

"The Religion of the Day"  
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St. John Henry Newman  
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"Let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire." Heb. xii. 28, 29.

1 IN every age of Christianity, since it was first preached, there has been what may be  
2 called a religion of the world, which so far imitates the one true religion, as to deceive  
3 the unstable and unwary. The world does not oppose religion as such. I may say, it  
4 never has opposed it. In particular, it has, in all ages, acknowledged in one sense or  
5 other the Gospel of Christ, fastened on one or other of its characteristics, and professed  
6 to embody this in its practice; while by neglecting the other parts of the holy doctrine, it  
7 has, in fact, distorted and corrupted even that portion of it which it has exclusively put  
8 forward, and so has contrived to explain away the whole;—for he who cultivates only  
9 one precept of the Gospel to the exclusion of the rest, in reality attends to no part at all.  
10 Our duties balance each other; and though we are too sinful to perform them all  
11 perfectly, yet we may in some measure be performing them all, and preserving the  
12 balance on the whole; whereas, to give ourselves only to this or that commandment, is  
13 to incline our minds in a wrong direction, and at length to pull them down to the earth,  
14 which is the aim of our adversary, the Devil.

15 It is his aim to break our strength; to force us down to the earth,—to bind us there. The  
16 world is his instrument for this purpose; but he is too wise to set it in open opposition to  
17 the Word of God. No! he affects to be a prophet like the prophets of God. He calls his  
18 servants also prophets; and they mix with the scattered remnant of the true Church, with  
19 the solitary Micaiahs who are left upon the earth, and speak in the name of the Lord.  
20 And in one sense they speak the truth; but it is not the whole truth; and we know, even  
21 from the common experience of life, that half the truth is often the most gross and  
22 mischievous of falsehoods.

23 Even in the first age of the Church, while persecution still raged, he set up a counter  
24 religion among the philosophers of the day, partly like Christianity, but in truth a bitter  
25 foe to it; and it deceived and made shipwreck of the faith of those who had not the love  
26 of God in their hearts.

27 Time went on, and he devised a second idol of the true Christ, and it remained in the  
28 temple of God for many a year. The age was rude and fierce. Satan took the darker side  
29 of the Gospel: its awful mysteriousness, its fearful glory, its sovereign inflexible justice;  
30 and here his picture of the truth ended, "God is a consuming fire;" so declares the text,  
31 and we know it. But we know more, viz. that God is love also; but Satan did not add this  
32 to his religion, which became one of fear. The religion of the world was then a fearful  
33 religion. Superstitions abounded, and cruelties. The noble firmness, the graceful  
34 austerity of the true Christian were superseded by forbidding spectres, harsh of eye,  
35 and haughty of brow; and these were the patterns or the tyrants of a beguiled people.

36 What is Satan's device in this day? a far different one; but perhaps a more pernicious. I  
37 will attempt to expose it, or rather to suggest some remarks towards its exposure, by  
38 those who think it worth while to attempt it; for the subject is too great and too difficult  
39 for an occasion such as the present, and, after all, no one can detect falsehood for  
40 another;—every man must do it for himself; we can but help each other.

