

The Religion of Humanity

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I wish to speak this morning upon the subject, "The Religion of Humanity." I wish to suggest the answer to that question that is behind all the seething unrest and inquiry of our times. Why is it that we are in the midst of all the turmoil, disintegration and reconstruction that we find about us today? What is the significance of it all? What will be the outcome of it?

What I have in mind is well suggested in one of the pointed and prophetic utterances of Mazzini, the great Italian reformer, who has been called the prophet of the religion of humanity.²

Even before the movement of modern life had become so well defined as it has today, Mazzini felt the full power of its vitalizing force surging through his being. He felt the call of the modern spirit of life, and even as he felt it, he recognized it as the call of the universal. With an abandonment that is at once heroic and divine, he cast behind him all conformity and plunged into the midst of the movement that was just then beginning to be felt in the world in which he lived. He had faith that in the strange, unconventional ideas of the unknown men of his time, the voice of the Living God was speaking even as it had spoken to Amos, the herdsman of Tekoa, to Hosea, the prophet of love,³ to Jesus, the prophet of the abundant life. He had faith that beneath all the changing forms, there is the eternal spirit that is true to its inborn powers, and with an irresistible instinct, follows on towards the eternal truth of human life.

¹ This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from August 30, 1908 to November 26, 1908.

² Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872) Italian revolutionary.

³ See Old Testament books of Amos and Hosea.

These two things should be noted in Mazzini, for I am sure that they are the two anchors by which we should feel ourselves tied to reality in the midst of the changing conditions of our time. Mazzini considered the current religion of his time to consist mainly of symbols and rites. To him, as to most men of today, these symbols, rites and creeds had lost their vitality. They no longer expressed a living faith. They are the falling leaves of a bygone luxuriance. To him, they seemed to belong absolutely to the past. Yet, in spite of the fact that he saw them fading away into oblivion of history, he did not do as many are doing today, he did not jump to the conclusion that there will be no more leaves, no more luxuriance. He did not see in the decay of the old forms, the old symbols and the old creeds, the passing of that spirit in human life that has produced them. We look not with feelings of hopelessness upon the falling leaves, for we know that even now the self-same spirit that has produced the leaves of the passing season is at work preparing for the luxuriance of the years that are before. To him also that self-same spirit that has dotted the whole face of the world with spots that are sacred to human life, because there man's aspiring soul has for the moment caught a glimpse of the infinite spirit of life; to him, also, that self-same spirit in man that has produced passing forms to express its best thoughts, and its highest aspirations, that has produced sacred writings, religious institutions, liturgies and even credos, that spirit is even now at work at the same problem, trying to give adequate expression to the best thought and the deepest feelings that possess the mind of man as he contemplates his relation to the unseen world of force and ideals in the midst of which he finds himself. The old forms pass away as do the dying leaves, but the religious impulse of the human soul is abiding and will forever work so long as man lives and thinks and wonders at the mystery of human life, the glory, and the majestic splendor of the Universe. This eternal presence of the religious spirit in human life, and the recognition of it as the master passion of the human soul, was a fundamental faith of Mazzini. We must recognize this as the deepest faith of all human life. Then whatever changes in form or in interpretation, we shall still be relying upon an ultimate faith in an eternal principle and an eternal function of the human personality.

But still more, Mazzini saw that in all these changing forms, the constant falling of the old leaves of faith and the constant growth of the new leaves of faith, there is to be observed a

constant development and an approach to a clearer understanding of truth. By whatever trial one may travel, in howsoever deep a thicket one may find himself straying, the way is always up, up towards the mountaintop where the truth of the higher and the purer interpretation of human life finds a free scope for its inquiring gaze into the infinite.

Thus he sees in the evolution of the life of man, a growing appreciation of man's deeper relation to the mysterious unseen. "Perhaps in religion as in politics," he says,

the age of the symbol is passing away, and a solemn manifestation may be approaching of the Idea as yet hidden in that symbol. Perhaps the discovery of a new relation—that of the individual to humanity—may lay the foundation of a new religious bond, as the relation of the individual with nature was the soul of paganism, and the relation of the individual with God has been the soul of Christianity.⁴

Such seems to me to be a true statement of the development of the religious life. In the simple life of the primitive man, the inquiring spirit was directed towards the more apparent relationships of the individual to nature. As these searchings extended into the unseen spirit manifested in nature, the object of interest was gradually transferred from the multiplicity of manifestations to the common source of the power that is seen in nature. But it is lamentably true that as men turned their eyes up from the earth to the unseen, they forgot altogether the facts of their relation to the realities of mother nature. They became entirely engrossed in their contemplation of, and their imaginings about, that unseen spirit and that unseen world far off in the distance, apart from all that they could see and feel and hear and touch. Thus it happened that their faith came to hang by a mere thread of the imagination.

