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The New Christianity

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for
brethren to dwell together in unity.

John Beverley Robinson

18 June 1886

There can be no doubt that a new religion is about to arise, as a natural outgrowth of the extinction of Christianity.

For Christianity, in every deep and true sense, is extinct.

By the very principle which it battled to maintain—the adequacy of private judgment in matters of doctrine—Protestantism is destroyed. How can one who demands the right of modifying old faiths to suit his private opinion find fault with another who by his private judgment abrogates the old faith entirely?

How shall he who rejects the doctrine of the apostolic succession condemn me if I reject the divinity of Jesus?

Protestantism made its stand to establish freedom of thought. Protestantism is, in the best sense, free thinking.

As for Catholicity, it rests its claim upon historical authority, and, as far as that goes, its position pregnable.

But when it is not the authority of the teacher that is called in question, but the validity of what is taught; when men lose their respect for arbitrary power; when the common acceptance upon which that power was based is gone—what then?

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Both Protestantism and Catholicity have almost lost; their hold on men's hearts and minds. Protestant churches have become rich men's amusements, temples of mammon, exclusive clubs where wealth buys the leadership and hires the performers, Hollow shams erected for the glory of God and to improve the surrounding property.

Catholicity is still the church of the poor, but rather the church that plunders than the church that protects them; the church that overlooks injustice in high places, and contents itself with repressing the manifestations of the misery which that injustice has produced.

Can we go on as we are going?

Can we rest content with no settled belief; doubting all things; doubting the possibility of truth, mercy, justice ; knowing only that this life is wretched, and that there is no other tangible hope?

What then can we do?

Shall we keep on pointing to the god of the churches, the individual who has created and maintains all the misery, all the violence, and blood and sin and wretchedness of the present desperate state of affairs?

Shall we go on trying to make men believe that such a person is benevolent and just? Shall we keep on teaching that this life is normally miserable, and that the only hope in life is after life is over?

It cannot be.

What shall we do? At least we need not fear. The churches themselves have revolted against the hell doctrine. The dread of burning is gone: the terror of death is past.

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Yet where shall we look? We have lost our old faith; where shall we find a new and better one?

Is there a God?

We wander through all the fields that science has explored; we divide atoms from atoms; we search the mysterious forces

Then the crime which law is supposed to suppress, but which really is created by law, will disappear.

Then all men will be as brothers, peace and right and the joy of life will be the equal inheritance of every son of God.

rush to war against their brothers, inspired only by national antipathy, and homes are desolated, wives widowed, children left destitute, men tortured and crippled for absolutely no good accomplished.

Even now is impending for many nations the Social destruction that our neglect of natural law must entail for all should it continue, by pestilence from our reeking cities, by riot and bloodshed from our downtrodden and irresponsible poor,

The destruction of Sodom and Ephesus and Rome will be the destruction of St. Petersburg and London and Chicago should things go on as they are going.

Yet it may be that men will change their course in time to avert the danger.

It may be that they will leave the old Christian idolatry, and do the things that Jesus taught, and that pure religion and science together demand.

Then war will be impossible, for men will refuse to murder each other under any circumstances. Then the assumption of dignities and privileges by one man above another on the ground of the superiority of his natural endowments will also be impossible, for each will be occupied not in demanding good for himself, but in doing good to others.

Then the enjoyment of any material pleasures by one above another will finally be condemned by the general voice, and will fall out of vogue; such enjoyment will be regarded as sin against society, and will not be sought by the well-disposed and virtuous.

The equality of fortune which would result if the boasted almsgiving of Christians were done by them as a duty and not as a merit, will follow.

Then courts will be established to seek out the principles of natural right, to arbitrate friendly differences without power of injuring anybody, for acquiescence in the decision will be wholly voluntary.

of the universe; with microscope we look through the minute world hitherto unknown; with telescope and spectroscope we penetrate the depths of the stars, but we find no evidence of the individual mind that is upheld by the theology of the day as the only god it knows.

All the great facts that we do note, all the broad principles that we thereon found are blindly and systematically antagonized by that theology, which gives us in place of them nothing.

So the mind returns and beats against the bars of its limitations as it asks again the question: What is all this Universe of things? Does it really exist at all? For what purpose does it exist? What are we, conscious atoms of the Whole?

And, as we look into the blackness of eternity before us and behind us, we shudder as we are repelled by a veil more impenetrable than the cloud on Sinai.

If it were not for the pride of intellect that leads men to think that they are capable of conceiving the Inconceivable, they would before this have learned that thought is permissible as far as thought is possible, and that we need never restrain the exercise of our intellect, for at the point where the intellect would mislead us, the use of intellect becomes impossible, the mind stands aghast.

