

SERMON.

An Agnostic's Creed.

By REV. LYMAN ABBOTT, D. D.
Preached at Plymouth Church, Brooklyn.

My text this morning is the following letter which I have received from an unnamed correspondent:

A friend of mine who is a constant reader of *The Christian Union* and an admirer of its spirit, but whose philosophy often prevents him from agreeing with its positions in detail, has prepared an expression of his belief about life and its purpose, in which I venture to think you will be interested. It may perhaps be applied called an agnostic's creed. It is as follows:

I believe in the universe.
I believe that it is wisely planned, rightly ordered, and purposeful in progress.
I believe in humanity, its noblest product.
I believe that conduct, not dogma, is the essential of life.

I believe that there is an eternal law of righteousness not made by ourselves, which determines conduct. I believe that a faithful love of the best self and of our fellows is the centre of that law.
I believe that man is a spirit, but with a paramount physical basis.

I believe that there is a source of these beliefs. I call that source God, and I worship Him.

You will at once observe that my friend is a reader, and, in a certain way, a follower, of Matthew Arnold. What I would like to ask is this:

If, as many claim, the spirit of a reverent agnosticism in gaining ground, and the human race finally comes to lose its hold on what is now accepted as an absolutely revealed religion, can such a creed as this—no matter what beauty of sentiment or philosophical truth it may contain—ever serve as a stay, a comfort, and an incentive to the people?

It may so serve individuals—even Matthew Arnold's "dreamer"—but how about the whole race? This, I know, is a question that perplexes today very many thinking young men.

This question perplexes a great many thinking men, young and old. It has recently been asked in a different form by Professor Bryce in his work on *The American Commonwealth*, and again by Goldwin Smith in an article, if my memory serves me right, in *The Forum*. It is asked by men who are considering whether we can introduce adequate ethical instruction into our public system without any teaching of Christianity. And it is involved in the experiments that are being made by schools of ethical culture, which are trying to give men a comfort, a stay, and an incentive in life without historical Christianity, and without any well-defined faith either in God or in immortality.

I ask you to notice, in the first place, that these are the questions of a reverent agnosticism. There is nothing in this akin to the old infidelity born of French sensuality and materialistic reaction against superstition—the irreverent and ignorant scepticism which sought to get rid not only of the Bible and of Christianity, but of all moral sanctions. Between this reverent scepticism that seeks the stay, the comfort, and the incentive that Christianity gives, and that old irreverent scepticism that trampled the pearls of Christianity under swinish feet, there is nothing in common. Notice, too, that the spirit of this agnosticism is not that of negation. It is not the agnosticism of denial—the declaration: "I do not believe in the bible, I do not believe in the church, I do not believe in the Christ. It is a refreshment to find a man who stands outside of the church and outside of the creed and outside of all theological schools saying, I do believe. It is a great gain when men cease to put the emphasis of life on what they do not believe and put it on what they do believe.

Notice, too, that the question which is put in connection with this agnostic's creed is one which is profoundly stirring the hearts of a great many young men and women. I have some opportunity of knowing whereof I speak, in the privilege which has been afforded me of administering in universities and colleges. And there are in them many educated men and women who are saying to themselves, "I do not know that I can believe in the miracles, or in the bible, or in the Divinity of Jesus Christ; I do not know that in time of sorrow they have found a comfort from that faith, and in time of wrestling with temptation a stay and strength from it, and in all their life they were stirred to great Divine activity by it. If I lose that faith, can I have comfort when sorrow comes? Can I have the reserve force when I have to wrestle with my temptation? Can I have the incentive to a great, noble activity in my life?" It is a very profound question, and it is in some sense a very pathetic question.

