Positivism. These sciences seek to explain all phenomena by natural causes, and thus reject even the mere notion of a supernatural power, and this idea leads, not necessarily but very frequently, to a doubt as to the existence of a Divinity, or at least to the affirmation that we can know nothing whatever of anything of the kind, which amounts to almost the same thing. Again, the studies on the origin of species seem to tend to prove that human beings owe their origin, through evolution, to the very lowest categories of the animal creation, and, further back still, to inorganic matter; it follows then that there is a temptation to assimilate man to animals and to withhold from him a soul. This order of ideas is not confined to the scientific world alone; it penetrates everywhere, and threatens the two essential principles of all spiritualism, a belief in God and in the immortality of the soul.

Religious sentiment is also weakened by the passion for well-being and by the pursuit of riches. It is quite true that in all ages men have endeavoured to secure for themselves wherewithal to satisfy their wants and their thirst for enjoyment and pleasure; but this pursuit has now become more ardent and more restless than it formerly was, because the condition of each individual is no longer fixed, as it used to be, by social organization. A working-man may now rise to the highest rank; but industrial crises may also reduce him to the most abject want. A man with nothing to-day may be a millionaire to-morrow, if only fortune favours him. In former days every man spent his life in the sphere in which he was born, and his condition was not

exposed to all the risks of this struggle for existence, which is neither more nor less than universal competition. I may attain any height, but I am exposed to all possible risks; hence, for all, a life of worry, agitated both by the desire for success and the fear of failure, in which religious feeling can necessarily hold little place. Even the scholar and the priest, though it is their vocation to seek and propagate truth, can no longer lead the peaceful and contemplative existence they did formerly, spending their whole lives in abstract and disinterested researches. Machinery is invading and devouring us even while doing us service. How many precious hours are absorbed by correspondence now that cheap universal postage is established, and by railways which draw us from our hearths by the facility with which we can now go from place to place! Each one wishes to succeed and raise his social status; hence a ceaseless effort towards the acquirement of earthly goods. In the midst of this whirl of business and pleasure no place is left for spiritual life, and for the cultivation of religious sentiment: see how busy men are about material interests, if not for themselves personally, for the works they patronize, and how their minds and souls are absorbed in political struggles and turned away from higher aims. The modern man fixes his affections on the things of this world, and desperately pursues the good things therein attainable, as if this were his lasting dwelling-place and there were nothing beyond. For him the word Heaven has no meaning. In this cold and dry atmosphere religion grows daily weaker and tends to be swept away.

The third cause undermining it acts on the working-classes. One shudders to think that in England, Germany, and France, everywhere, in fact, where Socialism penetrates among the lower orders, it sows the seeds of Atheism. On this point indeed a very strange error is committed. The workman who stands up for equality rejects Christianity, which brought the good tidings to the outcast and the desolate. Christ declared that "the last should be first," and His word is proscribed by those to whom it promises freedom.

By a similar and no less strange contradiction, the majority of the partisans of democracy in the present day adopt the tenets of Darwinism and Positivism. Darwinism applied to social sciences sets aside all notions of equality, and simply glorifies the triumph of the strongest and the cleverest. We know, indeed, that in the animal kingdom the strongest and the fittest get the upper hand in the struggle for existence, and the weakly and delicate are by degrees eliminated. Thus is accomplished natural selection, which transforms the species and effects progress. In human society, says the Darwinist, the same law should be allowed free sway. In this way those races and individuals who are less favoured would have to yield their place to those who are superior. This is as it should be. Charity and pretended justice interfere very wrongly in such instances. They are placing obstacles

