

A FAITHLESS WORLD

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649302666

A faithless world by Frances Power Cobbe

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Cover @ 2017

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"THE CONTEMPORARY REVIEW;"

WITH ADDITIONS AND A PREFACE.

BY

Frances Power Cobbe.

WILLIAMS AND NORGATE,
14, HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN, LONDON;
AND 20, SOUTH FREDERICK STREET, EDINBURGH.

1885.

923. e. 8



LONDON

PRINTED BY PEWTRESS & CO.,
Steam Printing Works,

28, LITTLE QUEEN STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS.

P R E F A C E.



THE following Essay, written originally for the *Contemporary Review*, pretends to be no more than an incomplete outline of a large subject. Whole provinces of the map of a fully drawn *Faithless World* have been left out. I have said nothing of the effects which the disappearance of Religion could not fail to produce on the general averages of crime and vice; nor have I attempted to follow the consequences of omitting all religious teaching in the education of children. As regards the last subject, I imagine that evidences are not wanting, even now, of a diminished reverence for human parents, which is the natural sequel of cultivating the intellect while failing to train that moral sense of veneration which can never be fully developed except towards a Divine Being. Already the fatal note has been sounded that we have heard enough of the Duties of Children to Parents, and must learn chiefly to think of the Duties of Parents to Children;—these last, according to the same programme, seeming to consist in the reckless encouragement of the children's selfishness and

self-sufficiency, till a youth of satiety leads up to a manhood of pessimism. And, as concerns the increase of crime and vice generally, it seems to stand to reason that, with the disappearance of the ideas of an Invisible Witness and Judge of human actions, and of a future world wherein those actions must inevitably bear their fruit, there will be lost two of the heaviest counterweights which Virtue has hitherto been able to put into her scale against the temptations of evil. Morality is, indeed, separable both logically and practically from religion. Good or evil do not exist solely by the arbitrary will of God; nor is it only in (conscious) obedience to His will that man can choose the good and reject the evil. But that the belief in ONE Supremely Good—personified eternal infinite Goodness—is the greatest of all aids to that choice, can be scarcely a matter of debate; nor, consequently, that the extinction of the belief will alter to a measureable extent the proportions of the choosers on either side. Strong and high-minded men, especially those engrossed by intellectual pursuits, will no doubt persist (as many of them are persisting now) in virtuous courses in a *Faithless World*. But for ordinary human beings the case must needs be otherwise; and in the chief

departments of practical morality,—namely, the relations of the sexes and the rights of property,—there are, if I mistake not, sufficiently threatening signs already visible that when Religion falls—if ever it should fall—there will crash down after it nearly the whole fabric of society. It is not, as atheists would have us think, merely some rickety and half-ruinous old tenement which they threaten to bring down, while they point complacently to a bran new Model Lodging House for Humanity, which they have built up alongside, and propose soon to open for a *Faithless World*. It is the Westminster Abbey of the human race which their dynamite would shatter into irretrievable ruin.

Amid the difficulties which beset every phase of theological opinion our sympathy is due to those who have struggled sincerely, even if in vain, to retain religious faith, and who, having lost it, endeavour to construct systems, Positivist, Secularist, or Agnostic, which may form a Law of Life in its stead. There is much deserving of respect in their efforts,—hopeless as we may deem them to be,—and more that is pitifully affecting in the attempt of the same persons to offer consolation in the prospect

of "posthumous activities," when the hope of a real immortality has been abandoned. But the truest proof of friendship to men who are embarking in a "coffin ship" is to tell them that wreck is inevitable; and when we see them putting off from shore with flags and music, to bid them observe in how many places their timbers are rotten. The tone of exultation adopted just now by Agnostics and Comtists, as if they were prophets announcing a Kingdom of Man which shall outshine the Kingdom of God, and the still loftier note of superiority sounded by some who "sit as gods holding no form of creed, but contemplating all," and finding all equally childish and unimportant, cannot be heard sounding through the land without a protest. In the hope of recalling to a few how unspeakably tremendous would be that catastrophe of the extinction of religion of which they have begun to speak as if of a not remote contingency, I have written this brief and (I am conscious), very imperfect enquiry into the inevitable conditions of a "FAITHLESS WORLD."

March, 1885.

A FAITHLESS WORLD.

A LITTLE somnolence seems to have overtaken religious controversy of late. We are either weary of it or have grown so tolerant of our differences that we find it scarcely worth while to discuss them. By dint of rubbing against each other in the pages of the Reviews, in the clubs, and at dinner parties, the sharp angles of our opinions have been smoothed down. Ideas remain in a fluid state in this mild season of sentiment, and do not, as in old days, crystallize into sects. We have become almost as conciliatory respecting our views as the Chinese whom Huc describes as carrying courtesy so far as to praise the religion of their neighbours and depreciate their own. "You, honoured sir," they were wont to say, "are of the noble and lofty religion of Confucius. I am of the poor and insignificant religion of Lao-tze." Only now and then some fierce controversialist, hailing usually from India or the colonies where London amenities seem not