

ARTICLE IV.

HERBERT SPENCER'S RELIGION:¹

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It is a long time since purely English philosophy has produced so able, so comprehensive, and so daring a thinker as Herbert Spencer. Unlike Mr. Mill, he constructs, rather than criticises. We are not troubled to gather his own opinions from his writings. He has planned out an entire scheme of philosophy, and has sent forth a prospectus of what he proposes to do. Of this great work, embracing ten volumes, and treating of philosophy in its first principles, of biology, psychology, sociology, and morality, and fit to command the best energies of a master mind for a long lifetime, he has issued four complete volumes and parts of others, covering, perhaps, more than half of the whole. In these, we have some of the clearest and most forcible statements of opinion upon great and abstract topics to be found in the English language.

If the truth must have opponents, it is just such opponents we prefer to see and to meet — frank, out-spoken, unreserved. For we are constrained to place Herbert Spencer among the enemies of that which we consider truth. Theoretically, indeed, not an atheist; his philosophy denies the possibility of all practical relations between God and man, if, indeed, it be not fairly chargeable with denying the existence of any thing that could properly be called God. But it is to be said in his favor, that he does not overlook or disparage the seriousness of the questions involved between philosophy and religion. He does not ignore or disdain them like Comte, or leave you in doubt, as does Mr. Mill. He plunges at once, in the very opening of his first principles into these questions,

¹ First Principles of a New System of Philosophy. By Herbert Spencer. (2nd ed.) New York: D. Appleton and Co. 1872.

giving the first chapter of all to "Religion and Science," thus recognizing the primary importance in philosophy of those issues which to us also are radical and vital.

Herbert Spencer's system connects itself with, and diverges from, that of Sir William Hamilton, though the connection can scarcely be considered as characteristic, the divergences being radical both as to scope and method. Thus as to method, not to speak of Hamilton's life-long practice of elaborating topics and pushing discussions without considering well their mutual bearings, as if tunnelling a mountain from both sides without calculating whether the two passage-ways would meet — while every step of Spencer's work appears to be carefully calculated with reference to all the rest, we are struck with the fact that abstruse, ontological discussions, occupy the forefront of Spencer's work. It is true that Sir William Hamilton's first published discussion, "The Philosophy of the Unconditioned," was in the same high region of speculation; but when he undertook the office of teacher, and gave his nearest approach to a system of philosophy in his Lectures, he reserved ontology to the last. Herbert Spencer has begun his tunnel into the mind, by sinking a shaft from the highest point of the line, piercing at once to the heart of the work, and grappling with its most profound and difficult portions.

His *First Principles* commence with an attempted reconciliation of religion and science, which is remarkable as coming from the side of science, and as proving that the pressure for such a reconciliation is felt in that quarter as well as in the other. It is an admission on the part of the philosophers that religion is a fact that cannot be sneered, or generalized, or shouldered out of the way; that philosophy must give account of it, not as an accident, but as an essential indestructible element of the constitution of things which it would understand; that a science which ignores religion is no more scientific than a religion which ignores science is truly and soundly religious.

In this specific point of view, Spencer has placed religion

in a better position than Hamilton left it. The latter put it outside of all scientific relations by his doctrine of the utter inconceivableness of the infinite, handing it over to faith as something entirely different from knowledge. The former argues, at least, for such a degree of knowledge as brings religion within the range of science, and furnishes a common ultimate object for science and for religion. Spencer, too, is to be clearly distinguished from the Positivists in his relations to religion, since Positivism limits all human interest and capacity to phenomena, and after trying to turn its back upon religion, at last constructed in serious earnest a caricature of religion, which was as futile as it was ridiculous.

In a letter to the "New Englander" of 1864, Mr. Spencer uses the following emphatic language, as to his relations to the system of Comte: "On all points that are distinctive of his philosophy I differ from him. I deny his hierarchy of the sciences. I regard his division of intellectual progress into the three phases, theological, metaphysical, and positive, as superficial. I reject utterly his religion of humanity. And his ideal of society I hold in detestation. Some of his minor views I accept; but from everything which distinguishes Comteism as a system I dissent entirely."

Let us freely make this concession: Herbert Spencer is no Comteist, no Positivist even. He stands on a higher plane of speculation. But, after all, this plane is so narrow, that it serves as little more than a kind of high-water mark. It is such an advance as encourages us to hope for more in the same direction, but of itself it is almost as barren as blank atheism.