Life is a quest. Everywhere men are seeking for something, they know not what. They are not always intelligently seeking. But they are never satisfied; and, paradoxical as it may seem, no man is so dissatisfied as the man that is satisfied. The man who has all that he thought he wanted is the most miserable of men. Humanity is in motion. In some places the movement is very sluggish; in some, full of great energy; but it is all moving, from the springs in the mountains to some unknown ocean. Science is search. Men are not satisfied merely to take the phenomena of nature and collate and compare them and put them into their respective pigeon-holes. Scientific men search the heavens with the telescope, and the minutest atoms of the earth with the microscope, dividing and subdividing, analysing and combining, spending days and nights in search—what? That they may find that there is really a universe; that makes out of all these varied phenomena a unity. "I believe in the universe," says my correspondent's agnostic friend. Perhaps that seems to you a very simple creed. But it is a very profound one. Man has gone a long way in the march towards truth when he has come really to believe that beneath this twisting and turning, this mutation, this perpetual variation, these seemingly separate phenomena, there is a unity.

Art is a search. The artist is one who is searching for, striving after, and ideal beauty that is always fugacious. Why is it that we want new literature, new music, new pictures? Why not copy the pictures of the past? Why not repeat the music of

the past? Why not read the books of the past? Because the past does not and cannot satisfy us. We are perpetually seeking for something that lies beyond. More than all pictures, statuary, sculpture, architecture, music, is the final ideal of beauty that still escapes us and which we still follow after. Politics is a search. Not politics in its low, mean, ignoble, newspaper sense, but the science of government. At the heart of it, politics is a search after organic justice. It is a striving to know what are the just relations of men one with another. The people say, "We will get a king," and the king does not find out, and the people will have no more kings. Then: "We will select the best and noblest of our citizens, and we will have an aristocracy to find out this justice;" and the aristocracy does not find it, and so, away with the aristocracy! Then: "We, the people, will find out this justice;" and we, the people, are still searching for it, and it is still in the distance. We abolish slavery, and lo! another problem greater than that of slavery is involved in our free men. We will offer our broad acres to all mankind; and, behold, a new problem in the host of uneducated foreigners fleeing upon our shores to be educated into manhood. Each problem is solved only to give place to another more complex and difficult. Yes; politics is a perpetual search, and every success introduces us to a new quest. All business life, social life, industrial life, is a search. If we be true men and women, we are seeking to understand our relationship with each other and our duties to each other. And we are searching not merely to discover what we ought to do today and the next day and the day after; we are searching to see if there is not some great bond that unites us, some brotherhood of humanity, and what brotherhood means. And love—love, the highest of all human experiences, is itself a search. The child loves and rests in the mother, but anon grows restless for other companionship, and finds it in a brother or a school-fellow; but only to grow restless of heart again till he finds the maiden and rests in her love. The husband and wife at first rest in each other's love; but still the restless heart seeks new love, and finds a new joy in the love that looks appealingly out of baby eyes. Father and mother, husband and wife, parent and child, patriot and friend—we are all pursuing, from the cradle to the grave, after this mysterious, this ideal, this perfect, this fugacious and escaping love. We come into troubles and trials. Life and grief lay hold upon us; our love is taken from us, and we are alone in our sorrow, and reach out for a comforting companionship. Our friends gather about us; they strew flowers before us; they bring us words of comfort; they send us messages of sympathy or bring us the sympathizing silence that means more than speech; and yet, thankful as we are for this, comforted as we are by this, it is not enough. There lies some power of comfort beyond, and we wonder what it is and where, and seek for it. In the battle of life we are borne down, and our souls cry out for some strong ally, some power not ourselves that may give us victory. We are beaten down by mysterious forces that we cannot understand, and we long for some reserve force, some moral reinforcement. We come to the church—sometimes we get help there, and sometimes not; to friends—sometimes they inspire us and sometimes depress and weaken. History, biography, great examples of great men, great ideals in masterpieces of literature,—we seize on them all, often to find help, yet always to be disappointed and to know that we need other and greater help. Our life meets at every step a dull resistance; it becomes a drudgery, a laborious grind. We try to help our neighbor and only succeed in hurting him. We try to render some service and fail, and grow weary of perpetual endeavor. We need some better refreshment and inspiration than sleep or recreation or vacation can give to us. We get an inspiration from the home; we get it from business; but it is not enough. And there goes up from all hearts the great cry that my correspondent has interpreted—a cry for a comfort, a stay, an incentive, adequate to strengthen and support and inspire us in every experience of life.