Years ago it was written: "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty to perfection? It is higher than heaven, what canst thou do: deeper than hell, what canst thou know?"

Yet now, as then, after saying that God cannot be conceived by the mind of man, Christian theologians go on to define a god after their own fancies, describing a man such as they are themselves, with the thoughts, the hopes, the desires of a man.

They even deify their teacher. Jesus; not knowing the real grandeur of his teachings, they worship as the Inconceivable God a man like ourselves.

Can it be that we ought to worship any man as God?

Or is it not that we have higher ideas of God than prevailed when Jesus was deified?

To the nations of antiquity God was not the massive and overwhelming thought that it is now. In recognizing another god they were doing what was an every-day thing. Gods were plentiful then.

But for us it is so no longer. We cannot admit that any man is God.

To go further, it is impossible for us to attribute to God any human qualities. Is it not as much idolatry to set up a god who is like man in mind as one who is like man in body?

To say that God is loving, angry, pleased, is it not idolatry? Can we say that God is a moral being, and define divine morality by human morality?

Can we say that God is a conscious being, or a personal individual at all, without making an image of ourselves for our god?

It is all mere idolatry.

We cannot say anything that implies that the human mind can know or conceive the Unknowable and Inconceivable.

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What, then, is Knowledge?

All our Knowledge is of the external aspect of things only. As given through our senses we say that things are red, that they are hot, that they are heavy, square, bitter, and so on, and we compare things among themselves by their qualities.

But what things are apart from their qualities by which they are related to our senses, what they are beneath the surface, what they are when all consciousness is removed we can never know.

Yet that things do exist, that something was before anything was conscious of it, that the same Something will continue though all consciousness of it be gone, we must assume.

We do not know it: we believe it.

This is the doctrine which Jesus preached, but which never yet has been practiced.

Everything goes on now as it did when Jesus preached. If he were to come again to-day men would still say: He is crazy, he hath a devil.

Nations still make war, and men murder each other, and think they do right.

Courts, with the civil power that they control, are based upon the idea of doing evil for evil, of the retaliation of the master upon the slave, of the ruling classes upon their inferiors, the masses. Never for a moment do they try to discover the principles of natural justice, to prevent wrong by attacking its causes, to do good to anybody.

In their intercourse with each other men still entertain the opinion that some are entitled to privileges which others are not entitled to; that some ought to be content with a scale of living that would be disgraceful and impossible for others: that it is the duty of most men to call somebody master here on earth.

The state of things which is before our eyes, which has been brought about by our wrong-doing, is indeed desperate.

We have erected a society where some are too rich, with the vices and sins of riches, and where others are too poor, with the vices and sins of poverty.

By our courts we have legalized natural injustice, such wrongs as interest and private land ownership, with our whole system of commercial intercourse, by which men receive without giving an equivalent, so that the rich are made continually richer and the poor poorer.

In our intercourse man with man we admire and uphold all evil passions, quickness to take affront, pride in our superiority to somebody else, emulation, the return of injury for injury, implacability, hatred, envy, luxury, idleness.

Nation with nation we ignore our common brotherhood, and each nation holds itself superior to other nations. Men

The motive that is really the strongest is the universal, overpowering demand of man's nature for the sympathy and support of his comrades.

That they may receive the sympathy and win the approval of others, it is easy to see what the actions of the individual must be.

They must be such as will benefit those whose approval is desired. The rule of life for each individual in society must be to do good to others. Under all circumstances, regardless of all selfish motives, to do good. Even at a loss to himself, to do good. "He that sweareth to his own hurt and changeth not:" this is the social type of man.

Though others do evil to him he must do good to them. Retaliation of injuries, the avenging of insults, emulation, profiting at the expense of others, all these are foreign to the principle of doing good that must be the rule of conduct for each social unit, if society is to become perfect.

If it be asked, what is good; the answer is that the desires of each for his individual happiness must be his guide in suggesting his actions towards others. He must do towards them what he would wish them to do towards him. To love others as oneself is not to protect our own interests as much as we protect theirs; it is to protect theirs as single-heartedly and disinterestedly as we would wish them to protect ours.

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They who admit that God Exists; they who admit that God is known to us through the sensible universe; they who admit that the laws of God may not be infringed with impunity; they who admit that social life is happier than solitary; they who admit that social life is impossible without mutual approval; these, in their reverence for the Power of God, and seeing it is necessary that they should, will gladly conform their lives to the rule of doing to others as they would wish others to do to them.

How things exist, relatively to our senses, we know by our senses; that things exist at all we do not know, but we must assume.

We cannot prove that things exist—we found our proofs of how they exist upon the ineradicable belief that they do exist.

We believe because we cannot avoid believing.

As the fundamental assumption upon which all thought, all proof, all knowledge rests lies the belief that Something exists.

