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The Humanitarian Tendencies of the Age

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In the great events that within a hundred years have so changed the face of Christendom, overturning thrones, creating powerful nations, shaping new governments and leavening the old with the spirit of democracy, in the novel and far-reaching enterprises of philanthropy and reform, and in the nobler conceptions of the relations of man to God, the tendencies of the age betray the guidance of a new and controlling sentiment of reverence for human nature.

Hitherto, man has been subordinated to his own institutions, has been sacrificed to the cruelty of superstition and to the neglect of mistaken piety. The Hebrews hallowed their temple and ritual, and believed that man was made for the Sabbath. The Spartan and Latin civilizations and the purest genius of Athens bowed before the majesty of military discipline, of established government and of enacted law, and believed that man was made for the State. When the Crusaders captured Jerusalem, the soldiers of Christ staked their pious wrath at the desecration of the Holy City by a seven days' promiscuous massacre, and with hymns of thanksgiving, in attitudes of reverent homage, they visited the sepulchre of the Saviour of the World. But the living Christ, incarnate in despised humanity,

was crucified afresh by the bigotry of race and creed.

In the Thirteenth Century the devotion of Christian Europe seems to have expended itself with prodigious toil and fervor in the building of magnificent cathedrals. The aspirations and prayers of many generations were wrought into towering spires and echoing aisles with a sad sincerity that thought to honor the Most High by fashioning into beauty and sublimity mountains of passionless stone rather millions of glowing souls.

And in harmony with the practical contempt of human nature that thus pervaded the ancient world and nearly eighteen centuries of Christendom, there grew up a philosophy that conceived of God as ^{an Oriental} despot, represented man as not his child but his slave, denied the principles of honor and right in the relations of the finite and the Infinite, and spurned as unholy the heart's noblest instincts.

But our age is inspired with a better faith. Magna Charta, the Protestant Reformation, and the English Commonwealth, the greatest triumphs of liberty till recent times, failed to recognize the essential equality of mankind and the native nobility of human nature. But the Declaration of Independence gave a clarion utterance to the doctrine of universal and inalienable rights. The French Revolution was the trump of judgment to the hoary forms of wrong that

oppressed the nations of Christendom, the mighty Amen
of the new faith in humanity with which a great
people responded to the confession uttered by our
fathers. The terror of the accompanying convul-
sions branded the new doctrine of human rights into
the world's memory. And when poets like Burns
chanted with somewhat of a fierce pride the dignity
of simple manhood and of honest poverty, when
prophets like Channing lifted the voice of eloquent
pleading for reverence toward the heart's native
instincts and for justice toward the degraded and
the enslaved, the hearts of the nations echoed their
words, and the battle-cry arose against all relics
of feudal ~~feudalism~~ ^{despotism}.

And as the approach of summer melts
the snows that have long encrusted the hills, and
swollen streams flow down to fertilize the valleys, so
the warmth of these mighty sentiments dissolved the
antipathies of race and creed and the selfishness of
caste, and poured forth numberless philanthropies.
In missions to the heathen, in missions to prisons
and asylums, in leagues for promoting peace temperance
and health, in the experiments of Socialism, the
crusades against African bondage, and the woman's
rights movements, the new impulses of respect for
humanity and of fidelity to the common brotherhood
have filled the world with beneficence. Literature too

has reflected this spirit. Romance and poetry no longer took their themes from the past, or lingered pensioners upon patrician favors in royal courts, but became champions of the neglected and the wronged, and expounded the laws of God to aristocracies and rulers.

But ~~And~~ ^{But} the new sentiments that worked so powerfully in politics and society, could not fail soon to influence the traditional philosophy. The received conceptions of the divine government and of human nature, felt the shocks that leveled the Bastille. The theology of capricious sovereignty quailed before the theology of love. ~~The~~ The charity that carried succor to every suffering brother man without question of race or color, resented the theory of arbitrary doom, and revolted at the doctrine of the inherent vileness of human nature. The heart of the age was throbbing with better convictions and demanded the laying of new foundations on which to build the theology of the future.

The first dogmatic manifestation of these new tendencies was the assertion of the right of manhood under human government. The American Declaration maintained the inalienable right of resistance to tyranny, and taught the nations to deny their rulers any other ^{divine} authority than was derived from promoting the highest welfare of their

subjects. It was an easy advance to apply the same principles to the government of God, and to maintain that humanity had rights which even the Creator was bound to respect. The leaders of thought who guided our great Revolution, as Franklin and Jefferson, were dissenters from the received theology of their day. They were too intelligent not to see that the principle of inalienable rights must have validity throughout the Universe as well as in the Thirteen Colonies. In revolting against royal tyranny, they also revolted against a despotic theology, and declared that by the necessity of his nature God was more honorable and righteous than the representation of the creeds. They had the courage to prefer to be called rather Deists than Calvinists, until the genius of a Channing restored to Christianity the humane spirit of its founder.

