

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00087-1 - The Catechism of Positive Religion

Auguste Comte

Excerpt

[More information](#)

# INTRODUCTION.<sup>1</sup>



## GENERAL THEORY OF RELIGION.



### CONVERSATION I.

*The Woman.*—I have often asked myself, my dear father, why you persist in designating as a religion your universal doctrine, though it rejects all supernatural belief. But on reflection I considered that this term is given in common use to many different and even incompatible systems, each of which claims it exclusively, whilst no one of them has at any time been able, taking the whole of our species, to reckon up as many adherents as opponents. This led me to think that this fundamental term must have a general acceptation, radically independent of every special faith. If so, I conjectured that, keeping close to this essential meaning, you might so denominate Positivism, in spite of the greater contrast that exists between it and the previous doctrines, which openly avow that their mutual differences are as serious as the points in which they agree. Still, as this explanation seems to me yet far from clear, I ask you to

<sup>1</sup> The Roman numerals attached to the headings indicate the series of the thirteen conversations, the Arabic the divisions of each part of the work.

begin your exposition by explaining, in direct and precise language, the radical sense of the word *Religion*.

*The Priest*.—This name, my dear daughter, has, in fact, by its etymology no necessary connection with any of the opinions that may be used for attaining the end to which it points. In itself, it expresses the state of perfect *unity*, which is distinctive of our existence, both individual and social, when all its parts, moral as well as physical, habitually converge towards a common purpose. Thus the term would be equivalent to the word *synthesis*, were it not that this last, not by force of its composition, but by nearly universal custom, is now limited entirely to the domain of the intellect, whilst the other embraces all the attributes of man. Religion, then, consists in *regulating* each individual nature, and in *rallying* all the separate individuals; which are but two distinct cases of one problem. For every man, in the successive periods of his life, differs from himself not less than at any one time he differs from others; so that the laws of permanence and participation are identical.

Such harmony, for the individual or society, not being ever fully attainable, so complicated is our existence, this definition of religion delineates, then, the unchanging type to which tends more and more the totality of human effort. Our happiness and our merit consist, above all, in drawing as near as possible to this unity, the gradual development of which is the best measure of real progress towards individual or social perfection. As the various attributes of man come into freer play, the more important becomes their habitual concert, but at the same time the more difficult, were it not that their evolution tended of itself to make us more susceptible of discipline, as I will explain to you shortly.

The value always set on this synthetical state naturally concentrated attention on the method of attaining it. Thus men were led, taking the means for the end, to transfer the name of *religion* to whatever system of

opinions it represented. But however irreconcilable these numerous beliefs at first sight appear, Positivism brings them into essential agreement, by referring each to the purpose it answered in its own time and country. There is, at bottom, but one religion, at once universal and final, to which all the partial and provisional syntheses more and more pointed, so far as their respective conditions allowed. These several empirical efforts are now succeeded by the systematic development of human unity; for it has at length become possible to constitute this unity, immediately and completely, by virtue of the sum total of our unsystematic preparations. Thus it is that Positivism naturally removes the mutual antagonism of the different antecedent religions, by taking as its own peculiar domain that common ground on which they all instinctively rested. Its doctrine could never be universally received were it not that, despite its anti-theological principles, its relative spirit secures it, by the nature of the case, strong affinities with every form of belief that has been able for a time to guide any part whatever of Humanity.

*The Woman.*—Your definition of religion will satisfy me completely, my father, if you can succeed in clearing up the serious difficulty which seems to me to arise from its too great comprehensiveness. For, in defining our unity, you take in the physical as well as the moral nature. They are, in fact, so bound up together that no true harmony is possible if one tries to separate them. And yet I cannot accustom myself to include health under religion, so as to make moral science, in its full conception, extend to medicine.

*The Priest.*—And yet, my daughter, the arbitrary separation which you wish to perpetuate would be directly contrary to our unity. It is due solely to the inadequacy of the last provisional religion, which could not discipline the soul save by giving into profane hands the management of the body. In the ancient theocracies,

the most complete and most durable forms of the supernatural regime, this groundless division did not exist; the art of hygiene and of medicine was in them always a mere adjunct of the priesthood.

Such is really the natural order which Positivism comes forward to restore and to consolidate, by virtue of the completeness which characterises it. The art of man and the science of man are each of them indivisible, as are the several aspects of their common object, all parts of which are in unbroken connection. No sound treatment of either body or mind is possible, now that the physician and the priest study exclusively the physical or the moral nature; not to speak of the philosopher, who, in our modern anarchy, wrests from the priesthood the domain of the intellect, leaving it that of the heart.

