

## A World Religion by Annie Besant

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[Page 1] AMONG the many names with which the love and reverence of man have appealed to the Supreme Being, there is none perhaps more full of significance, none whose implications are more important, than the well-known Masonic title, *The Great Architect of the Universe*. An architect is not a builder; an architect is one who plans, and who hands over his plan to many others to carry out bit by bit, stone by stone; but, under all the diversities of the many builders, under all the movement and whirl of a great mass of workmen, all are moving to a single end, all are contributing to the carrying out of a single plan, to make an idea manifest in material matter to the world when the plan is carried out in form.

Now there are many ways of reading history. Sometimes in the school a mere mass of dates and names, utterly uninteresting, a matter of memory and not of thought, is given as history; but that is not history; that is only the dry bones, the [Page 2] skeleton, of history; and the one that has only read history in that way knows nothing of its reality and its teaching. Or again you might read history a little more wisely; not thinking only of the names of Kings and statesmen, but realizing the movements of peoples, understanding the great forces by which nations rise, rule and fall, and so play their part in the theater of the world; but even that is not history in its deepest sense. It is still the corpse. The muscles are there; the nerves are there; the skin, the features are there; but it is a dead body and not a living one. You only begin to understand the fascination, the enthralling interest of history, when you see the events on earth as the projections thrown down on to the earth of spiritual realities in higher and mightier worlds. When you begin to see in the events of history the working of a mighty plan; the shaping of a great purpose; the carrying out down here of the thoughts conceived in the spiritual world; then your body becomes alive, then the form takes on the attribute of the living man pulsing with life. History rises up before you, and you realize that the outer events are but the shadow of the realities, and that the realities that cast the shadows are the spiritual truths of the universe. And as that thought begins to show itself, history becomes illuminated, and the outlines of the plan shine through the tangle of events. Even looking back say a century and a quarter, how different was the world then; how separated in its parts; how ignorant the nations of each other; how [Page 3] profound the darkness which veiled the East from the West and the West from the East ! From time to time before that, as in the reign of Elizabeth, a stray traveler may have gone over to the eastern lands and brought back some message of the wonders there, of delicate art, of exquisite craftsmanship, of treasures which dazzled the imagination of the West; but those travelers, few and far between, knew nothing of the thoughts of the people, though they admired their handiwork; knew nothing of the religions that they followed; nothing of the philosophy that they studied; nothing of the Scriptures on which their lives were built. It was scarcely more than one hundred and twenty years ago when first a touch of eastern science was brought over to western lands, when the great Maire of Paris, Bailly, who perished later in the Reign of Terror first drew the attention of Europe to the marvelous astronomy of the East. Then there came over some of the stories of the popular faith, copyings of some of the pictures, the sculptures, used in the temples of that ancient faith. There you have the beginning the foundation, of the science called Comparative Mythology, which in the last century has received such an enormous impulse by the researches of the archaeologist and the antiquarian.

You find in some of the earlier books of the nineteenth century the beginnings of that Free Thought movement, which gradually blended with scientific materialism, and made a dangerous foe, menacing the very life of Religion. Some of the books which still are [Page 4] classics came from France, especially towards the close of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Then, a little later, Englishmen joined in the study. But still the best of the East did not come over here: only some of the religious stories and many of the external superstitions came. It was only comparatively lately, in the days of Max Müller, when that splendid series of the Sacred Books of the East was published, that gradually the European mind awakened to the world-treasures of philosophy and wisdom that lay buried in the literature of the East. The German philosophers had touched upon it. Emerson, the famous American essayist, possessed the one copy that existed in America in his day of that now well-known Hindû Scripture, *The Song Celestial*.