The rapid growth of Free Thought in continental Europe after the French Revolution indicated that Theological Rationalism also was logically inseparable from the principles of political freedom. The denial of the divine right of kings involved an entire change of base in the doctrine of religious authority. For if the natural reason be ~~qualified~~ ^{competent} to judge the principles of human and divine government, it must be because it drinks immedi-

ately from the eternal fountains of truth and right.

The clear dictates of our own nature, ~~therefore~~, must be more trustworthy than the arrogant teachings of any Church or any alleged communication from the skies. No revelation through the traditions of men shall take precedence of that revelation to the soul that cometh not through flesh and blood. No venerable scriptures can be more authoritative than that elder scripture engraved on the tablets of the heart.

And, thirdly, if these natural instincts of the heart be truthful and holy, there is, then, an element of goodness in every soul. Now, as in the garden of Eden, each spirit comes into being in the likeness of its Maker. The existence of sin is not denied, neither is its guilt diminished, but rather intensified, by doing justice to human nature. But we know not that the love of holy things can ever be utterly extinguished. A Christlike philanthropy will pierce the hardest surface and open the fountains of spiritual healing.

Such doctrines as these, of the natural rights of man under God's government, of the soundness of our intuitive perceptions of truth, and of the native rectitude of human nature, are the consistent theory of modern reform and philanthropy.

But many who were hospitable to some of the premises have been fettered by the lingering influ-

ence of the traditional philosophy from accepting the doctrines that were their logical consequences.

For if the heart's better instincts be the influx into humanity of the truth and holiness of God through foreordained and natural channels, the ~~awkward~~ ~~mechanical~~ machinery of supernatural regeneration and miraculous testimony can be spared from our theology. The faith that we urgently need today is a more earnest faith in natural goodness in the heavenly origin of our best impulses and in the supreme trustworthiness of our own clear insights.

For it is the dulness of men's spiritual vision to the ineffable divinity revealed in the Universe and in ~~humanity~~ ~~the world~~ that calls for miraculous and super-human manifestations. ~~of which we have had too much.~~

And thus the latest dogmatic result of the tendencies of the age, is the doctrine of God's ^{in the Universe and per-} ~~petual~~ ~~dwelling~~ immediate Presence. There is no longer any countenance in ~~the~~ ^{a despotic and degrading} philosophy of human nature for a mechanical theory of the Universe and of God. The Universe is not a work of elaborate and ingenious mechanism, ^{long ago set in motion} but each moment and forever a re-creation, fresh every evening and radiantly new every morning. Not merely omnipresent but everywhere vivifying ^{his} creation with his immediate energy, God truly dwells in the unseen resistless forces that guide our lives.

about, and in the changing loveliness of visible
Nature. But more mysteriously and sublimely
God pervades all souls. As the delicate flower
by hidden ways draws moisture and warmth
from earth and sky to nourish its beauty and
fragrance, so by mysterious channels from the
eternal fountain flows the divine life into hu-
man hearts, and blooms forth around us in
the sweetness of maiden innocence and in
noble character. Reverence the humblest human
form for it is the temple of the Most High!
The thousand lineaments of flitting grace that
meet us daily are the smiles of the Infinite
Beauty. The light of love in friendship's eyes
is the inspiration of the living God. The most
brutal of men is still worthy of respect, for
God's Spirit is ever striving with the perverted
soul. In its lowest estate there still lingers in
our human nature something of the divine. And
he whose memory is the world's purest inheritance
became the Son of God because he was the Son of
Man, became the Immanuel God-with-us, the
full manifestation of the unseen and eternal
glory, because he was the incarnate fulness
of humanity.

But there are good people who
speak with honest grief of these humanitarian

tendencies. Belonging to a philosophy whose foundation is the doctrine of the soul's native corruption and inability and ~~its~~ need of supernatural help, that represents God as virtually external to the universe and the verification of truth as external to the soul, it would be strange if they did not fear these tendencies as leading to theoretical and practical atheism. They can recognize no perpetual and supreme revelation in our simple human nature, forever renewed by the natural unfolding of every spirit, but only a long-ago revelation, external to humanity, and introduced by supernatural agencies. They deny to humanity its worthiness of God's perpetual indwelling and of a natural brotherhood to Jesus. They complain of a humanitarian theology as degrading the conceptions of God and of Christ, ~~and~~ making Christ a mere man ^{as they say} and ~~and~~ ~~degradation~~ fashioning a God after the ideal of human sinfulness, because they themselves, in their theory at least, degrade humanity. [~~This is the foundation of all their error.~~]

But we may deal tenderly with their fears while we seek to adjust their philosophy to the ruling sentiments of the age and to the belief of their hearts. For many advocates of the theology of the Sixteenth Century are among the noblest of the philanthropists of today. But their hideous

philosophy of human nature was the natural product of an age of violence. Its founders could attribute to God no better treatment of mankind than the highest ideals of human beneficence that were accepted in their time. ^{But} their contempt of human nature is ~~now~~ treason to the genius of the Nineteenth Century.

