

**RELIGION AS AFFECTED BY MODERN
MATERIALISM: AN ADDRESS DELIVERED
IN MANCHESTER NEW COLLEGE,
LONDON, AT THE OPENING OF ITS 89
SESSION, ON TUESDAY, OCT. 6TH, 1874**

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Religion as Affected by Modern Materialism: An Address Delivered in Manchester New College, London, at the Opening of Its 89 Session, on Tuesday, Oct. 6th, 1874 by James Martineau

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JAMES MARTINEAU

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PREFACE.

THE following Address, published by desire of my College, was much curtailed in oral delivery. As somewhat more patience may be hoped for in a reader than in a hearer, it now appears in full. The position assumed in it, of resistance to some speculative tendencies of modern physical research, is far from congenial to me : for it seems to place me in the wrong camp. But the exclusive pretension, long set up by Theology, to dominate the whole field of knowledge, seems now to have simply passed over to the material Sciences ;— with the effect of inverting, rather than removing, a mischievous intellectual confusion, and shifting the darkness from outward Nature to Morals and Religion. I cannot admit that these are conquered provinces : and to re-affirm their independence, and protest against their absorption in a universal material empire, appears to me a pressing need alike for true philosophy and for the future of human character and society.

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LONDON, Oct. 13, 1874.

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RELIGION AS AFFECTED BY MODERN MATERIALISM.



THE College which places me here to-day professes to select and qualify suitable men for the Nonconformist Ministry; that is, the headship of societies voluntarily formed for the promotion of the Christian life. In carrying out its work, two rules have been invariably observed: (1) the Special Studies which deal with our sources of religious faith—whether in the scrutiny of nature or in the interpretation of sacred books—have been left open to the play of all new lights of thought and knowledge, and have promptly reflected every well-grounded intellectual change; and (2) the General Studies which give the balanced aptitudes of a cultivated mind have been made as extensive and thorough as the years at disposal would allow. In both these rules there is apparent a genuine thirst for a right apprehension of things,—a contempt for the dangers of possible discovery, a persuasion that in the mind most large and luminous the springs of religion have the freshest and the fullest flow; together with the idea that the Preacher, instead of being the organ of a given theology, should himself, by the natural influence of mental superiority, pass to the front and take the lead in a regulated growth of opinion.

There have never been wanting prophets of ill who distrusted this method as rash. So much open air does not suit the closet divine; such liability to change disappoints the fixed idea of the partisan; and the "practical man" does not want his preacher's head made heavy with too much learning, or his faith attenuated in the vacuum of metaphysics. At the present moment these partial distrusts are superseded by a deeper and more comprehensive misgiving, affecting not the method simply, but the aim and function of our Institution. Side by side with the literary pursuits of the scholar, the study of external nature has always had a place of honour in our traditions and our estimates of a manly education; and there is scarcely a special science which has not some brilliant names that range not far from the lines of our history; and from the favourite shelf of all our libraries, the *Principia* of Newton, the *Essays* of Franklin, the *Papers* of Priestley and Dalton, the "*Principles*" of Lyell, the *Biological Treatises* of Southwood Smith and Carpenter, and the records of Botanical research by Sir James Smith and the Hookers, look down upon us with something of a personal interest. The successive enlargements given by these skilled interpreters to our earlier picture of the world,—the widening Space, the deepening vistas of Time, the new groups of chemical elements and the precision of their combinations, the detected marvels of physiological structure, and the rapid filling-in of missing links in the chain of organic life,—have been eagerly welcomed as adding a glory to the realities around, and, by the erection of fresh shrines and cloisters, turning the simple temple in which we once stood into a clustered magnificence. Thus it was, so long as discoveries came upon us one by one; nor did any Biblical chronology or Apocalypse interfere with their proper evidence for an hour