Since that time how great the change! Every educated man knows something of the sacred literature of the Hindû, of the Buddhist, of the Chinese, has tried to read, and endeavored to grasp and understand; and now we find in the Universities they are beginning to have chairs of Oriental Literature, so that eastern knowledge and western knowledge may supplement each other instead of being regarded as antagonistic to each other; and you can see, if you look through that century, the wonderful change that has come in two directions. First, the gradual bringing of India under the rule of Great Britain, and the familiarizing of Great Britain with the Indian thought of the past and of the present; on the other hand, the uprising of the [Page 5] far East, grappling in a death struggle with a western nation — the war between Russia and Japan, which left the great eastern Power triumphant. Can you catch under that no glimpse of a plan, no working of a determinate end, in guiding the East and West along the road beneficial to humanity at large? Is it not true that the eastern and western minds are drawing together, the one philosophically metaphysical, the other fond of every science that deals with matter? How that eastern mind, subtle and spiritual, is gradually becoming wedded to the western mind, scientific and practical, seeking to turn discoveries and knowledge to the practical prosperity of man. How the eastern ideals are again taking their place, tempered with the practicality of the West. How the eastern lack of public spirit is gradually being made good by the altruism and the public spirit and the patriotism of the West. How Britain is working in India; how India is re-acting on Britain; until you can see gradually forming, amid the dust and the turmoil of the present, the outlines of a mighty World-Empire, with East and West together; mighty World-Powers linking, and marching side by side, until India shall no longer be a constant menace, a danger in the moment of Britain's weakness, but shall be a buttress and a strength; the oldest and the youngest branches of the Âryan family joining hands in one mighty Empire, which, by the peace it will make, will offer a fit field for the spread, for the teaching, of a World-Religion. [Page 6]

All religions now have passed, for all really educated and thoughtful persons, out of the stage in which they tried to convert each other into the stage when they try to understand and learn from each other. All religions are different with a purpose. If great truths are to express themselves fully, it cannot be through a single faith, nor by a single intellectual presentment; and if you will look for a moment at the religions of the world as a whole, you will find that every religion strikes a different note, and not one of these notes is to be spared in the making of the mighty chord which shall arise from humanity to God. For religion is the search for God, and every religion gives us a letter of His Name; and only when the rivalries are over and each religion is speaking out its letter, will the mighty Name shine out complete, through the contribution that every faith has made. The most cursory glimpse of the world's faiths, living and dead, will convince you of the truth of what I say. For every one of them gives out a different note. Every one of them contributes something special to the making of the World-Religion of the future. Not in monotone but in

chords and harmony comes out the great revelation of God to man. One religion would be a monotone. The world's religions make a full harmonious chord. And think how different is the dominant idea that goes out from every faith. Think of Hindûism, the oldest of the world's religions. One of your own Scotch divines, who lived for a very long time in India as a [Page 7] missionary, and founded the great Christian College at Madras, Dr. Miller, has said what, in his opinion, is the contribution of Hindûism to the religious thought of the world. He summed it up as the proclamation of the Immanence of God and the Solidarity of Man. In those two phrases you have but one truth, for if God be immanent in all, then the lives animated by a single life must form one vast solidarity. The one life in all means the brotherhood of the many. Only when we realise that God is seen in everything, do we feel that all that lives belongs to that single life.

Then from Pãrsiism comes out the note of Purity, purity of thought, of word, of deed. That is the formula that every Pãrsî repeats day by day as he ties his sacred thread. And Buddhism gives right knowledge, right understanding, right thinking. That is the great message of Buddhism to the world. Greece speaks of Beauty, and Rome speaks of Law, and the message of Egypt is Science. Christianity gives the message of Self-sacrifice; Judaism that of Righteousness; and so on, one after another. You see that every religion has its special idea that it gives to the religion of the future, and of all those pearls of truth not one must be lacking when religion's great necklace of jewels is placed round the neck of humanity.

So, looking thus at the religions as each contributing its own thought above all others; realising that the political and social condition of the world is gradually making an area where the World-Religion can grow up, let us next ask what would be the [Page 8] conditions of such a religion, and what its special gifts to the world ?

First of all, I do not believe that the religions of the time will disappear as religions. I believe that they will be related to the World-Religion, as, say, the various Churches of Christendom are related to Christianity. It is just as you find many a Church, many a sect, just as you find many varieties of thought and teaching; but they all look up to the Christ as the supreme Teacher, and accept His gospel as the foundation of their message. So in the World-Religion, the great religions will still exist, each one appealing to a special type and a special temperament of mankind, existing as sects of a single Faith, existing as branches of a single tree, realizing their fundamental unity, but preserving their valuable diversity; for by construction and not by destruction will come the fulfilling of the great religious law. For surely diversity is the very condition of a universe and of all its beauty. One expression of truth could never exhaust the contents of a spiritual truth. The intellect divides, separates, classifies; it can never give the full rounded All of the sum which is Truth. A part of it, a fragment of it, an aspect of it — yes — that the intellectual presentment can give; but we need to have them all, in order that the many-faced truth may shine out for the helping and teaching of man.

