

## The Protestant Spirit by Annie Besant

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[Page 1] FROM time to time in the world's history we see the rising up of a spirit of revolt against the existing condition of things, a spirit that challenges all authority and rejects all tradition. It appears when some religion, some social polity, some convention, has lost, wholly or partially, its indwelling life, and offers to the world a shell instead of a content, a stone instead of bread. It appears when an authority has lost its inherent power and rests on mere prescription; when a creed is an empty formula instead of the expression of a life. When abuses have accumulated, when dust has gathered thickly over ancient jewels, when priesthood has become a profession, and religious rule a prize for ambition, then arises the Protestant spirit, and sweeps like a storm wind over the minds of men. It is one of the purifying agencies in the treasure-house of the spiritual Guardians of Humanity, the wind which scatters the fogs of blind credulity, and chases away the miasma of intellectual sloth.

Such revolts may be seen now at work in India, in the movement known as the Brahma Samāj and the Ārya Samāj — movements which cause much distress to the religious minds in the country from their narrowness and aggressiveness, but serve an admirable purpose in stimulating Hindūism to shake off [Page 2] its impurities and purge itself of superstitions. But the historical example of such a revolt, the greatest recorded in history, is that which takes as its own the name of Protestantism, and marches under it as under a battle-flag. It may show us at one and the same time the uses and dangers of the Protestant spirit.

Looking back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, we can see the Roman Catholic Church, the historical representative of Christianity, had reached a point at which some great change was necessary if Christianity were not to sink under a mass of superstitions and immoralities. The corruptions of the priesthood, reaching their worst depths in Rome, which should have been the centre of life and inspiration; the frightful cruelties of the inquisition, the crushing out of thought with death and torture; the unrestrained licence of a brutal nobility, which bought immunity for oppression and rapine with bribes of gold and lands to the Church as portress of heaven — all these and many another evil were choking the life out of Religion in Europe, and a reform was imperatively necessary to save Christianity from destruction at the hands of her own household.

Two lines of reform were traced out at this critical moment: one, that identified with the name of Erasmus — scholarly, moderate, conservative — the other, that identified with the names of Martin Luther and Calvin — popular, headlong, revolutionary. It was then as it was later in the French Revolution, with its Encyclopaedists and its *Montagnards*; reason, education, orderly progress were on the side of the scholars, but the gigantic evils of the time — religious in one case, political in the other — forced on a cataclysm which swept away alike both good and bad, the gold with the dross. [Page 3]

Erasmus was the type of the cultured and balanced reason, polished, refined, shrinking from the coarse, the blatant, and the vulgar. If he pierced the ignorant and evil-living priesthood of his time with the keen rapier of his satire, he did it that a purer type might arise, not that an equally ignorant peasantry might erect themselves into ecclesiastical dictators; if he broke the stately tyranny of mitred bishops, it was not to submit to the vulgar oppression of petty and loud-voiced fanatics, sprung from the mire. He sought to revive and then enthrone learning, and to give to the reason the authority claimed by prescription. Could he have had his way, the Western Church had not been rent in twain, the progressive part of Rome's heritage had not been torn from her, the dignity of the ancient ceremonial and the spiritual value of the mystic tradition had remained unimpaired, and the iconoclastic forces of ignorance, allied with fanaticism, had not desolated the pastures of Christianity.

The movement which by its followers is called the Reformation substituted — so far as the will and the teaching of Martin Luther and Calvin were concerned — but one tyranny for another, a Book for a Pope. "The Bible and the Bible alone is the religion of Protestants". Calvin burned Servetus as readily as Rome had burned Bruno, and in fanaticism and narrowness the Reformers rivaled Rome. None the less Protestantism, while shrouding the spiritual, stimulated the intellectual, and contained within itself forces needed for the evolution of the future. For while it is true that the Reformers substituted but one tyranny for another, and one that was, on the whole, worse, as being quite as oppressive while also blatant and vulgar, yet it is also true that the spirit which rose up against the tyranny of the time and [Page 4] smote it, was the spirit which inevitably generated a similar resistance against the new tyranny, and ensured the application of the principle that overthrew the Pope to the overthrowing of all tyrannies that would fain fetter the soaring intellect of man. It was easy for the Reformers to say to the reason to which they appealed: "Thus far shalt thou go, and no further". Their descendants appealed to the same reason against the puny barriers they set up.