This ever-present and inevitable belief in the Existence of that which to our bodily senses is known as the visible universe is the true faith which is above knowledge.

We believe, not because "belief is impossible," but because unbelief is impossible.

That Existence, which we are compelled to believe in, is indeed that which, under many manmade disguises, men have ever recognized as God.

We assert it the more confidently because it is beyond proof. We do not know, we cannot prove that anything exists. We are compelled to believe that Something exists, and that which Exists is God.

It is not belief against reason, but it is belief upon which reason rests.

Whether we will or not we must believe that Something exists, and that Something in which are all things we can only call God.

The manifestation of the Existence in which we believe is only through the temporary and relative existence which we know through our senses. The only revelation of God is in the book of Nature. The highest worship is the investigation of the workings of the visible universe.

Worshiping God thus we need fear no science; we worship by science.

Trace as we may the genesis of worlds and galaxies from the primeval ethereal aggregation, our wonder and reverence is not diminished for the God that Is.

Analyze as we may the last particles of brain-matter, identifying thought with motion, life with electricity, each with all and all with each, we but add to our awe at the mysteries of Existence.

We may not use words to describe God: we may not speculate as to the connection between the relative and absolute; we may not because we cannot.

We may not say that God is one any more than we would say that God is many. We may say only: God Is. Existence is God.

Through and in all things; beneath all things and above all things: by which the whole is filled and moved and driven onward.

Origin and cause and reason and end of all things, beyond all words, beyond all thought: before which the most careful phrases are but false and misleading, for it is beyond all words as far as the mystery of Existence surpasses all other mysteries.

We take refuge in our ignorance. We defend as our highest knowledge our incapacity to know at all. We say only: God Is.

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What shall we say then of the Soul?

Just as the pure idea of God has hitherto been hidden under various personifications and masks, so under similar disguises shall we find the soul.

All the notions in which the soul is figured as an attenuated and bleached body are of the same order as the idolatrous notions of God in the past.

What is that which we call Self?

Each one knows himself to exist only in the consciousness of the existence of things outside of self. Self-consciousness there cannot be apart from the consciousness of other things.

Yet among the things of the visible universe we are compelled to distinguish two orders; that which is perceived and that which perceives. As before, the distinction is one that cannot be proved, but must be assumed as axiomatic. That reality

of the prosperity of the individual. The actions of individuals must be regulated by their fitness to further the existence of the society. Moral action, which is action regulated by other than individual motives, begins with the existence of society. Society is, in fact, a moral organism.

When men live in the society of other men the actions that are right, that are best suited to harmonize with the Order of the Universe for the furthering of individual life, these very actions become wrong in social life, because they are precisely the ones most antagonistic to the existence of the society.

Selfishness, self-esteem, pride, cruelty, deceitfulness, theft, lying, murder, these and all such which for solitary-lived animals are right, and according to the laws of God, become for gregarious animals to a certain extent and for social man wholly wrong, and opposed to the laws of God.

The punishment for the infraction of the rules that must be observed for the maintenance of society, the natural punishment that is, lies not in the injury or death of the individual, but in the injury or death of the society. Such divine punishments are the uprisings that occur when men have pushed their wrong-doing to such a pass that society is maimed, the injured portion rises in blind violence. The mad excesses of men in such cases are not to be judged by a moral standard; the revolution, never to be advocated from a moral standpoint, when it does come is a physical revulsion, the true divine vengeance upon the wrong-doers who have caused it, no more a moral convulsion than is the tornado or the earthquake.

The law that lies at the foundation of society, that must be observed for society to attain full health and vigor, is clearly pointed to by man's natural instincts.

Accompanying the social instinct which makes the greatest happiness for man only attainable in Society, is the ruling passion of man's nature—the desire for the approval of others.

It is not true that selfishness is the strongest human motive. Strong although that undoubtedly is, there is a stronger.

If we jump from too great a height we break our limbs; if we expose ourselves to cold we incur sickness.

Inexorable in action, inevitable in effect, above all human might, is the Only Might which is above right, that Might conformity with which is indeed the last standard of right.

When we thus realize our ignorance, when we admit our helplessness, hurled on, we know not wherefore, whence, nor whither, we feel for the first time the Fear of God, we reverence for the first time the Power of God.

In our search into the laws of God we have but recently formulated certain broad generalizations, expressing the fundamental relations among all the things of the universe, and showing how they have been developed. This is popularly called the law of evolution.

In the development of animal races it is shown how, by the immensity of the destruction of life that goes on in nature, the comparative few that survive are those who have some offensive or defensive characteristic in a more marked degree, which gives them a superiority over their fellows.

This is called the survival of the fittest.