We are all searching for a somewhat. In science, for truth; in art, for beauty; in politics for justice; in love, for righteousness; in home, for love; and in all the experiences of life for a comfort and a stay and an incentive. Oh, my friends, do you not see that what we are searching after is God? Do you not see that there is nothing, nothing—no, nothing—that is true but God? Do you not see that there is no beauty except the beauty that there is in God? Do you not see that there is no righteousness except the righteousness that there is in God? Do you not see that there is no comfort for our sorrow except the comfort of knowing that we are the children of God, and that sorrow is His minister to bring us to Him? Do you not see that there is no power to stay and support us in this tremendous battle of life except the support and the presence of God, caring for us, weak and unworthy as we are, and holding us up by His perpetual presence? Do you not see that no power can keep us truly alive, and make our life full of a joyous service, except the power of God? It is for God we are searching. The question of my correspondent comes to this: If you abolish Christianity, if you give up faith in the Bible, and faith in Christ, and faith in the Church, and faith in the faith of your fathers and your mothers, will you find God? It is the profoundest question that any man can ask himself. Where shall I find God, and what shall I do if I cannot find Him? Religion does not exist for the sake of ethics, but ethics for the sake of religion. God is not a means, but an end. He is not a mere help to enable us to live; life is the great help to enable us to find God. The question is not for me, how shall I find the way to be a good husband, a good father, a good citizen, an honest business man? The great central, per-

petual question is, how, by the family, the state, the church, life in all its phases, shall I find my God? Business, state, home, church, everything, are for God. Not God to help us live, but life to help us find our God. That is what the old psalmist taught: "He who hath clean hands and a pure heart, who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity nor sworn deceitfully, he shall receive the blessing of God and righteousness from the God of his salvation." Purity, truth, honor, righteousness—that is the high road to the heart of God, to fellowship with God, to oneness with God. This is what Peter taught: "Add to your faith valour, and to valour knowledge, and to knowledge self-control, and to self-control patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness, love; for if these things be in you and abound, they shall make you that you shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." This is what Paul taught: Even love is not the end, but love the instrument of God and the end. "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height;" that is, that you may understand all experiences of love, its broad horizon, its heavenly heights, its deepest depths—why?—that ye may know the love of God which passeth knowledge, that ye may be filled with all the fullness of God. It is for this we are searching: in science after truth, in art after beauty, in government after justice, in business after duty, in the home after love, in sorrow after comfort, in temptation after strength, in life after life, because in all we are searching for One who is Himself the source of truth and beauty and justice and duty and love and life. For there can be no truth except as there is a truth speaking One, and no justice unless there is One who does justice, and no love if there be not One who loves, and no life if there be not a living One. And if this search be utterly hopeless, there is a Some One who is Himself the ideal toward which we struggle.