We do not know whether Spencer has anywhere explained why he put ontology first in his speculations; or why he introduced his ontology with religion and science. Perhaps it was done with a certain newspaper-like deference to popular sentiment, or as a shrewd and subtle mode of advertising; commending his book by announcing a topic of general interest in his first chapter. He is not to be blamed for it, if he did. Nor is he to be blamed for writing in such a clear

and forcible style that almost any one of fair intelligence can readily understand him. He belongs to the school of non-Christian thinkers, who, unlike their prototypes in former times, seek popular recognition, desire to make their views current among the masses, and who preach and teach their philosophy to that ever-widening, ever-rising, circle—the reading public.

It is plain, however, that he regarded ontology as the only meeting ground of religion and science. In considering the latter, he was brought immediately to the former branch of his studies. And in this ultimate region of thought he has found religion and science in complete accord. To good purpose, indeed, have studies been pushed into these transcendental regions, if they have furnished the conditions of so momentous a reconciliation. We shall see that the results, although not wholly nugatory, are meagre and unsatisfactory to the last degree.

For it is not an attempt to reconcile science with *a* religion, or with *the true* religion, but with an ultimate abstraction, void of all positive qualities, which Spencer chooses to call *the religious idea*. Dealing with all religions in the same manner, he declares that none of them are wholly true and none wholly false. And, stripping away from them all that is specific and peculiar, he professes at last to reach that which is common to all; that which alone is true and valuable in all, and with that alone he proposes a reconciliation of religion with science. In fact, there is far more of error than of truth in all religions, according to this unsparing analyst. In order to prepare himself and his readers for the conception that they comprehend any truth whatever, he is obliged to call to mind, in the opening sentence of his inquiry, the proverb that “there is a soul of goodness in things evil,” as otherwise the temptation to overlook religion, as entirely erroneous, would have been too great. It is as if performing some chivalrous and generous act to a respectable but decayed branch of knowledge that he enters upon his inquiry. By hard searching, among a deal of rubbish, we shall come upon a minimum of truth at last.

But where is this vast dust-heap which is to be sifted for valuables? One would expect it to be found in the extant records of human opinion, in the facts of history. Not so. It is to be found in the arbitrary conceptions of the writer as to the nature of these opinions. If then we do come upon a vast dust-heap, let it be understood to be largely of Mr. Spencer's own making. There is plenty of dust and rubbish in veritable history; but Mr. Spencer speculates a great deal more into it. His theory requires it. We have elsewhere met with philosophers who would persuade us that the world was made exactly on their system. Their claims are plausible until a closer inspection shows that it is their world, — not the world of history and of fact; not God's world, — which is constructed according to their theory.

Spencer ignores utterly the fact that a pure monotheistic religion has been in the world from the earliest historic times. He speaks of the period when fetichism was universal, as if the fact was unquestioned (p. 11).¹ He affirms of religion and science alike, that each was originally a mere rudiment (p. 105). Again, he speaks of the steps by which "religion has progressed from its first low conception to the comparatively high one it has now reached" (p. 102). All of which is flatly contradicted by credible history. Setting aside all that is supernatural in the Old Testament records, they are unimpeachable witnesses to the fact that already, at the dawn of human history, a perfect, spiritual, and sublime monotheism had gained a footing among men, and was one of the living forces of the world's progress. And not only in Palestine, but in India, China, and Persia, ages ago, comparatively pure forms of religion stood side by side with the cruder fetichisms and polytheisms of the time. Nay, the progress of events in those countries, according to the literary monuments of their religions, has been downward, instead of upward, as Spencer's theory requires.

Again, when he ascribes to science the whole credit for the progress of religion from lower to higher stages, he

¹ *First Principles* (second edition. 1872).

equally contradicts history, and insults common sense. Page 102, sec. 29, he says: "And now observe, that all along the agent which has effected the purification [of religion] has been science. It is demonstrable that every step by which religion has progressed from its first low conception to the comparatively high one it has now reached, science has helped it, or rather forced it to take." Again: "And so is justified the assertion that the beliefs which science has forced upon religion have been intrinsically more religious than those which they have supplanted" (p. 104). Again: "From the times of early mythologies religion has been compelled by science to give up one after another of its dogmas" (p. 107). And the paragraph on p. 19 is too crowded with extraordinary assumptions to be overlooked, though its bearing on the indebtedness of religion to science is not so direct.¹

When we ask for proof of these sweeping assertions, we are referred to the myth which represented the sun as a god, riding in a chariot drawn by horses. Religion owes to science the removal of this erroneous idea from its doctrines. It was Kepler and Newton who "forced upon religion" "the intrinsically more religious belief" that the planets moved round the sun under the law of gravitation. Just as if the Hebrew scriptures, long before the development of the Greek