But *now*—must we not confess it?—certain shadows of anxiety seem to steal forth and mingle with the advancing light of natural knowledge, and temper it to a less genial warmth. It comes on, no longer in the simple form of pulse after pulse of positive and limited discovery, but with the ambitious sweep of a universal theory, in which facts given by observation, laws gathered by induction, and conceptions furnished by the mind itself, are all wrought up together as if of homogeneous validity. A report is thus framed of the Genesis of things, made up indeed of many true chapters of science, but systematized by the terms and assumptions of a questionable, if not an untenable philosophy. To the inexpert reader this report seems to be all of one piece; and he is disturbed to find an account apparently complete of the “Whence and the Whither” of all things without recourse to aught that is Divine; to see the refinements of organism and exactitudes of adaptation disenchanting of their wonder; to watch the beauty of the flower fade into a necessity; to learn that Man was never *intended* for his place upon this scene, and has no commission to fulfil, but is simply flung hither by the competitive passions of the most gifted brutes; and to be assured that the élite beings that tenant the earth tread each upon an infinite series of failures, and survive as trophies of immeasurable misery and death. Thus an apprehension has become widely spread, that Natural History and Science are destined to give the *coup de grâce* to all theology, and discharge the religious phenomena from human life; that churches and their symbols must disappear like the witches’ chamber and the astrologists’ tower; and that, as everything above our nature is dark and void, those who affect to lift it lead it nowhither, and must take themselves away as “blind leaders of the blind.” Whether this apprehension

is well founded or not is a very grave question for society in many relations; and is emphatically urgent for those who educate men as spiritual guides to others, and who can invest them with no directing power except the native force of a mind at one with the truth of things and a heart of quickened sympathies. Hitherto, they have been trained under the assumptions that the Universe which includes us and folds us round is the Life-dwelling of an Eternal Mind; that the World of our abode is the scene of a Moral Government incipient but not yet complete; and that the upper zones of Human Affection, above the clouds of self and passion, take us into the sphere of a Divine Communion. Into this over-arching scene it is that growing thought and enthusiasm have expanded to catch their light and fire. And if "the new faith" is to carry in it the contradictories of these positions,—if it leaves us to make what we can of a simply molecular universe, and a pessimist world, and an unappeasable battle of life,—it will require another sort of Apostolate, and would make such a difference in the studies which it is reasonable to pursue, that it might be wisest for us to disband, and let the new Future preach its own gospel, and devise, if it can, the means of making the tidings "*glad*." Better at once to own our occupation gone than to linger on sentimental sufferance, and accept the indulgent assurance that, though there is no longer any *truth* in religion, there is some nice feeling in it; and that while, for all we have to teach, we might shut up to-morrow, we may harmlessly keep open still, as a nursery of "*Emotion*."* I trust that, when "emotion" proves empty, we shall stamp it out, and get rid of it.

Though, however, no partnership between the physicist

* See Professor Tyndall's Address before the British Association; with Additions, p. 61.

and the theologian can be formed on these terms of assigning the intellect to the one and the feelings to the other, may it not be that, in the flurry of exultation and of panic, they misconstrue their real position? and that their relations, when calmly surveyed, may not be in such a state of tension as each is ready to believe? Looking on their respective contentions from the external position of logical observation, and without presuming to call in question the received inductions of the naturalist, I believe that both parties mistake the bearing of those inductions upon religion; and that, although this bearing is in some aspects serious, it is neither of the quality nor of the magnitude frequently ascribed to it. I venture to affirm that the essence of religion, summed up in the three assumptions already enumerated, is independent of any possible results of the natural sciences, and stands fast through the various readings of the genesis of things.

The unpractised mind of simple times goes out, it is true, upon everything *en masse*, and indeterminately feels and thinks about itself and the field of its existence, the inner and the outer, the transient and the permanent, the visible and the invisible: its knowledge and its worship, the pictures of its fancy and the intuitions of its faith, are as yet a single tissue, of which every broken thread rends and deforms the whole. Hence the oldest sacred traditions run into stories of world-building; and the earliest attempts at a systematic interpretation of nature, in which physical ideas were clothed in mythical garb, are regarded by Aristotle as "*theological*." It must be admitted that our own age has not yet emerged from this confusion. And in so far as Church belief is still committed to a given kosmogony and natural history of Man, it lies open to scientific refutation, and has already re-