41 What is the world's religion now? It has taken the brighter side of the Gospel,—its  
42 tidings of comfort, its precepts of love; all darker, deeper views of man's condition and  
43 prospects being comparatively forgotten. This is the religion natural to a civilized age,  
44 and well has Satan dressed and completed it into an idol of the Truth. As the reason is  
45 cultivated, the taste formed, the affections and sentiments refined, a general decency  
46 and grace will of course spread over the face of society, quite independently of the  
47 influence of Revelation. That beauty and delicacy of thought, which is so attractive in  
48 books, then extends to the conduct of life, to all we have, all we do, all we are. Our  
49 manners are courteous; we avoid giving pain or offence; our words become correct; our  
50 relative duties are carefully performed. Our sense of propriety shows itself even in our  
51 domestic arrangements, in the embellishments of our houses, in our amusements, and  
52 so also in our religious profession. Vice now becomes unseemly and hideous to the  
53 imagination, or, as it is sometimes familiarly said, "out of taste." Thus elegance is  
54 gradually made the test and standard of virtue, which is no longer thought to possess an  
55 intrinsic claim on our hearts, or to exist, further than it leads to the quiet and comfort of  
56 others. Conscience is no longer recognized as an independent arbiter of actions, its  
57 authority is explained away; partly it is superseded in the minds of men by the so-called  
58 moral sense, which is regarded merely as the love of the beautiful; partly by the rule of  
59 expediency, which is forthwith substituted for it in the details of conduct. Now  
60 conscience is a stern, gloomy principle; it tells us of guilt and of prospective punishment.  
61 Accordingly, when its terrors disappear, then disappear also, in the creed of the day,  
62 those fearful images of Divine wrath with which the Scriptures abound. They are  
63 explained away. Every thing is bright and cheerful. Religion is pleasant and easy;  
64 benevolence is the chief virtue; intolerance, bigotry, excess of zeal, are the first of sins.  
65 Austerity is an absurdity;—even firmness is looked on with an unfriendly, suspicious  
66 eye. On the other hand, all open profligacy is discountenanced; drunkenness is  
67 accounted a disgrace; cursing and swearing are vulgarities. Moreover, to a cultivated  
68 mind, which recreates itself in the varieties of literature and knowledge, and is interested  
69 in the ever-accumulating discoveries of science, and the ever-fresh accessions of  
70 information, political or otherwise, from foreign countries, religion will commonly seem to  
71 be dull, from want of novelty. Hence excitements are eagerly sought out and rewarded.  
72 New objects in religion, new systems and plans, new doctrines, new preachers, are  
73 necessary to satisfy that craving which the so-called spread of knowledge has created.  
74 The mind becomes morbidly sensitive and fastidious; dissatisfied with things as they  
75 are, desirous of a change as such, as if alteration must of itself be a relief.

76 Now I would have you put Christianity for an instant out of your thoughts; and consider  
77 whether such a state of refinement as I have attempted to describe, is not that to which  
78 men might be brought, quite independent of religion, by the mere influence of education  
79 and civilization; and then again, whether, nevertheless, this mere refinement of mind is

80 not more or less all that is called religion at this day. In other words, is it not the case,  
81 that Satan has so composed and dressed out what is the mere natural produce of the  
82 human heart under certain circumstances, as to serve his purposes as the counterfeit of  
83 the Truth? I do not at all deny that this spirit of the world uses words, and makes  
84 professions, which it would not adopt except for the suggestions of Scripture; nor do I  
85 deny that it takes a general colouring from Christianity, so as really to be modified by it,  
86 nay, in a measure enlightened and exalted by it. Again, I fully grant that many persons  
87 in whom this bad spirit shows itself, are but partially infected by it, and at bottom, good  
88 Christians, though imperfect. Still, after all, here is an existing teaching, only partially  
89 evangelical, built upon worldly principle, yet pretending to be the Gospel, dropping one  
90 whole side of the Gospel, its austere character, and considering it enough to be  
91 benevolent, courteous, candid, correct in conduct, delicate,—though it includes no true  
92 fear of God, no fervent zeal for His honour, no deep hatred of sin, no horror at the sight  
93 of sinners, no indignation and compassion at the blasphemies of heretics, no jealous  
94 adherence to doctrinal truth, no especial sensitiveness about the particular means of  
95 gaining ends, provided the ends be good, no loyalty to the Holy Apostolic Church, of  
96 which the Creed speaks, no sense of the authority of religion as external to the mind: in  
97 a word, no seriousness,—and therefore is neither hot nor cold, but (in Scripture  
98 language) lukewarm. Thus the present age is the very contrary to what are commonly  
99 called the dark ages; and together with the faults of those ages we have lost their  
100 virtues. I say their virtues; for even the errors then prevalent, a persecuting spirit, for  
101 instance, fear of religious inquiry, bigotry, these were, after all, but perversions and  
102 excesses of real virtues, such as zeal and reverence; and we, instead of limiting and  
103 purifying them, have taken them away root and branch. Why? because we have not  
104 acted from a love of the Truth, but from the influence of the Age. The old generation has  
105 passed, and its character with it; a new order of things has arisen. Human society has a  
106 new framework, and fosters and develops a new character of mind; and this new  
107 character is made by the enemy of our souls, to resemble the Christian's obedience as  
108 near as it may, its likeness all the time being but accidental. Meanwhile, the Holy  
109 Church of God, as from the beginning, continues her course heavenward; despised by  
110 the world, yet influencing it, partly correcting it, partly restraining it, and in some happy  
111 cases reclaiming its victims, and fixing them firmly and for ever within the lines of the  
112 faithful host militant here on earth, which journeys towards the City of the Great King.  
113 God give us grace to search our hearts, lest we be blinded by the deceitfulness of sin!  
114 lest we serve Satan transformed into an Angel of light, while we think we are pursuing  
115 true knowledge; lest, over-looking and ill-treating the elect of Christ here, we have to  
116 ask that awful question at the last day, while the truth is bursting upon us, "Lord, when  
117 saw we Thee a stranger and a prisoner?" when saw we Thy sacred Word and Servants  
118 despised and oppressed, "and did not minister unto Thee?" [Matt. xxv. 44.]

