

Browning. His Relation to the Spirit of his Age,
and the Diverse Thinkers, exemplified by Tennyson, Arthur
Hugh Clough and Matthew Arnold.

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INTRODUCTION

In thinking of the nineteenth century, which has been and still is the greatest and noblest age in the history of the British Empire, how many of us seriously keep in mind, that it is not the nineteenth century, but nineteen centuries, which we have to take into consideration, and even nineteen centuries is only a moderate assertion, for I would include the almost six thousand years, since the creation of our Universe. Adam and Eve are still alive to our mind, the garden of Eden, the snake, the apple and Eve's temptation still influence and play upon the imagination of many beings. Nay more, similar reminiscences of the past, even control the religious lives of thousands, - and on religion the formation of many characters depended and still largely depend.

History has shown us, that the broader, the deeper religious views are, the subtler and richer is our life, our conception of humanity and our understanding of the Infinite commonly termed God. Yet the value of broad-mindedness has had a rather slow development, intellectual progress was disliked by many, for it involved the reasoning, speculation and doubt, a thing greatly feared by those whose narrow religious and intellectual horizon controlled and dominated their whole superficial, self-sufficing and complacent outlook of life. These people strove, with might and main to close the door of inquiry, which humanity has for centuries been struggling to open, and the leader of humanity in its almost super-human task, is to be seen in the noblest and truest effort of Robert Browning.

Is it inevitable that every step conducive to the freedom of mind, profitable for human welfare and human development, must be gained through continual strife and even bloodshed. How long shall it last? Or is it meant to be eternal? Doubt which must at times inevitably be the business of our lives if we are earnestly and sincerely interested in arriving at truth was thought to be inimical to the early Christian world, which wrapped itself complacently in the veil of superstitious habits and customs, forgetting in the meantime the principal aims and teachings of the One whose name they proudly bore, considering themselves His true followers.

People were in fear and consternation of any change, which might strike the final blow to their narrow sphere of thought, and disturb their existance, and also their narrow ethical outlook. They fully utilized their power and authority to prevent any discrepancies which might enter into their religious life, for the experience of individuals has taught humanity that as soon as one has torn asunder the spider web, which the early Church wove around his mind, he becomes a rabid propogandist against his former thoughts, habits, customs, and even ideals; then he inevitably endeavors to spread his newly-born convictions among mankind.

Any religion which finds its happiness in taking all things of creation for granted is loath to accept truth which has proved of sound validity for its basis. Intellect and intuition, - attributes of each same being - stood hostile to one another, and the task was left to Robert Browning to reconcile the two.

Sometimes even the heathen were ahead of the early Christians, the pagan Hindus, for instance, through their intuitive and introspective observations arrived at conclusions which Christianity reached only

in the eighteenth century through considerable research. Wherein the Hindu was ahead lies in the fact, that he had no suspicion whatever that such truth which is known to us as science was in antagonistic relation to religion, provided it is supported and sustained by true intuition. The Hindu nobly thought that through scientific discoveries, religion can be ennobled and beautified, but by no means hindered as millions of Christians thought. Do the Hindus not deserve our admiration and respect, for their primitive broad-mindedness?

The question seriously confronts us, why should Christianity be the most advanced of religions, a religion to which civilization is largely due, and which was the basis for ennobling so many, create and sustain for so long a cult, unfortunately not yet completely bridged, between religion and science. Most peculiar is the fact that this most advanced of religions in its earliest stages embraced many pagan superstitions, such as belief in witchcraft, myths, wonders while it rejected a great principle which was later recognized and which the pagan recognized as the principle of research.

That do we see when we look into our own time? Do we not realize, that each century is inextricably interwoven with the others, that each century is inevitably and indispensably the sum total of the centuries gone by, that each century ought to be greater than its preceding one, for it has the advantage of imbibing the spirit, the struggles - which gives strength and nobility of character, - the adventures, the ideals of all centuries gone by, in addition to the advantages each century may claim as its own, resulting in social, political, religious, intellectual and psychological problems arising from the times.

Each century has its peculiar ideals, and so far as we can see in its life of literature, - which is to a large extent the product of life, - each century has not been able to grasp the ideals propounded by individuals who, through the peculiar gift of the Unknown power, were endowed with the foresight of seers, and strove to impart to humanity that which filled their innermost soul. The idealists in their efforts to realize and embody their ideals have often, alas, too often lost their lives. But as time advances humanity finally reaches the stage ripe for the ideals long ago propounded by the martyr-seers, then we are too ready to extol, to idealize our darling prophet, we erect monuments, we visit the grave with sacred reverence of the one who during his lifetime, if he was not considered insane, was treated with indifference if not with contempt, for was he not the disturber of our peace, complacency and narrow ethical views ?

Humanity has always proved to be too conservative toward new ideals. In spite of this fact, we have often seen, that for the welfare of mankind, a single individual in strife not with the whole world, at least with the major part. Think of Christianity as a powerful illustration of my statement, Luther was a propounder of an ideal, ^{as were} Copernicus, Spinoza, Tolstoy and hundreds of others. Our minds filled with the old, are not readily receptive of the new; hence the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of human intentions. But the strife and struggle of each age is a stimulus for strengthening and developing the characters of its own period as well as being conducive to the broad mindedness of ~~pre-~~ posterity.

Thus we see that the nineteenth century is a thread woven from all other centuries. It is difficult some times to mark the termina-

tion of one century and the commencement of another. The Victorian Era would have been such an age, had not most of the poets of the Romantic School met with a premature death. Shelley, Byron and Keats, the representatives of Romanticism filled the atmosphere with their ideals and gave way to another age, which in spite of the great difference in its aims, thoughts and ideals is essentially the continuation of the Romantic School. Browning shows the romantic touch through his unbounded love for Shelley, who was the source of inspiration of his youthful period, and his admiration for Byron portrayed in his earliest works. Matthew Arnold shows their relation of the two stages in the development of mankind through Byron and Goethe.

The Romantic movement as a whole shows great interest in nature, in the mysterious elements, the unknown, the hazy, the past; they were also interested in art, but they neglected what was most essential to the Victorian writers, namely, reality, life, men and women of flesh and blood, with their struggles, interests, ideals, hopes and fears. The Victorian poets lavished that imagination which the Romanticists spent on the abstract and distant, on the sorrows and joys of mankind. Life and its manifold complexities, social and spiritual was the watchword of the poets of this era, and out of the various struggles of the individual characters they built up a tower of literature.

Browning is the true realist of his age, but his realism is vastly different from the realism of Zola and Ibsen, who have striven to show us the moral evil, the diseases of the world, and life in its darkest phase. Browning, on the other hand, held up before us a mirror of hope and health for humanity. He too deals with evil in this universe of ours, yet he gives us a solution which has helped many to face unflinchingly life's trials in the hope of participating of a