¹ "To ask the question which more immediately concerns our argument—whether science is substantially true?—is much like asking whether the sun gives light. And it is because they are conscious how undeniably valid are most of its propositions, that the theological party regard science with so much secret alarm. They know that during the two thousand years of its growth, some of its larger divisions—mathematics, physics, astronomy—have been subject to the rigorous criticism of successive generations; and have, notwithstanding, become ever more firmly established. They know that, unlike many of their own doctrines, which were once universally received, but have age by age been more frequently called in question, the doctrines of science, at first confined to a few scattered inquirers, have been slowly growing into general acceptance, and are now in great part admitted as beyond dispute. They know that men of science throughout the world subject each other's results to the most searching examination, and that error is mercilessly exposed and rejected as soon as discovered [!]" A claim of infallibility for science as intensely bigoted, and as transparently absurd as that made for the Pope by the Vatican Council.

myth of Apollo, did not teach the purely religious doctrine of the absolute dependence of the material universe upon divine power. Mr. Spencer himself holds it to be truly religious to recognize a something, an inscrutable fact or power behind all the intelligible phenomena of nature. And just this the Old Testament scripture has done, to the almost entire neglect of the scientific aspects and relations of things. It is incumbent on Mr. Spencer to explain how, upon his own principles, such a conspicuous example of pure religious teaching could have arisen at such an early date. At a time when science was confessedly rudimentary, long before Copernicus, Newton, and Kepler were thought of, consequently without the aid of science, — without what Spencer chooses to call the compulsion [force] of science, — the purest ideas of the dependence of nature upon an inscrutable, divine power were taught and maintained by all the aids of a sublime literature, a lofty moral code, an established outward order, and a theocratic national government.

It is idle, futile, to propose an elaborate system of philosophy, which at the very outset traverses such palpable and commanding facts as these. It has no more consistency, no more reality, than the imposing pageants of a dream. In a reverie one may be rich, powerful, illustrious; one may revel in magnificent theories; the world may seem to arrange itself exactly in the line of our thought, our desire; but one ray of actual fact, of authentic history, is competent to dissolve the whole structure, and leave not a wrack behind. And we claim that history does this for Spencer's reverie of the origin of correct religious ideas. History disavows the claim made for science as the tutor and educator of religion.

It is not a little remarkable that this is the only illustration given by Spencer of the position which he seems so fond of repeating, viz. that "from age to age science has continually defeated religion, whenever they have come into collision, and has obliged it to relinquish one or more of its positions" (p. 100); "Obliged to abandon, one by one, the supersti-

tions it tenaciously held" (p. 101); "Religion has been compelled by science to give up one after another of its dogmas" (p. 107). All of which is supposed to be sufficiently supported from history by the assertion that the Greek myth of Apollo as the sun-god was finally dissipated by the discoveries of Newton and Kepler!

Thus we are not told much of what science has achieved in its conflict with religion. What science is competent to do upon current religious systems; what it is doing; what, if believers would admit it, they are secretly conscious science is doing with their favorite dogmas; what a quantity of opinions still held are evanescent—these are illustrated with somewhat more of freedom. Especially, it is argued, after the manner of Hamilton in his *Doctrine of the Unconditioned*, that religion can no more entertain a view of creation, than atheism dare deny one. Mr. Spencer may deny creation; but he does not venture to claim that this is one of the dogmas which religion, under the compulsion of science, has been led to set aside. It is, perhaps, to be classed among the "evanescent" forms of religious thought. Religious men—believers—being the judges, science has had an exceedingly limited effect upon the body of specific truths of which our religious systems are composed. These systems are perhaps less elaborate than at the period of the Reformation; but they retain their essential features, and they are accepted as widely and held as firmly, among religious people, as at any former period.

Why, then, is the tone of these discussions so different? What lurking postulate silently shapes and projects all these assumptions to the surface? This, consciously or unconsciously, but this certainly—that Herbert Spencer is the most religious man that the world has ever seen. In his view alone, of all mankind's, the true religion is perfectly represented. Not Moses and the prophets, not Jesus Christ himself nor his apostles, not the fathers nor the reformers, not Budha, nor Confucius, nor Zoroaster, nor Mohammed approached the true knowledge of religion, which now, at

last, has been attained by this modern Englishman. All were in error. The impiety of the pious is expressly denounced by Mr. Spencer. The results of what he calls science are more religious than religion. In short, the whole dust-heap of the world's religions has been sifted, and its one inconsiderable, but unnoticed item of value has been detected; and he who recognizes and holds that, may, should, cast all the rest away, and he will be the real possessor of religion, — and that man is Mr. Spencer. All that the world imperfectly and dimly aspired after, in its sublimest experiences, has been clearly disclosed and realized at last in the ontology of Mr. Spencer.