119 Nothing shows more strikingly the power of the world's religion, as now described, than  
120 to consider the very different classes of men whom it influences. It will be found to  
121 extend its sway and its teaching both over the professedly religious and the irreligious.

122 1. Many religious men, rightly or not, have long been expecting a millennium of purity  
123 and peace for the Church. I will not say, whether or not with reason, for good men may

well differ on such a subject. But, any how, in the case of those who have expected it, it has become a temptation to take up and recognize the world's religion as I have already delineated it. They have more or less identified their vision of Christ's kingdom with the elegance and refinement of mere human civilization; and have hailed every evidence of improved decency, every wholesome civil regulation, every beneficent and enlightened act of state policy, as signs of their coming Lord. Bent upon achieving their object, an extensive and glorious diffusion and profession of the Gospel, they have been little solicitous about the means employed. They have countenanced and acted with men who openly professed unchristian principles. They have accepted and defended what they considered to be reformations and ameliorations of the existing state of things, though injustice must be perpetrated in order to effect them, or long cherished rules of conduct, indifferent perhaps in their origin but consecrated by long usage, must be violated. They have sacrificed Truth to expedience. They have strangely imagined that bad men are to be the immediate instruments of the approaching advent of Christ; and (like the deluded Jews not many years since in a foreign country) they have taken, if not for their Messiah (as the Jews did), at least for their Elijah, their reforming Baptist, the Herald of the Christ, children of this world, and sons of Belial, on whom the anathema of the Apostle lies from the beginning, declaring, "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maran-atha." [1 Cor. xvi. 22.]

2. On the other hand, the form of doctrine, which I have called the religion of the day, is especially adapted to please men of sceptical minds, the opposite extreme to those just mentioned, who have never been careful to obey their conscience, who cultivate the intellect without disciplining the heart, and who allow themselves to speculate freely about what religion ought to be, without going to Scripture to discover what it really is. Some persons of this character almost consider religion itself to be an obstacle in the advance of our social and political well-being. But they know human nature requires it; therefore they select the most rational form of religion (so they call it) which they can find. Others are far more seriously disposed, but are corrupted by bad example or other cause. But they all discard (what they call) gloomy views of religion; they all trust themselves more than God's word, and thus may be classed together; and are ready to embrace the pleasant consoling religion natural to a polished age. They lay much stress on works on Natural Theology, and think that all religion is contained in these; whereas, in truth, there is no greater fallacy than to suppose such works to be in themselves in any true sense religious at all. Religion, it has been well observed, is something relative to us; a system of commands and promises from God towards us. But how are we concerned with the sun, moon, and stars? or with the laws of the universe? how will they teach us our duty? how will they speak to sinners? They do not speak to sinners at all. They were created before Adam fell. They "declare the glory of God," but not His will. They are all perfect, all harmonious; but that brightness and excellence which they exhibit in their own creation, and the Divine benevolence therein seen, are of little moment to fallen man. We see nothing there of God's wrath, of which the conscience of a sinner {318} loudly speaks. So that there cannot be a more dangerous (though a common) device of Satan, than to carry us off from our own secret thoughts, to make us forget our own hearts, which tell us of a God of justice and holiness, and to fix our attention merely on the God who made the heavens; who is our God indeed, but not