in the way of the application of natural laws. Let go and let pass, the strongest must reign; they will be the masters of the community, and it is good that they should be so. Natural selection will bring about the same progress in the human race that it does in the animal creation. Right is might, and might being the attribute of superior organizations, it is to the general interest that power should be vested in their hands. Such is the social theory of Darwinism. It is essentially aristocratic. The partisans of democracy and equality can then only uphold it from either mere ignorance or blindness. Nevertheless, they do support it out of antipathy to any sort of religion. There is one thing which sets the labouring classes allured by Socialism very much against any form of Christianity; it is that the ministers of religion, who as a rule belong to the better class, make religion a sort of consecration, a means of defence, of the established order. They say to the poor: "Bear your trials with patience, the present life is short and is a mere preparation for an eternal life beyond. Those who have suffered here will be recompensed above. Poverty is the road to heaven." So long as such notions as these hold ground among the people they will bear their lot submissively. Religious conviction thus arrests the explosion of the spirit of insurrection and Socialistic revindication. Hence the supporters of Socialism do their utmost to lessen its influence, and even entirely to root it out, if possible. The manifestoes of the German Socialists are characteristic in this respect: "Socialism," they say, "is the commencement of a great epoch of atheistic culture. We must all work to prepare its triumph, which will last for thousands of years;"—"Despotism and Theism have always joined hands to exercise oppression; the people have bowed their heads and sought their happiness in another world, instead of claiming it in this, and they have allowed themselves to be turned to account by tyrants. With the disappearance of the last Theist the last slave will disappear. The future must belong to Atheism. Men will be indebted to it for their freedom and their happiness, which they have so long sacrificed for a mere delusion." In England also, the most Radical leaders of the working men's party preach Atheism. If religion continue to be made the boulevard, so to speak, of the established order of things, the sanction of existing social organization, it is quite inevitable that hostility to all religious views will become more widespread as the desire to reform society gains firmer footing.

In Roman Catholic countries all the advocates of freedom are obliged, often in spite of themselves, to attack religious belief. The clergy use religion as a sort of defensive weapon to ensure their domination. All who resist this make war against the priest and, consequently, also against the church he represents.

We see, then, that there are three powerful movements at work eating away religious belief. They are working simultaneously and

are daily making more way. It seems, indeed, that if this continue, all religion must, sooner or later, utterly disappear.

But here rises before us a most important question which demands a very clear and accurate reply: Can civilized society continue to subsist without religion? Morality without a belief in God and in the immortality of the soul, the vague and wavering sentiment of good and evil, with nothing practical to awaken in us the consciousness of our own infirmities or any aspiration towards an ideal of truth and justice: in a word, is human nature, abandoned in its irremediable loneliness to all its earthly instincts, capable of keeping straight and fulfilling the high destinies it is called upon to accomplish? True it is that the animal creation, guided only by instinct, live and perpetuate themselves while merely satisfying their inclinations and appetites. Some savages live very much in the same fashion, with no notions of duty or of a future life to exercise any control over their actions; but their existence is that of the brute beast. They are ceaselessly disputing the prey, and the strongest is the best provided for. But what would our modern society become, which is in truth based on respect and esteem for what is *right*, if the feeling of duty and all notions of justice were to disappear? If Atheism were to become universal, if it were everywhere confessed and taught, would it not inevitably carry us back to the barbarity of pre-historic ages?

Let us, for a moment, carefully consider this state of things, which seems yearly to be drawing nearer, and which some persons are so anxiously longing for.

Heaven is at last empty, and the places of worship entirely deserted. There is no God, no eternal and immutable type of truth and justice; no prayers can be addressed to a merciful Father, supreme source of comfort and consolation for the desolate and afflicted; there is no hope of another and a better life, where there is no more sin, and where the just are rewarded. Religion has altogether vanished, like the elementary myths which our early predecessors believed in. Irreligion is no longer the privilege of scholars and learned men, as in the eighteenth century. If Atheism is indeed the truth it must be openly preached to all. There will be many who will say to the people: "What is the use of a religion? Religion supposes a God and God does not exist. It is a mere word of no meaning, invented by terror, imposed on credulous minds, turned to account by fanaticism, and enlarged upon by the dreamings and empty meditations and reveries of ages. God is a mere mirage of man's personality. Man! you were bowing in adoration to yourself. You were worshipping your own image. Stand up; and raise your head too long bent to the dust beneath the yoke of tyrants and priests! Produce of earthly clay, you have nothing to hope for beyond this world. You need look for nothing in a future beyond the grave, for that future does not exist. Your lot is limited to an existence here below;

endeavour then to make the best of it, and to secure for yourself a large share of enjoyment and of the good things of the earth. For there is no compensation elsewhere."