This granted, then, indeed, science has dealt hardly with religion. If Mr. Spencer is high-priest, his occupation is almost gone. At his advent, one single proposition, remote, shadowy, abstract, constitutes the entire creed, the perfected religious system of mankind. The ruthless hand of science has hewn away everything else; all other dogmas, creeds, scriptures, observances are transitory expedients, suited to the imperfect culture of the age, antagonized by science, stamped as superstition, and utterly dispensed with in the perfected religious state of advanced thinkers, — at least, of Mr. Spencer. The great tree of religion is hewn down, like the dream-tree of Nebuchadnezzar. The branches are cut off; the leaves are shaken down; the fruit is scattered; a stump of its roots only is left on the earth, with a band of iron and brass around it. Are *we*, then, dreaming, who behold the tree in its pristine vigor and glory? or is it not Spencer, rather, who sees it only as an iron-bound stump, without prospect of revival?

Mr. Spencer does not give a definition of religion, as he does of science. But by a process of analysis, he endeavors to reach what he calls ultimate religious ideas. Every one, he says, sometimes asks the question, What is the universe? Whence comes it? Three different hypotheses of its origin, he says, may be made: Either that the world is self-existent (atheism), or self-created (pantheism), or created by external agency. The last of these is the theistic or properly religious

view. Yet it is claimed that the theistic view must be rejected equally with the others, as involving, with them, utterly unthinkable, inconceivable elements. Because we cannot conceive the production of matter out of nothing; because we cannot conceive that space was ever non-existent; because a self-existent universe and a self-existent Creator are rigorously inconceivable, therefore we must reject every view of creation as untenable. They are not merely inadequate, not-justifiable symbols of a higher truth, but altogether vicious, illusive, and in no way distinguishable from pure fictions. Hence, the very idea of creation must be abandoned; the opposite view of the self-existence of the universe must in like manner be abandoned. Neither can be reckoned among ultimate religious ideas, the theistic no more than the atheistic.

In a similar manner it is attempted to be shown that First Cause is not an ultimate religious idea. He reproduces Mr. Mansel's demonstration, in the spirit of Sir William Hamilton's Doctrine of the Unconditioned, that First Cause, Infinite, and Absolute are contradictory to each other when viewed in conjunction as attributes of the same Being. All these conceptions are but the rubbish which has attached itself to the religious idea. Atheism is quite as religious as these parts of our creeds. A religious creed is an *a priori* theory of the universe. All theories of the universe are nugatory, according to Mr. Spencer; therefore all religious creeds are worthless — almost so, yet not absolutely. There is a single ultimate religious idea, the most abstract and general of all ideas of which the mind is capable; broadest in extension, — universal, in fact, — emptiest in comprehension; touching upon more and meaning less than existence. And that is not a theory or explanation of the universe, but the mere blank inquiry of the universe *for* explanation — the fact that the universe needs to be explained, and that it cannot be explained (pp. 44, 46). In other words, our need of religion is absurdly put for religion itself. To recognize our need of religion is to be religious, and we are only religious when we stop short at that recognition. The moment we speak of satisfying the need, we cease to be religious.

After all, may not positivism, which Mr. Spencer so earnestly repudiates, be preferable to this? Positivism which deals only with phenomena, which ignores all questionings, possibilities, and powers of any interest to man beyond phenomena, may it not be preferable to this philosophy of an unknown and unknowable, which requires, as a religious act, the total renunciation of all possibility, power, or purpose of man to comprehend it? Has it become superior to positivism by placing in our way an awful, inscrutable sphinx, propounding to us Life and the Universe as mysteries, and threatening to crush us if we attempt to solve them? It is a fair question whether this is any real advance in philosophy. In our judgment it is — a little — a very little.

Let us, however, hear Mr. Spencer's statements of this shadowy, ultimate religious idea: "The existence of the world, with all it contains and all which surrounds it, is a mystery ever pressing for explanation" (p. 44). "The omnipresence of something which passes comprehension. . . . Every religion setting out, though it does, with the tacit assertion of a mystery, forthwith proceeds to give some solution of this mystery, and so asserts that it is not a mystery passing human comprehension. But the analysis of every hypothesis proves, not simply that no hypothesis is sufficient, but that no hypothesis is even thinkable. . . . The mystery turns out to be a far more transcendent mystery than any of them suspect, not a relative, but an absolute mystery. . . . The power which the universe manifests to us is utterly inscrutable" (p. 45). "The reality underlying appearances is totally and forever inconceivable to us" (p. 98). "The consciousness of an incomprehensible power, called omnipresent from inability to assign its limits, is just that consciousness on which religion dwells" (p. 99). "Religion has ever been more or less irreligious, because it has all along professed to have some knowledge of that which transcends knowledge, and so has contradicted its own teachings" (pp. 100, 101).