169 God as manifested to us sinners, but as He shines forth to His Angels, and to His elect  
170 hereafter.

171 When a man has so far deceived himself as to trust his destiny to what the heavens tell  
172 him of it, instead of consulting and obeying his conscience, what is the consequence?  
173 that at once he misinterprets and perverts the whole tenor of Scripture. It cannot be  
174 denied that, pleasant as religious observances are declared in Scripture to be to the  
175 holy, yet to men in general they are said to be difficult and distasteful; to all men  
176 naturally impossible, and by few fulfilled even with the assistances of grace, on account  
177 of their wilful corruption. Religion is pronounced to be against nature, to be against our  
178 original will, to require God's aid to make us love and obey it, and to be commonly  
179 refused and opposed in spite of that aid. We are expressly told, that "strait is the gate  
180 and narrow the way that leads to life, and few there be that find it;" that we must "strive"  
181 or struggle "to enter in at the strait gate," for that "many shall seek to enter in," but that  
182 is not enough, they merely seek and therefore do not find; and further, that they who do  
183 not obtain everlasting life, "shall go into everlasting punishment" [Matt. vii. 14. Luke xiii.  
184 24. Matt. xxv. 46.] This is the dark side of religion; and the men I have been describing  
185 cannot bear to think of it. They shrink from it as too terrible. They easily get themselves  
186 to believe that those strong declarations of Scripture do not belong to the present day,  
187 or that they are figurative. They have no language within their heart responding to them.  
188 Conscience has been silenced. The only information they have received concerning  
189 God has been from Natural Theology, and that speaks only of benevolence and  
190 harmony; so they will not credit the plain word of Scripture. They seize on such parts of  
191 Scripture as seem to countenance their own opinions; they insist on its being  
192 commanded us to "rejoice evermore;" and they argue that it is our duty to solace  
193 ourselves here (in moderation, of course) with the goods of this life,—that we have only  
194 to be thankful while we use them,—that we need not alarm ourselves,—that God is a  
195 merciful God,—that amendment is quite sufficient to atone for our offences,—that  
196 though we have been irregular in our youth, yet that is a thing gone by,—that we forget  
197 it, and therefore God forgets it,—that the world is, on the whole, very well disposed  
198 towards religion, —that we should avoid enthusiasm,—that we should not be over  
199 serious,—that we should have large views on the subject of human nature,—and that  
200 we should love all men. This indeed is the creed of shallow men, in every age, who  
201 reason a little, and feel not at all, and who think themselves enlightened and  
202 philosophical. Part of what they say is false, part is true, but misapplied; but why I have  
203 noticed it here, is to show how exactly it fits in with what I have already described as the  
204 peculiar religion of a civilized age; it fits in with it equally well as does that of the (so  
205 called) religious world, which is the opposite extreme.

206 One further remark I will make about these professedly rational Christians; who, be it  
207 observed, often go on to deny the mysteries of the Gospel. Let us take the text:—"Our  
208 God is a consuming fire." Now supposing these persons fell upon these words, or heard  
209 them urged as an argument against their own doctrine of the unmixed satisfactory  
210 character of our prospects in the world to come, and supposing they did not know what  
211 part of the Bible they occurred in, what would they say? Doubtless they would  
212 confidently say that they applied only to the Jews and not to Christians; that they only

213 described the Divine Author of the Mosaic Law [Note]; that God formerly spoke in  
214 terrors to the Jews, because they were a gross and brutish people, but that civilization  
215 has made us quite other men; that our reason, not our fears, is appealed to, and that  
216 the Gospel is love. And yet, in spite of all this argument, the text occurs in the Epistle to  
217 the Hebrews, written by an Apostle of Christ. I shall conclude with stating more fully  
218 what I mean by the dark side of religion; and what judgment ought to be passed on the  
219 superstitious and gloomy.

220 Here I will not shrink from uttering my firm conviction, that it would be a gain to this  
221 country, were it vastly more superstitious, more bigoted, more gloomy, more fierce in its  
222 religion, than at present it shows itself to be. Not, of course, that I think the tempers of  
223 mind herein implied desirable, which would be an evident absurdity; but I think them  
224 infinitely more desirable and more promising than a heathen obduracy, and a cold, self-  
225 sufficient, self-wise tranquillity. Doubtless, peace of mind, a quiet conscience, and a  
226 cheerful countenance are the gift of the Gospel, and the sign of a Christian; but the  
227 same effects (or, rather, what appear to be the same) may arise from very different  
228 causes. Jonah slept in the storm,—so did our Blessed Lord. The one slept in an evil  
229 security: the Other in the "peace of God which passeth all understanding." The two  
230 states cannot be confounded together, they are perfectly distinct; and as distinct is the  
231 calm of the man of the world from that of the Christian. Now take the case of the sailors  
232 on board the vessel; they cried to Jonah, "What meanest thou, O sleeper?"—so the  
233 Apostles said to Christ; "Lord, we perish." This is the case of the superstitious; they  
234 stand between the false peace of Jonah and the true peace of Christ; they are better  
235 than the one, though far below the Other. Applying this to the present religion of the  
236 educated world, full as it is of security and cheerfulness, and decorum, and  
237 benevolence, I observe that these appearances may arise either from a great deal of  
238 religion, or from the absence of it; they may be the fruits of shallowness of mind and a  
239 blinded conscience, or of that faith which has peace with God through our Lord Jesus  
240 Christ. And if this alternative be proposed, I might leave it to the common sense of men  
241 to decide (if they could get themselves to think seriously) to which of the two the temper  
242 of the age is to be referred. For myself I cannot doubt, seeing what I see of the world,  
243 that it arises from the sleep of Jonah; and it is therefore but a dream of religion, far  
244 inferior in worth to the well-grounded alarm of the superstitious, who are awakened and  
245 see their danger, though they do not attain so far in faith as to embrace the remedy of it.