Who can contemplate such a situation without alarm? With the notion of God, light disappears from the moral world and darkness invades all. Byron's "Dream of Darkness" becomes accomplished. It seems as if humanity could not exist without religion as a spiritual atmosphere, and we see that as this decreases despair and pessimism take hold of minds thus deprived of solace. Madame Ackerman well expresses this in some lines addressed to Faith, in which she writes :

"Eh bien, nous t'expulsons de tes divins royaumes,
 Dominatrice ardente, et l'instant est venu :
 Tu ne vas plus savoir où loger tes fantômes,
 Nous fermons l'Inconnu !
 Mais ton triomphateur expia ta défaite—
 L'homme déjà se trouble et, vainqueur éperdu,
 Il se sent ruiné par sa propre conquête ;
 En te dépossédant nous avons tout perdu.
 Nous restons sans espoir, sans recours, sans asile,
 Tandis qu'obstinément le désir qu'on exile
 Revient errer autour du gouffre défendu."

Incurable sadness takes hold of the man who has no hope of anything better than this life, short as it is, and overwhelmed with trials of all kinds, where iniquity triumphs if it have but force on its side, and where men risk their lives in dispute with each other for a place when there is too little space for all, and the means of subsistence are wholly insufficient! Some German colonies have been founded in America, in which all sorts of divine worship are proscribed : those who have visited them describe the colonists, the women especially, as appearing exceedingly sad. Life with no hope in the future loses its savour.

A still more serious view of the matter is that, not unfrequently, with religion, morality also disappears; it has no longer any basis, and certainly no real hold on the soul or mind. Science, when reduced to material observation, can only know what is, not what *ought* to be. If there does not exist, beyond the tangible reality, an ideal of right and justice, how can I possibly conform to it? If man is absolutely nothing but matter, constituted in some special manner, it cannot be conceived that this collection of particles of carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen has duties to perform. What is the duty of the lion, the mollusc or the seaweed, of the stone falling, or the wind blowing? Materialism will never succeed in supplying a basis for moral law. I can comprehend morality apart from any specified form of worship, but not apart from a belief in God and in the immortality of the soul. Without these two convictions, there is no reasonable impediment to my seeking my own pleasure and well-being even at the cost of others' happiness. I should not hesitate to sacrifice others for my own benefit; but sacrifice myself for others, why, and to what end?

If all indeed ends with this life, what valid reason can you give me for risking my life in the service of my fellow-men or my country? What can I expect in return for such a sacrifice? Esteem, glory, the gratitude of posterity, what is all that to me? I shall know nothing of it. Such notions as these may stimulate men who have been trained in a religious belief or a spiritual philosophy, who, in spite of all, have still an affection for spiritual things; but speak of them to a practical and logical Materialist, he will shrug his shoulders, and, from his point of view, he is right in so doing.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, he who has no belief in a future life thus expresses himself: "A living dog is better than a dead lion." "Truly the living know they must die, but the dead know nothing, and are no gainers; for their memory even is forgotten." "Wherefore I have drunk deeply of joy, because there is nought better for man than to eat, drink and rejoice." Horace, the disciple of Epicurus, uses similar language; he says: "Let us enjoy life, and drain the cup of pleasure before old age and death overtake us."

An Atheist, if he argue consistently, will not expose his life to defend either his country or his fellow-man; for, if *all* really dies with the body, why should he sacrifice that by which he enjoys all the rest? Abnegation such as this would be absolute folly, and the sacrifice complete trickery. The denial of the spirituality of the soul uproots all reasonable motives for being just and honest. If I can enrich myself and escape the penal code, why should I not do so? The blaze of gold soon makes men forget a slur on the moral character. I see no good reason for abstaining from any indelicacy of conduct, from an abuse of another's confidence, or even from theft, if all this may go unpunished and be profitable to myself. Apart from religion, what influence is there to encourage good and withstand evil propensities? They tell us there are two—honour and conscience. But honour is a sentiment which has sprung up in essentially spiritualistic societies, and which could not even subsist in any other atmosphere. In a country given over to materialism, it is scarcely ever to be met with, or, if it just exists, it must disappear, for it has no foundation there on which it can implant itself. Place in one scale all the enjoyments of life, and in the other honour—that is to say, the desire for the consideration of one's fellow-men; it is quite certain the majority of persons would select the first of these. The satisfaction procured by the consideration of others exists only in imagination; whereas the pleasures of wealth, even ill-gotten, appeal to the senses and have a strong hold on the carnal man. If I act wrongly, you tell me my life is dishonoured, and I shall feel it a charge on me, a burden of which I cannot rid myself. But if I change my country, I shake off the dishonour with the dust of my feet, and I find other pleasures and enjoyments, and even consideration, if I have sufficient means to purchase it. Besides, a pleasure-loving man cares

but little for the esteem of others, if he can but have all his own comfort and ease; and he can live in luxury and fail to perceive that he is despised.