And to show the supremely exclusive, may we not say

bigoted, nature of Mr. Spencer's claims, we need only quote his declaration: "This, which to most will seem an essentially irreligious position, is an essentially religious one; nay is *the* religious one, to which all others are but approximations" (p. 109). And he asks: "May we not, without hesitation, affirm that a sincere recognition of the truth that our own and all other existence is a mystery absolutely and forever beyond our comprehension, contains more of true religion than all the dogmatic theology ever written?" (p. 112). I ask, on the contrary, does it not rather contain the assertion of a universal need of a religion, with the peremptory denial of any such thing being possible in human experience?

And I ask you to look at the claim (p. 113) that every notion framed, every symbol formed, of definite religious ideas, can be religious at all only if treated as utterly without resemblance to that for which it stands. That is, it is the province and the test of true religion, to deny that the Supreme Power does or can make a revelation of himself to man; and I submit that no one dare assert this who does not himself know all about that power, and therefore this seeming nescience involves nothing less than a claim of Omniscience; just as this lofty pretension to all the religion in the world is twin brother of the blankest atheism. To say that I know absolutely nothing of the Supreme Power of the universe, except that he is utterly unknowable, is to insult the intelligence of the most untutored. Grant that I do not know him strictly in his essence; grant that I do not know substance in and of itself, dare I say after all that I know nothing of the substances in the world around me? Dare I say that I know nothing of the substance of yonder tree, when I know that it manifests itself in so many lively and impressive ways? Do I not know that its substance is such as to take a certain elaborate and marked form and development; do I know nothing of its substance when I know that it has power to produce such and such delicious fruit?

And, coming to higher forms of life, does not the teacher know his pupils in their own inherent nature, when he knows that some of them are restless and inattentive, and some boisterous and inconsiderate, and some prompt and ready, keen and thorough, others indifferent and given to excuses? As surely as he knows these things accurately, does he not truly know the individuals in their essential natures, to be just such as to do these things? Or, are these facts so utterly by themselves that I know them only and know nothing, absolutely nothing, of that nature from which they sprung, save that it exists, and that it is inscrutable?

And am I in a world, and have I a nature which, according to Mr. Spencer himself, points with inevitable, inexorable logic to a supreme, all-embracing power, of whom yet I am bound by religious duty to abjure utterly all knowledge? A most monstrous perversion. An attempt, which would be infamous if it were not futile, at wholesale robbery and defacement of the precious seals of consecration stamped on every creature of God. An act of sacrilege in the name of religion (Rom. ii. 22) upon this great temple of the universe, casting down its altars, quenching its altar fires, breaking down its carved work and obliterating its hieroglyphs of precious meaning, striking dumb its prophets and silencing the glad oratorio of the morning stars and the hallelujah chorus of penitent and grateful man.

I cannot but know, I cannot but believe that I know, something of God in everything I know. Spencer himself calls him the power which the universe *manifests* to us, the Ultimate Cause, the Ultimate Existence. I am surrounded on every hand by the methods of his manifestation; my very existence is made up of them. I am myself but one of these methods of the divine manifestation. How can he be in any sense manifested, if he is in every sense utterly inscrutable? Nay, all that is vast, transcendent, and glorious in nature, teaches me that he is glorious; all the objects that swell my bosom with emotions of beauty, grandeur, and sublimity, teach me that beauty, grandeur, and sublimity belong to the

divine nature ; all that stretches out into the illimitable — and what smallest object does not ? — testifies of his infinity. “The heavens declare his glory, and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge.”

* Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold !
There 's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubim.”

“ Earth 's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God.

Every natural flower which grows on earth
Implies a flower upon the spiritual side,
Substantial, archetypal, all aglow
With blossoming causes, — not so far away
But he whose spirit-sense is somewhat cleared
May catch at something of the bloom and breath.”

In a word, it is a plain contradiction in terms, to declare that anything which manifests itself is utterly inscrutable. Nay, it would indeed make God inscrutable, and dim the perfect conception of his moral character, to imagine that he could spread around us such a magnificent profusion of worlds in which it should not be possible to trace one vestige of his character, and which it would be our highest duty and only religion to declare utterly unlike their author.

Hence Mr. Spencer's account of religion falls to the ground, and with it, for the most part, goes his attempted reconciliation of science and religion.