There are some who say that according to this law it is right that the mass of mankind should be wretched and degraded; that it is right that men should struggle for advantage over each other, and that the few should profit by the misery of the many; that thus only can the best men be singled out for preservation.

If a separate individual life were the condition of greatest happiness to man, this assertion would be true.

Man's greatest happiness, however, is not in his Solitary existence; his greatest happiness is in Social existence in the company of other men.

It is because the condition of greatest happiness for man is the social condition that society has developed, and must continue to develop.

With the development of society a new state of affairs begins. The prosperity of the society takes precedence necessarily

which we know only as it perceives other things; and which we must recognize as the same reality which is manifested in the things that are perceived, is indeed the soul divested of the fanciful forms with which men have tried to bring the inconceivable down to their grasp. Second only to the belief in God is the belief in self, and it is as far beyond proof. And as we recognize the visible things by which we are led to believe in the existence of the soul-self as of the same visible universe wherein is manifested the Existence of the Whole, so we may say that our Souls are indeed in and of that Existence; that we are truly the "sons of God."

As the inconceivable self of the individual is the Soul, so the Inconceivable self of the Universe is God.

Is there, then, any life after death?

Does the soul continue to live after the body is separated into grass and stones and worms?

No doubt, as stones and grass and worms, as well as men, are manifestations of existence, however scattered the body may be, its constituents still correspond to some existence. But that there is not after death any conscious individual life, connected by memory with this life, is as certain as it is certain that we lived no such life before we were born.

With the death of the body consciousness ends. The soul, the real Self, then is merged in the Existence of the Whole.

"Then the body shall return to dust, and the soul shall return to God who gave it."

The whole doctrine of future life as a thing to be desired is the result of the natural wish for happiness in a world where man's wrong-doing has made happiness hitherto exceptional.

When it was invented the world was torn by tyranny, rapine and destruction. The masses were slaves, ground down by injustice and violence. Poverty and servility for the many were the natural results of the vast riches and cruelty of the few.

What wonder that men grasped at the hope of a happy life hereafter when a happy life here was impossible.

And since then this same hope of future life has done much to reconcile men with the evils of the world, to paralyze their desires for righting the wrongs, and doing away with the miseries of the present life on earth.

Now light is coming, day is at hand. The hope of the ages is close upon us.

We have learned now that happiness here on earth is the normal lot of mankind; that not merely for the ox is living a pleasure in itself; that the natural joy of existence ought to be the keener in men as much as they are above oxen; that it is otherwise only by the mistakes and wrong-doing of men themselves.

When we live happily shall we not die peacefully? Death, indeed, is no more to be feared than sleep. We are but merged again in that God in which we live and move and have our being.

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Who can say that there is no need for right-doing if the expectation of future life is removed? That there is no incentive to moral excellence but the hope of reward?

As much stronger for us is the motive for doing right as the attainable is more earnestly sought after than the unattainable.

Men's only chance of happiness here lies in their doing right.

What is this right that we are to do?

Acknowledging no personal dictator, what do we establish as a standard of right actions?

As the Inconceivable Existence which we have agreed to call God is known to us only in the sensible universe, so the only laws of God that we know are the laws by which the Sensible universe operates.

Not laws in the sense of the arbitrary fiat of man, or of a being like man, but the modes in which, things are related to each other to our Senses, as we discern by our senses; what Christian

theologians call the laws of nature, and blasphemously deny to be the laws of God.

When we search out how this globe developed from the primeval fiery cloud; when we trace similar fiery clouds in the sky from which their suns and worlds have not yet sprung; when we trace the birth of seas and continents, and the beginning of vegetable and animal life; when we follow up the wonderful chain by which, from a formless jelly, man came to pass; when we divide the brain and identify the thoughts of it as of the same order as the lightning flash, do we not in all these things learn the laws of God in the highest sense?

We need not fear to use our minds to the extent of their power. We need not harass ourselves with the idea that we are trying to know what is too deep for us. We know that where thought is too deep, thought is impossible. Even if all our discoveries later on were shown to be mistakes, we could but begin again to search out the wonders of the knowable universe, sure that the existence which it reveals to us is forever hidden from us.

So that it is not merely in moral matters that we see the laws of God. As all things in the universe are in and of God, the laws of all things are in very truth the laws of God.

Whether it be the formula of gravitation, or of heat absorption, or the rules by which we measure the electric current in the wire, or the still more obscure relations of heredity or mind-action, they are all for us the laws of God.

Not a clod by the roadside, not a speck in the sunbeam, not an atom of invisible star-dust that we do not recognize as of the same universe of God as ourselves, as not less wonderful in nature than the mind of the greatest sage.

All about us is an Order of things which goes on whether we will or not.

If we interfere with that order, if we transgress the law, we suffer; if we transgress beyond a certain point we die.