So I look for a great World-Religion where each religion will have its place, where each great faith will present its own aspect of the truth; but where we all [Page 9] shall learn from every faith the special view it has to teach, and so widen our minds, enlarge our hearts, and deepen our reverence for the greatness of the truth.

Looking for a moment at that conception, how shall we find that which unites ? How shall we discover the method by which the intellectual presentment shall find a common origin in the spiritual truth ? I will take

two illustrations to show you exactly what I mean, and they are closely connected with each other. I spoke of the different ways of reading history. Let me take for a moment one great drama played on the stage of the world, familiar to you all — the life of the Christ. Now there are two ways in which you may regard it. One tends to divide, the other tends to unite. You may take it purely and entirely as the history of one Man, however divine. A life led in the face of the world, great, inspiring, noble, but only a single life, however divine, with a single life's contents. Round that idea there has been much of controversy, much of struggle, much of antagonism. Questions of scholarship arise, the age of documents, the various readings, how long this manuscript has existed, what particular date can be given to that manuscript, come down or discovered perhaps in some church ruin, some ancient monastery. There is all the turmoil of intellectual strife, all the arguing of scholars and controversialists, everything which makes for controversy and nothing which makes for inspiration. Now it *is* a story of a single life. Most [Page 10] people agree now that the idea put forward by Strauss that the Christ-story is a myth is entirely out of court. That was one of the lines of attack very popular in the last century, but I doubt if any scholar today thinks for one moment that the Christ did not really exist on the stage of history, and teach and preach in Palestine. It is the history then of a life which had the most enormous effect upon mankind. But is that all it is? Or is there something deeper and greater which shall unite where scholarship and criticism divide? Never yet did a great spirit live on earth and live a life which was His alone, with no bearing upon His brethren, with no touching of the mankind to which He came. There is a deeper meaning in the history of the Christ, in which that life shines out in parable and drama, as it were. It is the story of the experience of every human Spirit, as he unfolds from seed into flower and fruit. It was declared by a great Teacher that Christ is the “first-born among many brethren”; it is declared that all men are partakers of the divine Nature; and surely that history loses nothing of its charm, if below the history of one man, however divine, you see your own history as you shall lead it, as you gradually rise from the carnal to the spiritual, and begin to realise the possibilities that lie latent in the Spirit that is man. Then the whole unfolding of that story becomes the expression of a great mystical truth. The birth of the Christ in Bethlehem stands for the birth of the Christ in every one who is rising into realised [Page 11] divinity, in every one of those in whom S. Paul's phrase is being realised: “My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you”. Then you begin to see in that birth the birth of the Christ. In every human Spirit you begin to see the growth in favour with God and man. You see the Spirit in the moment of baptism, when the life flows down upon him from above. You see him in the glory of transfiguration, when the human Spirit begins to realise his own divinity. You see him in the agony of the passion, when the soul approaching Deity finds out its human weakness, and agonises in the last ordeals of the Saint. You see him risen and ascended in the man who has attained the full stature of the Christ. And so you realise, however historical the story, it has a deeper spiritual meaning which underlies the whole, that Christ was living the story of all mankind, as well as a single life in Palestine two thousand years ago. Now it is that mystical story that unites: it is true for all men of every faith, true for all in their upward climb, true for all in their realisation of divinity within themselves; and then it becomes an inspiration, the most potent that man can have for realising the unity.

He also realises through that the possibility of a personal achievement; and then for the first time the words of Christ become literally possible of fulfilment: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect”. For a man that is only man, that command must remain for ever unfulfilled; but [Page 12] for a man in whom the seed of God is sown, there is no perfection impossible for him as he passes from strength to strength.