But conscience, it is again objected, do you count it for nothing? Certainly conscience is a great strength, but apart from all notion of God, or, in other words, from any absolute type of good and evil, how vacillating and frail it is! Good and evil, right and wrong, these are merely terms of comparison if it be once admitted that matter alone exists. To be absolutely accurate, these words lose all their value, and there remains, as for animals, nothing save the mere pleasure of the moment. Besides, conscience becomes so rapidly warped and deadened when there is no religious feeling to keep it on the alert. Do you think that the rogue who has enriched himself with the spoils of his victims, and is luxuriating in all the enjoyment that our capitals can procure him, suffers much from remorse or qualms of conscience? These are merely empty phrases, flowers of rhetoric and nothing more. In the midst of the business and pleasures which fill up his entire life he has no time for feelings of remorse. Conscience has nothing to do with such a man; he has not even the leisure to grant it an audience.

Duty without God or a future life is a very fine word, but it has no meaning whatever. To make disinterested attachment to what is right the guiding star of human actions, and consequently the foundation-stone of society, is a mere return to the errors of Quietism, which taught that the love of God should be unalloyed with any feeling of self whatever. It is always most profitable to re-read Bossuet's and Fenelon's discussion on this subject. Fenelon was condemned, and justly so; his arguments applied to an ideal man who has never really existed.

The study of *reality* cannot be called in question. Man, like every organized creature or rather living thing, plants included, pursues his own well-being. The love of self is the fundamental principle of the preservation of species; without this instinct, which dominates all others, they would perish. To hope that man, for the sake of accomplishing what is called his duty, would give up even a small pleasure if he has no personal interest in so doing, and still more if it is against his interest so to do, is a positive delusion. In man there is always to be found, more or less concealed, the animal with its carnal tastes and appetites; for him to overcome them and keep them well subdued, there must be either religion or a spiritual philosophy to lead him to take an interest in spiritual things, and influence his life and acts. Man seeks his happiness as the stone falls, by the force of a natural law; it is, therefore, worse than useless to attempt to inculcate disinterested duty and the "Quietist's" love of right. What is possible, on the other hand, is to open a perspective of eternal bliss

which renders men regardless of their lot in this life, and ready even, if called upon to do so, joyfully to lay it down.

There are many Atheists who are reckoned among the best and greatest men of their day: Helvetius, for instance, so humane, so full of good works, and James Mill, a model of morality, stoical, cold and pure as an antique marble; but these exceptional men are of themselves philosophers, not exposed to the ordinary temptations of the senses, and formed by a Christian education in the midst of a Christian society. In every one of our individual acts the influence exercised by the views and opinions of our neighbours is greater than our own personal share. But imagine a people with religion entirely banished from amongst them; morality and the mere idea of sacrifice and duty would disappear with it. Darwinism teaches that in the struggle for existence the strongest and fittest should have the pre-eminence, and support themselves at the cost of the weaker. Therefore, let us employ our utmost endeavours to be the strongest, and to take the place of others; we shall, in so doing, accomplish our duty, for we shall be the means of occasioning the triumph of a natural law which is productive of the perfecting of species. The destruction of religion would also have the effect of mercilessly embittering the claims of the poor. The chiefs of the revolutionary communistic party are well inspired when they place the negation of God at the head of their manifestoes of war against society. The more men are led to count on mere transitory and sensual enjoyments (all hope of heavenly compensation being denied them), the less patiently will they bear present social inequality, which deprives them of their share of the good things of this, their only world. If they realize that they can secure for themselves none of these, they will be seized with an irrepressible hatred, and with an enraged fury for the destruction of the institutions of which they consider themselves the victims. It was feelings such as these which led the Paris Communists to set fire to the monuments, the symbols of the established power. It is quite certain that Atheism will fire the trail with which revolutionary communism would fain consume everything on that day when, vanquished, it no longer sees the possibility of realizing its schemes for social reform.

Naturalism does away with all idea of liberty. In the physical universe all is settled by natural laws. If, therefore, man is only matter he is compelled inevitably to obey these laws. What becomes, then, of responsibility and culpability? The words may be retained, but they have no more meaning.