The Protestant spirit, despite the faults of its youth, its crudeness, its blatancy, its vulgarity, was none the less, in its essence, the spirit that made possible the advances of modern science. It questioned, it challenged, everything; and however iconoclastic such a spirit might be in the domain of religion — as iconoclastic as a blind man might be who found his way obstructed by priceless pictures, the value of which could not be gauged by his sightless eyes — none the less was it invaluable on the physical plane, where the means at its disposal were adequate for the investigation of the problems surrounding it. When the Protestant spirit awoke, Religion in the West had extended her authority over all physical questions, and checked all efforts to understand Nature with her perverted "Thus saith the Lord". The world had not yet existed for six thousand years, therefore the geological records were untrue; the Jews were the chosen nation, the vanguard of humanity, therefore the civilisations of the past were fabulous; the earth was the centre of the Universe, for which the sun, moon and stars were created, therefore astronomical facts were fictions; and so on. Science could only breathe by tearing down the biblical prison which shut it from the air, and the Protestant spirit which enthroned the Bible on the ruins of the Papacy, [Page 5] enthroned science on the ruins of the Bible. Both the Papacy and the Bible were to be rebuilt, but never again was either to become a fortress to frown a silent world into submission.

Enjoying, as we do today, the freedom to think and the freedom to speak, we should do ill to forget the meed of gratitude we owe to that spirit which won for us this freedom. True, in the days of its battling it destroyed much that was fair and gracious, but the things it destroyed can blossom anew, while the freedom which it won is the condition for intellectual progress.

The harmful work of the Protestant spirit is seen in its later effects on religion, for while it did much to cut off the heads of the weeds of superstition, it did nothing to destroy their roots. A superstition is only uprooted when knowledge explains its origin and growth, and this the Protestant spirit could not do, seeing only the grotesqueness of its above-ground manifestation. Why is it that in every country in which the Protestant spirit has triumphed, scepticism and materialism have followed in its track ? Why are the Protestant Churches helpless before the ever-advancing flood of unbelief ? Is it not because the reason, to which Protestantism appeals, has so far failed to pierce into the region where are the facts on which Religion is founded, and because here religious Protestants appeal to authority while everywhere else they decry it ?

The mistake — a mistake natural and perhaps inevitable — has lain in erecting the reason, as limited by the physical brain, into the sole arbiter of truth. The divinely lucent Intelligence, the Wisdom aspect of the Self, is indeed that arbiter; but its broken reflection in the human brain, dominated moreover [Page 6] by Activity, and showing the restless instability of knowledge-hunting rather than the calm security of possessed wisdom, is but poorly equipped for that high office. In things of the physical plane, within reach of the senses, it is a trustworthy guide, when undistorted by passions and prejudice. Moreover, however imperfect it may be, it is the only guide man has, and is to the man what the eye is to the body. Vision may not be perfect, but it is better than the groping touch of the blind as a medium for understanding surrounding objects. Man walks better through the world with the opened eye of reason than by groping his way with the fumbling touches of ignorance and foolish credulity. None the less does reason hinder the spread of knowledge when it unreasonably affirms the all-sufficiency and independence of the physical universe, and shuts its ears to all the whispers of Nature, which suggests that it is face to face with a part only and not with the whole. Reason, as evolution proceeds, will learn to perfect and control one vehicle after the other, each subtler than the preceding one, and will thus come into touch with subtler regions of the Universe, the existence of which, for it, is at present unproven. The existence of those regions will, in millennia to come, rest for it on the same basis as does now the existence of the physical Universe; but at the present time it is as incapable of penetrating them as is a fish of investigating the nature of the meadow land, or of soaring into the upper regions of the atmosphere. On things watery, the fish's judgment may be reliable, but its opinions on things terrestrial and aerial are not weighty.