That is the mystical interpretation, and the religion of the future must be based on Mysticism. See how that is carried out in one of the dogmas of the Churches in regard to the Atonement. See how it shows

how much of truth there is in it, and, how much of human error has veiled the spiritual truth. For in the ideal of Christ as an external Saviour, however exquisitely beautiful and lovable from the standpoint of those He helps, there is always some feeling of unrest, of disturbance, inasmuch as some one outside is the Helper, and gives us that which we do not realise for ourselves. But in the mystical view of the Atonement with the birth of Christ in the human Spirit, it is a Christ within instead of a Christ without. It is the unfolding of a life, instead of the imputation of the righteousness of another. There is nothing of legality, nor contract, nor materialism, but the opening up of a life that transforms, and makes atonement because it transforms man into God.

You may say: Are you against religious dogma? No. Dogma has its place in all teaching of truth. Science has it, just as much as religion. It is quite dogmatic to say that if you put hydrogen and oxygen together at a certain temperature they will combine. A statement of truth imposed by authority from outside, that is what dogma is, and any such statement of truth is necessary for learning and for teaching. That is what critics of religious dogmas [Page 13] very often forget. But a dogma, not to be mischievous, must be based on experience and verifiable by experience, and that is sometimes the weak point of religious dogma; but it ought not to be so. All the great religious dogmas are based on experience, though not on the experience of modern people; but that is the fault of modern people and not the fault of the dogma. Every great spiritual truth thrown into dogmatic form and imposed on the awed man by Church, or Pope, or Book, has its origin in human experience in relation to divinity. For the religious consciousness is universal and the great dogmas of the faiths of the world are built on that testimony of the religious consciousness of mankind.

You say: How do you know it? Because you find them in every faith. You find them in every age. Every nation possesses the same truths although in different words, the same great fundamental truths on which every religion is based. They are common truths, and they have been known by the experience of man in touch with the invisible worlds.

Now there is no reason in the world why you should not again be able to verify these truths for yourselves, as in a moment I will show you; but what I want to put to you now is that the difference between the man who accepts the dogma and the Mystic is this: the authority of the receiver of the dogma is outside him, and he has no knowledge which verifies the dogma; but the Mystic knows the truth by sight. The Spirit has faculties as well as the body. There is a science of the [Page 14] Spirit as much as physical science. The Spirit can gain knowledge experimentally as well as the body, and when a man has reached a certain stage of evolution he needs no other authority to teach him religious truth, for within the depths of his own Spirit there wells up the truth which the other sees from the outside, and an inner authority and not an outer authority reveals the truth that the Mystic knows. He does not believe in God because the Church says: God is. He believes in God because he has found God within himself, and the Spirit knows that is where God is, and naught can ever shake that knowledge. The dogma standing on authority may be undermined by other authority. The dogma based not on demonstration but on a Church or a Book may be shaken to pieces when other books are read and other religions are looked into; but your own knowledge, your own experience, your own realisation of the Deity within you which makes you able to recognise the Deity without you, that nothing can shake; for it is your very own, and you know it, you hold it, and if all the world were to rise against you, it would not be shaken. That is the position of the Mystic. He knows Christ within him. There is the Spirit that is knowledge; and he recognises that which agrees with the key note of his own Spirit.

For there is but one Spirit in many bodies, one Life in many forms, one God in many temples; and so there comes to be but one word and one knowledge, and that belongs equally to all who will to know [Page 15] and not only to believe, to unfold within themselves the faculty of knowledge which lies within the Spirit of every son of man.

Now Mysticism unites, for all the Mystics of the world agree on the fundamentals of the spiritual consciousness. Dogmatists quarrel; Mystics reinforce each other; and on the development of the Spirit in man the religion of the future must depend. Those grow into knowledge; they will be the pillars of the religion of the future: and dogma will have its proper place in the teaching of the younger and inexperienced, until they have grown into religious manhood. So the mischief of dogma will disappear. It will take its rightful place as part of the education, the religious education, of the man. The dogmas will be taught in many forms in the different faiths, and the one mystical truth they embody will be taught in *the* religion, the World-Religion, as expressed in different ways in the Churches.