The spirit of their theology is simple despotism. It would have the Universe purified and administered not by the inherent attractiveness and superiority of truth and love but by violence and torture. Its central doctrine, of sacrificial atonement, is built upon this immoral principle.

It teaches ^{virtually} that Sin would be more desirable ~~to man~~ than Holiness but for the dread of future suffering. It appeals not to the affections and moral instincts, to the generosity and heroism of man, to his slumbering capacities for a Christlike humanity, but to his selfishness and fears by which he is made more brutelike. But from the divine depths of men's hearts the great perovading sentiments of the age utter their remonstrance against such impiety. From the ends of the earth the children of India rise up in rebuke and a Zulu savage converts ^{to the pure religion} a ^{of Jesus} bishop of the most civilised nation in Christendom.

The theology of the Sixteenth Century is today the consistent apology of oppression. It is mourn-
^{indeed}ful that the great majority of Christian pulpits that are practically committed to humanitarian movements, still preach principles in the interest of despotism, not knowing

what they do. But it is by no accident that a large part of the English Episcopacy and Aristocracy ~~are~~ ^{is} relapsing into Romanism, while the great Liberator of Italy is as radical in ~~his~~ theology as in ~~his~~ politics. It is by no accident that those churches have flourished in the miasma of American Slavery that would cite the religious authority of ~~the~~ ^a despotic Past in defense of a worse than Mediaeval barbarism, and would justify tyranny on earth by the example of tyranny in heaven. It is but a slight remove from unhumanitarian to inhuman.

But the great tendencies of our age are humanitarian. They are manifested with power in the protest of Colenso against Anglican despotism, in the revolt of Gasser Passaglia against papal dictation, in Beecher preaching boldly the faith of Channing, in Alexander freeing the serfs of Russia, in Gladstone demanding manhood suffrage for the people of England. Every where the loosening of the old fetters. [The increased reverence for personal rights even of the child, the substitution of a reformatory for a vindictive spirit in our penal codes, the views of Christian nurture that seek to cultivate wisely all the native capacities from their earliest unfolding, the remarkable growth of true social refinement, temperance, and respect for the sanctities of home, the independent self respect that is fostered by our institutions and seems irreverence to European servility, — all these are signs of the times.] To all oppression and privilege, all iniquitous statescraft and inhuman theol-

ogy, there is a handwriting on the wall. Never was simple manhood such a power in the affairs of the world. To Louis Napoleon, the ^{upholder} supporter of the decrepit despotism of Rome, and the prince of modern liars, there is more Terror in Joseph Garibaldi with his plain truth and humanity than in all the armies of Europe. Never were professional wig and surplice and official tinsel, so little regarded. The heart of the people deems more honorable the red shirt of the Italian patriot than royal decorations, respects more the war worn blue of our unknown veterans than double-starred epaulets, and prizes the uncomely form and features of our backwoodsman President as a plain casket in which the jewel of personal character may shine more resplendent.

"The rank is but the guinea's stamp,

"The man's the gold for all that."

The ages of monsters and reptiles ~~are~~ ^{are} past. The age of man is now drawing nigh, and the theology that is to rule the future must be radically humanitarian. It must recognize in all the relations of man to his fellow man and to his Creator the eternal principles of honor and right. It must respect the heart's native perceptions and instincts as more trustworthy than any processes of logic. It must honor the sentiment of responsibility only unto God. It must acknowledge no infidelity, but unfaithfulness to the divine monitions from within. It must reverence the solemn isolation and the indwelling divinity of every soul. And in its doctrine of human brotherhood, it

must proclaim that the unlikeness of the most gifted and the most degraded of men, is trivial in comparison with their common capacities and the grandeur of their common destiny.

In the Middle Ages the battling words that covered Europe were gradually drawn together with a sense of common interests and common hopes by reverence for the memory of Christ. The mighty working of this sentiment first gave to rival nations the feeling of fraternal union without impairing their independence. The Christendom that rallied to the rescue of the Holy Sepulchre, contained the germs of the only civilization that has had the vitality to become permanent and world-wide.

But when the principles of Jesus, so long unrecognized, his world-embracing philanthropy and his reverence for the godlike in every soul, shall be no longer tendencies merely, but shall have become the spirit of the age, when the intercourse of nations shall be based upon the Golden Rule and all mankind in fraternal peace and goodwill shall worship the common Father, when institutions and constitutions, legal precedents and political expediences, ^{Scriptures} Sabbath, and traditions, shall all be subordinated to the individual needs and the ^{God-given} native ^{simple} rights of ~~man~~ ^{humanity}, a civilization thus truly Christianized will be the dawning of the Millennial Age, a kingdom of God established on the earth, the fulfilment of the Sermon on the Mount.