The reason, free from prejudice, may arrive at the certitude that man is a being in touch with regions beyond the physical, as the physical is now [Page 7] understood. It can recognise the existence in man of a power to respond to impressions other than those which reach him through his senses, and it can argue, by analogy, that these vague and indeterminate impressions are the prophecy of the opening to him of another region of the Universe through the development of another organ of perception, as the first faint recognitions of light and shade adumbrated the coming development of the eye. It may further establish by irrefragable proofs the fact that in some individuals of the human race this response has been clear and definite, and that they have *seen* where others are still groping; that these are the men who have changed the course of history and re-shaped the lives of men — Manu, Pythagoras, the Buddha, the Christ, Muhammad, to name but a few; and it may perceive that the power of these men rests on the presence in the mass of mankind of a faculty which answers vaguely where they answer clearly — a faculty embryonic in the mass, developed in themselves, but guaranteeing to that mass the truth of their sayings; were it not for this, their declarations would be regarded as ravings, not as inspirations. It may study the records of the mystics and geniuses of all ages, and weigh the definite evidence for the existence of a state of consciousness beyond the normal, in which the method of working of the intelligence in search for truth is by direct cognition instead of ratiocination.

It is by recognition of the reality and value of the mystic state of consciousness that the Protestant spirit will cease to be the herald of materialism, and it is to the absence of mysticism in the Protestant communities that is due their declension in spirituality. Of all forms of Religion, Protestantism is the [Page 8] one that most needs the *Inner Light*, and it is the one from which that Light has been most markedly absent. And yet not wholly absent. Leaving Jacob Boëhme, that prince of mystics, aside, the Light shines out clearly in Fox, amid all his extravagances, and the Society of Friends was a voice uplifted in the desert, testifying to a firm belief in the illumination and guidance of the Spirit. Nor can we ignore, although they be marred by fanaticism and crude emotion, the phenomena of *conversion*, accompanied, wherever it has been real, with a sense of the divine Presence, of the rending of the veil which hides the spiritual Universe, and of the flooding of the soul with God. These are true mystic experiences, and are far more valuable *evidences* of the truth of Religion — whatever errors it may contain — than the laboured arguments of a Paley. The pity has been that the lack of self-restraint and of delicacy in these outbursts has revolted the colder judgments of the educated and rational, and they have looked on them with contempt as the ravings of the ignorant and sentimental. They have failed to remember that the human soul, in the marvel of a sudden realisation of the inner world, has no time to think of external trivialities, and if the outburst occurs in a body in which self-restraint is not congenital, it will be likely to jar on refined susceptibilities. Manners are sometimes forgotten by educated people on the deck of a foundering ship, or in the stalls of a theatre on fire; and what are such things in comparison with a sudden flash which reveals the worlds invisible and the profundities of the immortal soul ? If a similar flash could open those same depths to the cultured and the intellectual, then should we have, instead of loud *revivals*, a wave of true and elevated mysticism, and as it swept over the arid wastes of knowledge [Page 9] divorced from Religion, " the desert would rejoice and blossom like a rose ".

Only such a wave can restore to the Protestant communities the religion which is withering among them under the keen blasts of scholarly criticism and the ice of scientific disdain. The criticism and the science are alike the results of the Protestant spirit, and they have come to stay and to exert an ever-increasing influence over the minds of educated men. Protestantism, in its worthier aspect, is the critical and scientific attitude of the reason, approaching all problems submitted to it for solution; as such it must endure. Protestantism, in its narrower meaning, is a mere passing revolt against a particular form of religion, and as such has no future. A religion cannot be made out of protests against another man's creed; we live by "Yeas", not by "Nays". If Protestantism is to live as a religion, it must emerge from the regions of negation into those of affirmation, and this it can only do if the spirit of mysticism revives within it, and leads it forth into a sweeter and a richer air. It must base its affirmations on facts recognised in the mystic state of consciousness; it must boldly cast aside its books, its legends and its creeds ; it must trust to the living spirit and no longer to the dead letter; it must proclaim, on the sure basis of human experience, the living Christ within as the redeeming Saviour, and the living Master Jesus without, as the Head and Shepherd of His Church.