But another thing that religion must give us is a science of religion. If religion be true, each of you has those faculties I spoke of, which are to the Spirit what the senses are to the body, and the reasoning mind to the intelligence. It is part of the duty of religion to teach us how to unfold those faculties in ourselves in order that we may know, and religions do teach it and have taught it, only it has slipped so much out of sight today. Useful as was much that was done in the Reformation, priceless as is the importance of the assertion of Liberty of Thought and Liberty of Judgment, one [Page 16] great harm was done to Christianity by that movement. It robbed the protesting communities of much of that occult knowledge which had come down from the days of the Apostles and the Disciples in the unbroken succession of the Church of Rome. The teachings of the Roman Church today contain far more occult science than is found in the bishops and the clergy of the communities that take the name of Protestants. It has methods of teaching, methods of training, ways of meditating, which in every great faith are the only ways of awakening those faculties which enable you to know and not only to believe. The faith which leads to man's perfection is laid down in some great Roman Catholic manuals, and it is identical in its stages, its beginnings and its endings with that same faith as taught in Buddhist treatises, as laid down in the Hindû science of Yoga. You might take what you like there, and you will find the teaching the same, the discipline the same, the methods of progress the same, only the words are different. Rome speaks of purification as the first step of that faith. The Hindû and the Buddhist call it the probationary path, on which certain qualifications are to be gained and the qualifications are given one by one exactly, as what is wanted to control and to discipline the moods of the mind and to make a man calm and pure and strong. Then you come to the next step which Rome calls the path of Illumination. The Hindû and the Buddhist call it the path of Initiation, and mark out the various stages on the path, all the great Initiations through which [Page 17] the disciples pass. The ending for both the Roman calls Union, the Hindû and the Buddhist call Liberation, but in both cases it means the realisation of Divinity, the union of the human Spirit with the divine. A few months ago I was reading with some care a Roman Catholic treatise that any one of you might read with the greatest profit, if you care at all about the scientific side of Mysticism. It is written by a Jesuit father, and in the translation is called *The Graces of Interior Prayer*. It has received the approval of the Pope and of some of the high officials of the Roman Catholic Church. Now in that book, at the end of it, in dealing with Union, the writer speaks of the deification of man, man become divine, the union between God and man, so close, so utter, that man is deified. Now I confess I was surprised to find a phrase so strong outside the Theosophical, Hindû and Buddhist treatises. I did not know that Rome would go so far in explaining what the end of the path connoted, and then I remembered that I ought to have known it, for one of the great teachers of the Church, S. Ambrose, gave the noble sentence: "Become what you are". Does it sound a paradox? It contains a great and profound meaning. Become

the manifested God that you are already in seed and in germ; for, if you think for a moment, you cannot become that which you are not. Only that which exists in you in possibility can ever be manifested by you in actuality. You must have it within before it can show itself without, and in that great [Page 18] sentence of S. Ambrose the idea of the universal religion is declared. The human Spirit is divine, the offspring of God. Become then in outer manifestation that which you are in inner reality; and the World-Religion of the future will bring out the way again in sight of the people, will show them how to walk; it will lead them into a knowledge of their own Divinity; mystical in its teaching, so that the teaching can be translated by all the religions into the varied dogmas; scientific with the knowledge of the Spirit, so that men may learn to develop the spiritual faculties and then use them for the perfecting of their own nature; with no antagonists, for it will be universal; with no quarrels within it, for it will be all-inclusive. That mighty World-Religion is to be proclaimed by the supreme Teacher, the Teacher of Angels and of Men; that, in very truth, is on the threshold: its foot is at the door. Look around you, and you will see the signs of the change. Look abroad over the world, and you will recognise that mighty synthesis is coming, into which, all the world-faiths shall be built and know themselves as one. When religious hatreds have passed, when religious controversies have disappeared, when men have learned the supreme truth so often preached, so little practiced: "Let him that loveth God love his brother also"; when out of the World-Religion has grown the World-Peace; when out of the World-Faith has grown the World-Service; then religion shall be what it ought to be, the helper of the downtrodden, [Page 19] the protector of the weak, the teacher of the ignorant, the raiser of the fallen; then religion will not only tie man to God but man to man, and it will be realized that knowledge of God is best expressed in Service to Man.