All of a sudden men realized that they had walked to the very edge of a precipice, and that, with one step more, they would step entirely off into the abyss of unreality. The spirit of the modern world has called them back from their vain quest of the

⁴ Giuseppe Mazzini, "From the Pope to the Council," in *Essays: Selected from the Writings, Literary, Political, and Religious of Joseph Mazzini*, ed., William Clarke, London: Walter Scott, 1887, p. 252.

realities of life amid the unrelated speculations of pure reason. Now we have turned again to our paganism of the relation of the individual to the world of nature, and we find that to us, even as to Moses of old, comes the voice of the great spirit from out of every bush that burns with the message of eternal beauty, "Take the shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground."⁵ Tired and weary in our search for the truth in the phantom world of speculation, we have laid ourselves down to rest upon the hard rock of nature. We have awakened from our refreshing sleep only to say, as Jacob of old, "Surely Jehovah is in this place, and I know it not."⁶ This stone of nature which our fathers, in their construction of the temple of religious speculation, rejected as vile and altogether evil, the same stone, in the new temple which we are building, is become a cornerstone of the foundation. We see that nature breathes the breath of the eternal truth and it is marvelous in our eyes.

That which we find in the beauty of nature, we find in all the universe. Everywhere, not alone in some far-off section of space dwelling in some heaven, do we find a big man-like God, but in every least corner of our familiar earth is the evidence of the eternal spirit of wisdom that is not so much in nature as it is nature itself. That which we mean when we use the name God is not so much to be defined as it is to be seen, not with the eyes of the body, but with the eyes of the personality. Every breath that we breath, every thought that we think, every impulse that blows across the quiet surface of human life, speaks to us of a spiritual environment in which intelligence, goodness, and high purpose survive. Within us, without us, about us, is a power infinitely greater, which makes for righteousness, to which we are related by the simple ties of the unseen laws of human life. This is another thing that we have learned as we have turned away from that abyss of speculation back to the plain experiences of human life.

But we are learning another thing that is most important of all, that thing which led Mazzini to say, with prophetic insight of high feeling and high appreciation, that the religion of the future would be the religion of humanity. From out of the complex mysteries of human life already are appearing the rough

⁵ Exodus 3:5

⁶ Genesis 28:16.

outlines of this new interpretation of the religious life. We are beginning to see a little more clearly what Jesus meant when he said that the whole law and the prophets hangeth upon the two principles of love to God and love to man.⁷ Love is not that flamboyant display of ostentatious worship, nor is it a mere sentimental adoration for that which is manifestly superior. On the contrary, it is that power of appreciation, that insight of the understanding heart that sees into the very soul of the person loved and identifies itself with the object and the purpose of the person loved in complete and perfect harmony. Love is not the desire of possession, but the passion of devoted and disinterested service. Thus between two persons, love is not the desire of possession, born of appreciation of beauty or charm, but rather it is the feeling which springs from such a deep insight into the purposes and the aspirations, into the hopes and the ideals, of a person, that one forgets himself, and with an abandonment that is wholly heroic, submerges himself in the interests and the life purposes of the one whom he loves. He is happy if he may but serve and in his service see the recognition, on the part of the one he loves, that says, "I receive and I am happy." That love between persons is complete when the aspirations of each find their satisfaction in the service of the other and in the pursuit of a common purpose in life.

It is this very same thing that is meant when we speak of the love of God. We do not refer to any sentimental attitude towards some person whom we have never seen. We mean simply this: that in some moment of insight we have caught enough of the meaning of human life and its relation to the universe, to see that this human life has some purpose to it, that it has some bearing upon the work and the relations of men, that we have something to do. Having seen that thing which we feel should be done, having seen that we ourselves must be the channel of its accomplishment, then we forget ourselves, and in the devotion of service to our new love, we give ourselves completely to whatsoever is necessary in the further realization of the great purpose. We do, in fact, come thus to identify our own purposes with the purposes of the universe as we see them. We will to act in accord with what, to our best insight, seems the highest and the best purpose of the world in which we live. That is not otherwise than saying that we will to do the will of God. Jesus

⁷ See Matthew 22:37-39.

said the same thing when he said, "I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him that sent me."⁸ It makes no difference as to the particular language in which you clothe this thought, the idea is the same and it is what makes life significant and gives to it something of dignity and importance. To feel yourself so related to the universe that you will that the apparent purpose of the universe becomes your purpose, and you the servant working for the realization of that purpose, and you are fulfilling that great principle of human life which Jesus enunciated when he said that we should "love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and will all our mind."⁹