246 Think of this, I beseech you, my brethren, and lay it to heart, as far as you go with me,  
247 as you will answer for having heard it at the last day. I would not willingly be harsh; but  
248 knowing "that the world lieth in wickedness," I think it highly probable that you, so far as  
249 you are in it (as you must be, and we all must be in our degree), are, most of you,  
250 partially infected with its existing error, that shallowness of religion, which is the result of  
251 a blinded conscience; and, therefore, I speak earnestly to you. Believing in the  
252 existence of a general plague in the land, I judge that you probably have your share in  
253 the sufferings, the voluntary sufferings, which it is spreading among us. The fear of God  
254 is the beginning of wisdom; till you see Him to be a consuming fire, and approach Him  
255 with reverence and godly fear, as being sinners, you are not even in sight of the strait  
256 gate. I do not wish you to be able to point to any particular time when you renounced

257 the world (as it is called), and were converted; this is a deceit. Fear and love must go  
258 together; always fear, always love, to your dying day. Doubtless;—still you must know  
259 what it is to sow in tears here, if you would reap in joy hereafter. Till you know the  
260 weight of your sins, and that not in mere imagination, but in practice, not so as merely to  
261 confess it in a formal phrase of lamentation, but daily and in your heart in secret, you  
262 cannot embrace the offer of mercy held out to you in the Gospel, through the death of  
263 Christ. Till you know what it is to fear with the terrified sailors or the Apostles, you  
264 cannot sleep with Christ at your Heavenly Father's feet. Miserable as were the  
265 superstitions of the dark ages, revolting as are the tortures now in use among the  
266 heathen of the East, better, far better is it, to torture the body all one's days, and to  
267 make this life a hell upon earth, than to remain in a brief tranquillity here, till the pit at  
268 length opens under us, and awakens us to an eternal fruitless consciousness and  
269 remorse. Think of Christ's own words: "What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"  
270 Again, He says, "Fear Him, who after He hath killed, hath power to cast into hell; yea, I  
271 say unto you, fear Him." Dare not to think you have got to the bottom of your hearts; you  
272 do not know what evil lies there. How long and earnestly must you pray, how many  
273 years must you pass in careful obedience, before you have any right to lay aside  
274 sorrow, and to rejoice in the Lord? In one sense, indeed, you may take comfort from the  
275 first; for, though you dare not yet anticipate you are in the number of Christ's true elect,  
276 yet from the first you know He desires your salvation, has died for you, has washed  
277 away your sins by baptism, and will ever help you; and this thought must cheer you  
278 while you go on to examine and review your lives, and to turn to God in self-denial. But,  
279 at the same time, you never can be sure of salvation, while you are here; and therefore  
280 you must always fear while you hope. Your knowledge of your sins increases with your  
281 view of God's mercy in Christ. And this is the true Christian state, and the nearest  
282 approach to Christ's calm and placid sleep in the tempest;—not perfect joy and certainty  
283 in heaven, but a deep resignation to God's will, a surrender of ourselves, soul and body,  
284 to Him; hoping indeed, that we shall be saved, but fixing our eyes more earnestly on  
285 Him than on ourselves; that is, acting for His glory, seeking to please Him, devoting  
286 ourselves to Him in all manly obedience and strenuous good works; and, when we do  
287 look within, thinking of ourselves with a certain abhorrence and contempt as being  
288 sinners, mortifying our flesh, scourging our appetites, and composedly awaiting that  
289 time when, if we be worthy, we shall be stripped of our present selves, and new made in  
290 the kingdom of Christ.