If all hope of a future existence must be abandoned, what a sad lot human life becomes. For a few bright days of joy and happiness what care and sorrow and suffering, both in body and mind. How dreary and desolate the down-hill path to the grave! How far happier are animals than men: scarcely any sickness, for they live in conformity

to their instincts, and without excesses of any kind; moral grief is unknown to them, and their life comes to an end without either apprehensions or regrets. If what we call the soul, the mind, the capacity to think and reason, is given us merely to cause suffering, and to make us realize the bitterness of this existence without any to-morrow, we have well cause to curse the gift, and man is not, as it is said, a perfected animal, but an unfortunate being, ceaselessly tormented with unassuaged desires and deceived hopes. Lamartine was quite wrong when he wrote, "L'homme est un ange déchu qui se souvient des cieux;" he is rather a pitiable creature who must regret the clay from whence he came.

But I do not believe that true science is opposed to religion. It is all very well to explain everything by natural causes or general laws; but whence do these emanate? Evidently from a great supreme cause. If cosmic matter became condensed, firstly as nebula, and then as suns and planets on which life gradually became developed in more and more perfect forms, there is here an ascending movement, a continuous progress which, of itself, excludes the hypothesis of mere blind hazard without any final aim. Neither can I understand in what manner Darwinian theories ruin a belief in God. How were species first formed, by evolution or by creation? Let us take the horse, for instance: either it appeared as a succession to congenial surroundings, natural selection, and the survival of the fittest, and by a series of insensible transformations, or it sprang up suddenly from the soil, born of inorganic matter which so arranged itself as to engender two animals of the equine species; this would be spontaneous generation, not of infusoria but of a being of superior organization. This latter hypothesis appears less probable than the first, and less in conformity with a providential plan, for has it not been said, *natura non facit saltus*? Scientific men, who are in favour of religion—Pasteur, for instance—have contested spontaneous generation, and have shown by experiments that it does not take place, whereas many naturalists and geologists, even though they are Catholics, as for instance D'Omalius de Halloy and Van Beneden in Belgium, admit the theory of transformation. Science may discover a linking of causes and effects which it terms *natural laws*, but as Mr. G. J. Romanes recently wrote in this REVIEW: "It may very well be that unless they were themselves ordained by a disposing mind, these physical causes could neither have come into existence, nor afterwards have conspired to produce by their combined activity an orderly cosmos."

Briefly, then, without a belief in God and in the soul's immortality, any code of morality must be lacking in basis, and consequently the social order, which rests on principles of right and justice, is being undermined at its foundations. If all religious feeling were entirely to melt away, a return to primitive barbarism would be inevitable. It is

an undeniable fact that religion has everywhere presided over the development of civilization. If, therefore, civilization is not destined to perish, religion, in one or other form, will continue to supply moral rules of conduct, and the necessary incentive for the accomplishment of duty.

But what will this form be? It may safely be affirmed that it will be an emanation of Christianity. No new religion will be invented. The age is past and gone in which the Ideal was incarnated in history under the form of revelation. Christianity brought men back to the pure and simple teaching of Christ, embodying the practice of charity and the obligation to aim at perfection: "Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect;" "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"—this, it must be admitted, is the religion *par excellence*. If any be destined to survive, it would be such plain teaching and simple faith as this.

But religion, which is indispensable as the foundation of true morality and of high principles, can it subsist without any formula, organization, or public worship—reduced to a mere individual faith with no exterior manifestation whatever? I do not think it can. All doctrine, especially when it has to regulate man's actions in life, must be clearly defined. The existence of human beings and of society in general cannot be based on a doubt or a negation. The philosopher may plunge deeper and deeper in search of truth; but men in general, and children more especially, require clear and absolute affirmations.

Daily experience shows us the necessity of a form of worship. Any feeling unsustained by outward manifestations languishes and tends to expire. The connection between the physical and the mental is such that the one is indispensable to the other. For religious feeling to be a living force and to bring forth fruit, it is necessary that it should be excited and vivified by outward manifestations, by the meeting of members of one faith together, and by symbolic practices. Freemasonry has its rites and ceremonies, and in North America even the Atheists have a form of worship. E. Quinet writes on this subject:—

"Man will not make up his mind to go through life without a word of any sort to connect him with the immortals, those who have gone before. He will neither enter this world nor leave it in secret, like a leaf which is born and dies. He requires a witness to answer for him before the community of the living and the dead. Be it strength, greatness, or weakness, such is his nature; he cannot change it."

EMILE DE LAVELEYE.