But we have been slow in learning our lessons from our experiences; all too many of our declarations of love to the great good will have been but the shallow murmurings of our tongues. Still more delinquent have we been in appreciating the fact that the true purpose of the universe is, so far as we may learn from the experiences of human life, related to our conduct, our mental, moral, and our spiritual relationships to each other in the various conditions of life. Here we come upon the heart of the new hope and the new visions that Mazzini saw in the religion of humanity. God, whose wisdom and whose truth we seek to understand, and whose will we try to make our will, is a living God. The soul of man is the temple in which he dwells as well as in the beauty of nature. That human nature, which has been so much decried and condemned, is the place where we find the Holy Grail of the deeper insight into the meaning of the universe, where we get the starting point for plotting the full curve of life. The thoughts that men are thinking today, the high hopes that they are expressing, the noble visions that they are seeing of a new heaven and a new earth, are just as much the voice of the divine as the world of old. Yes, even more do they speak with the authority of infinite purpose for they have to guide them all the accumulated wisdom and experience of the ages. In the light of this vision, we are coming to see more clearly that it is in the human soul, in the personality of man, and in the life of man as he lives, that life in the three score years and ten upon this earth, that the best and the deepest problems and hopes are to be found. We are coming to see that we are not merely depraved beings, created to satisfy the whims of

⁸ John 6:38.

⁹ Matthew 22:37.

a foolish God, but that we are here to take part in the unfolding evolution of the universe; that we are here to see and to understand the full glory of Truth, Goodness and Beauty, and to make our lives, and the lives about us, the living incarnations of these universal principles of truth, goodness and beauty. Our attention is turned from the abstract idea of God to the concrete objects in which the spark of the infinite spirit dwells. God does not need our worship and our pious verborosities. The thing for us to do is to understand his will and to make it our will in these relations of human life, to know and respect the infinite spirit as it is in common man.¹⁰

Out of all this we are coming to see more and more the wondrous beauty of human life, the unsearchable mystery that hovers above it, as the morning mist hovers over the surface of the lake. The more deeply we penetrate into the depths of the inner purposes of pure life, the more we are impressed by its transcendent nobility. Here too is the spirit of the living God.

The picket frozen on duty,
The mother starved for her brood,
Socrates drinking the hemlock,
And Jesus on the rood;
And millions who, humble and nameless,
The straight, hard pathway plod—
Some call it Consecration,
And others call it God.¹¹

Here it is, the faith of the religion of humanity. We are bound together not by ties of economic necessity, or bonds of social expediency, or shackles of supernatural authority, but by the common tie of a common purpose and a common spirit. In the life that now is we are to live the eternal life. In the life that now is, we are immortal souls, if we are immortal souls at all. Our basis of judging our relationships shall no longer be that of the yardstick of conventionality, but the subtle balance of the justice of purpose.

Men have been asked to go down on their knees before the altar which was the symbol of God they worshipped. They have bowed themselves and prostrated themselves before some God whom they

¹⁰ In the manuscript the words "common man" are circled with a "?" attached to the circle.

¹¹ The last stanza of William Herbert Carruth's (1859-1924) poem "Each in His Own Tongue."

imagined dwelled in the far off limits of space. The English poet cried [to] his companion, "Down, down on your knees, man, violets, Violets."¹² You have felt that way yourself, and so have I. But I want to say to you now, "Down, down on your knees, humanity, humanity." I say to you, Worship the infinite in the human soul. There is no soul so base, so degraded, but that there glows within its secret chambers, that self-same spirit that has carried thousands of men, as it carried Christ, to complete devotion. There is no soul so noble but that there lurks within it the glory of an unending incompleteness. I appeal to you in the spirit of modern life, not to love nature less, not to love the great Good Will less, but to love humanity more, to see in the everyday life of man the infinite beauty, and to hear in the voice of the common life, the command of infinite goodness.

Above all, I appeal to you that wherever you find humanity in ignorance, feel it your joy to enlighten; wherever you find humanity in bondage, feel it your joy to liberate; wherever you find humanity imperfect and incomplete, feel it your great work to contribute your life to its greater perfection. In the religion of humanity, that is the motive power of all thought, of all hope, of all action. The purpose of realizing the great possibilities of the human soul for living the noble life in the midst of a noble world. I like that fine sentiment of Heine's,

"I know not if I deserve that a laurel wreath should one day be laid on my coffin. Poetry, dearly as I have loved it, has always been to me but a divine plaything. I have never attached any great value to poetical fame, and I trouble myself very little whether people praise my verses or blame them. But lay on my coffin a sword, for I was a brave soldier in the war of the liberation of humanity."¹³

¹² Attributed to Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) by James T. Field (1817-1881). See, James M. Farrar (1853-1921), *Little Talks to Little People*, New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1910, p. 176

¹³ Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) German poet. This quotation of Heine's can be found in Matthew Arnold's *Essays in Criticism*, London: George Routledge & Sons, 1907, p. 126.