Joseph Déjacque
Essay on Religion
1861

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Only at their advent in the world, religions, like constitutions, never affirm anything but the knowledge acquired on the day before, and always present themselves as an obstacle to the affirmation of the latent knowledge that the social atmosphere of tomorrow will embrace: and in this, we must confess, they are still only the reflection of the nations and men, who always cling, with a kind of stupid fury, to their dead ideas, and yield to the attraction of living ideas only after having been long assailed by them. It seems that all, men and nations, constitutions and religions, are as ashamed to confess themselves vanquished, and abandon themselves only with grudgingly to the charms or the fascinating seduction of irresistible and universal progress.

(To be continued)

There are some obvious transcription errors in the only version of this text online, but the sense of the paragraphs seems clear. And as this first installment of the essay appeared in the last issue of Le Libertaire, it was not ultimately continued.

—Working Translation by Shawn. P. Wilbur.

I.

What is Religion? What must it be?

What is Religion today? It is the immutable synthesis of all errors, ancient and modern, the affirmation of absolutist arbitrariness, the negation of attractional anarchism, it is the principle and consecration of every inertism in humanity and universality, the petrification of the past, its permanent immobilization.

What must it be? The evolving synthesis of all the contemporary truths; perpetual observation and unification; the progressive organization of all the recognized sciences, gravitating from the present to the future, from the known to the unknown, from the finite to the infinite; the negation of arbitrary absolutism and the affirmation of attractional anarchism; the principle and consecration of every movement in humanity and universality, the pulverization of the past and its rising regeneration in the future, it's permanent revolution.

II.

Dualism's Work of conservation.

To date, in Religion as in Politics (and, by politics I mean here, not "the art of governing states," but the art of organizing society; as, by religion I mean here, not "the worship one renders to divinity," but the humanitary link or idea). Thus far there has been no revolution in them; there have only been evolutions, which have indeed been able to bring about some modifications in the system, but have changed nothing about the principle. The principle de of religious economy, like that of political economy, is still God; it is still authority. So long as we have not destroyed God, in heaven, and authority, his satellite, on earth, we will have revolutionized neither religion, nor politics; at most, we will have revolutionized deism and governmentalism: the religious dualism, — spirit and

matter, — and the political dualism, — governors and governed. To revolutionize the dualism, is that not to preserve it?

III.

The Religious Code is the Supreme Penal Code.

"Dis-moi qui tu hantes, et je te dirai qui tu es;" thus speaks the proverbial wisdom.[1]—Tell me what religion you profess, and I will also tell you, man of the people, who you are. Is not religion, for the savage peoples, as for the barbaric or civilized nations, the law of laws, the morality of moralities? Has not man, seized by a fanatical, superstitious belief in God, placed divine law well above the human law, and the morality of the Church above the morality of the State? It may be that he endures the one if it is imposed on him, but he only has fervent devotion to the other. In order to govern the world, would there be need of penal laws, civil moralities and legions of secular archangels, if the people had a blind faith in the religious dogma? The clerical army would be sufficient by itself to keep them in submission, and the voice of the priests more terrifying in their ears than the sound of the lictors' armor.

IV.

Religion prepares its own suicide by using a double-edged sword.

If Religion, in opposition to its very principle, which is the exclusive domination of brutal force by intellectual force, a principle that forbade it, in its own interest, from recognizing in the sword a governmental power capable of turning against it, as we have seen at the birth of every religious reform, through the massacre of the first Christians, for example, and of the first Huguenots—if Religion, I say, has had recourse to warriors, if it has called for aid and

[1] The sense is the proverb is that "you are known by the company you keep."

support from the sword, it was with the aim of reducing to obedience the men or nations that, in ancient time, still did not have faith, of that, in modern times, no longer had it. The faithful, its willing slaves, had no need of that brutal constraint in order to bow and serve. It is, on the contrary, that senseless use of violence that has contributed to opening their eyes and unblocking their ears. Soon the zealous servants would become aggressive rebels. Religion, by wishing to embrace too much, would only grasp itself: it struck a mortal blow to a principle.

V.

Religion is the barometer of public reason.

If Religion has been able to act in this way, if it has been in all eras of history the more extreme personification of the exploitation of man by man, it is because, as a synthesis of false sciences, an extraordinary expression of authoritarian prejudices, of divine superstitions that had currency among humanity, it was inevitable, it was logical that by summing them up it affirmed them in all their hideousness. Religion is only the barometer of public reason, and it does nothing but indicate through its formulas the general degree of elevation or abasement of human knowledge. The religious idea is no more capable than the political of resisting the magnetic action of minds, of escaping the movements of the intellectual temperature. As a new constitution marks for a nation the level of its political progress, the appearance of a new religion records the level of philosophical progress.

VI.

The reigning Religions are the testament of generations who are no more.