Now, my friends, if this be the true interpretation of life, if ignorantly or intelligently, blindly or with open vision, humanity is seeking, reaching for, groping after God; if science is trying to think the thoughts of God after Him, and art is trying to discover the beauty of God, and politics is trying to embody the justice of God, and build up the kingdom of God, and business and society are trying to show us the need and the meaning of the righteousness of God, and sorrow is trying to bring us to God through stress of trials, and life itself is teaching us our need of a great incentive in order to bring us to God—if everywhere humanity is searching for God, then I put before you the other question: Is God hiding Himself while His children seek for Him? Is life a game of hide-and-go-seek, God doing the hiding, and man the seeking? Christianity answers that question. Life is man seeking for God; Christianity is God seeking for man. All religions show us man searching after God; Christianity shows us God searching after man. This is the message of the Bible; this is the message of the Christ. First of all is the great fundamental declaration that God has made man in His own image; and, second, that, having made man in His own image, He has come in the image of man, bringing Himself to man that He may bring man to Himself; and, thirdly, growing out of those two truths, that He offers Himself perpetually to dwell in the hearts and lives of those who follow after Jesus, who have learned the secret of Jesus life, and are endeavouring, by companionship with Him, to reproduce in themselves His character. This is Christianity in its simplest terms: God is seeking for man. God has spoken to man through the word of prophets in the bible. God has lived among men in an earthly life that we might see Him and know Him. God is coming through the door of that divine life, that He may fill all hearts and inspire all lives. God sends tears in order to drive you to Him, that He may wipe away the tears from your eyes. God throws you into the great struggle, in order that out of that struggle God may be revealed to you, your helper and your strong tower. God puts you before the door of a great opportunity, that you may seek Him and in Him find the incentive to enter and the patience to persist and the power to achieve. This is Christianity. This is the value of the bible—that in it and by it God is revealed in the spirited consciousness of men as a God who is seeking man. This is the significance and the sole significance of miracles—that they have served as the witness that God is in the world seeking for His own. Creeds are of no value except as they are the endeavor of men to formulate their faith in a God whom they have sought and who has sought for them; and the church is nothing if it is not a congregation of men that are seeking after God and have found some revelation of Him in history and in their own lives. The needle points to the pole, thinking it is the pole that draws it. Mistaken needle! It is kept true to the pole by the magnetic current which enfolds the world, that current which is in the needle and in the world, and binds these two in one. So the heart of humanity looks up into the skies, looks back into the past, looks forward into the future, looks everywhere for Him who draws them to Himself. Oh, mistaken souls! God enfolds the universe with His presence, and He has come in shadowed and veiled presence in Jesus Christ, in order that He may show that God and man are one, with a perfect and indissoluble unity.

Have I answered my correspondent's question? Perhaps not. But perhaps you will see that I have prepared the way for answer. Without a Christ, men do find a comfort, they do find a stay, they do find an incentive. I bow reverently before the agnostic who goes out into the east of London or into the lower wards of New York city, and without the hope of immortality, without the presence of Christ, labors on, in discouragement, inspired by a great desire to do something for his fellowmen; for, without any hope or help, he is doing better work than I am doing. But the comfort that transforms sorrow into joy, and paints the rainbow on the tears, the stay that sustains the soul through the long, long night of wrestling

on the mountain top, and gives the patient wrestler a new name at the breaking of the morning, and the inspiration that lifts him up as on eagle's wings, and enables him to run as they that are not weary and to walk as they that faint not—this comfort, this stay, this incentive, is never found outside the regions where the story of the manger and the Cross has gone; and it we could think it possible that that story should be blotted out of the heart and the memory of man, the hope, the stay, and the incentive which have made Christendom what it is would die with the death of Christianity, and be buried in its tomb.

Read the article "What Do You Think?" on the fourth page. It will interest you.

General Booth's Scheme Failing.

There appears to be something more than a possibility of Gen. Booth's philanthropic and religious enterprises being crippled from lack of funds. When Mr. Booth, 18 months ago, propounded his scheme of social regeneration it met with the hearty concurrence of thinking people, who came to the conclusion that it at least deserved a trial. Its promoter took courage, travelled the world over to enlist the widest range of sympathy, and met with what seemed to be a very substantial response. But from a letter which has just been issued on behalf of the "Darkest England Scheme," it appears that, generous as the response was, it is still an inadequate provision for a complete trial of the great experiment.

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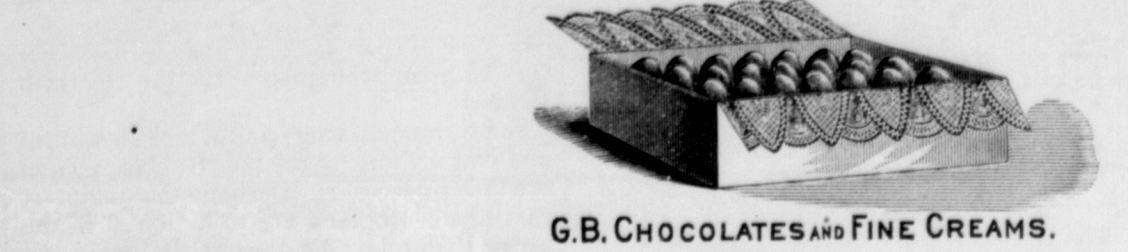
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