The diseases of the brain, and even many others, daily prove the powerlessness of all medical treatment limited to the lowest organs. It is quite as easy to see the inadequacy of every priesthood which aims at guiding the soul whilst taking no account of its subordination to the body. This separation, which is in two ways anarchical, must then cease, once for all, by a wise reincorporation of medicine into the domain of the priesthood, when the Positive clergy shall have adequately fulfilled its encyclopedic conditions. In fact, the moral point of view is alone able to secure active obedience for hygienic injunctions, alike whether they concern the individual or society. This is easily verified by the fruitlessness of the efforts made by Western physicians to regulate our diet, now that it is no longer under the control of the old religious precepts. Men will not generally submit to any practical inconvenience solely on the ground of their personal health, where each is left to judge for himself; for we are often more sensible of actual and certain annoyance than of distant and doubtful advantages. We must appeal to an authority higher than any individual, to establish, even on the most unimportant points, rules

of real efficacy, resting then on a social judgment which never admits uncertainty.

*The Woman.*—Now that I have thus surveyed, in all its extent, the natural province of religion, I would know, my father, what are its general conditions. It has often been represented to me as depending solely on the heart. But I have always thought that the intellect has also its part in it. Could I gain a clear idea of the parts respectively assigned the two?

*The Priest.*—A right judgment on this point, my daughter, follows from a searching examination of the word *religion*, perhaps the best in point of composition of all the terms used by man. It is so constructed as to express a twofold connection which, if justly conceived, is sufficient to summarise the whole abstract theory of our unity. To constitute a complete and durable harmony, what is really wanted is to *bind together* the within by love and to *bind it again* to the without by faith. Such, generally stated, is the necessary participation of the heart and the intellect as regards the synthetical state, individual or collective.

Unity implies, before all, a feeling to which all our different inclinations can be subordinated. For our actions and our thoughts being always swayed by our affections, harmony would be unattainable by man if these last were not co-ordinated under one paramount instinct.

But this internal condition of unity would be inadequate, did not our intelligence make us recognise, outside of us, a superior power, to which our existence must always submit, even whilst modifying it. It is in order that we may be the better subjects of this supreme rule, that our moral harmony, as individuals or as societies, is especially indispensable. And conversely, this predominance of the without tends to regulate the within, by favouring the ascendancy of the instinct most easily reconciled with such necessity. Thus, the two general conditions on which religion depends are naturally

connected, especially when the external order can become the object of the internal feeling.

*The Woman.*—In this abstract theory of our unity I find, my father, a radical difficulty, in regard to the moral influence. In considering the internal harmony, you seem to me to forget that our personal instincts have unfortunately greater energy than our sympathetic tendencies. Now, their preponderance, which seems calculated to make them the natural centre of our whole moral existence, would on the other hand make personal unity almost incompatible with social unity. Yet the two unities not having been found irreconcilable, I need fresh explanation to show that they are in themselves entirely compatible.

*The Priest.*—Herein you have, my daughter, directly raised the grand problem of man's existence, which is, in fact, to secure the gradual predominance of sociability over personality, whereas personality is naturally predominant. The better to understand the possibility of this, we must begin by comparing the two opposite forms which our moral unity seems naturally to admit, according as its internal basis is egoistic or altruistic.

You just now used the plural in speaking of our personality, and by so doing involuntarily bore witness to its radical inability to constitute any real and lasting harmony, even in a being cut off from society. For this monstrous unity would require not merely the absence of every sympathetic impulse, but also the preponderance of one single selfish instinct. Now this is only found in the lowest animals, where all is referred to the instinct of nutrition, especially when there is no distinction of sex. But everywhere else, and particularly in man, this primary want once supplied, there is scope for the prevalence in succession of several other personal instincts, the nearly equal energy of which would neutralise their conflicting claims to the entire command of our whole moral existence. Unless all submitted to

## I.—INTRODUCTION. (1)

39

affections resting on outward objects, the heart would be for ever agitated by internal conflicts between the impulses of the senses and the incitements of pride or of vanity, etc., supposing that cupidity proper should cease to reign, together with the purely bodily wants. Moral unity, then, is impossible, even in a solitary existence, for every being under the exclusive dominion of personal affections, which prevent his living for others. Such are many wild beasts, whom we see, allowing for times of temporary union, usually oscillating between a disorderly activity and an ignoble torpor, from their not finding outside of themselves the chief motors of their conduct.

*The Woman.*—I understand now, my father, the natural coincidence between the true moral conditions on which the individual and those on which the collective harmony depends. Still, however, I have the same difficulty in conceiving of the strongest instincts as habitually yielding.

*The Priest.*—Your difficulty, my daughter, will easily disappear if you observe that altruistic unity does not, as egoistic unity, require the entire sacrifice of the inclinations which are contrary to it in principle, but merely their wise subordination to the predominant affection. When it condenses all sound morality in the law of *Live for others*, Positivism allows and sanctions the constant satisfaction in just degree of the several personal instincts, as being indispensable to our material existence, which is always the foundation for our higher attributes. Consequently it blames, however estimable the motives may often be, any austerities which, by lessening our strength, make us less fit for the service of others. The social purpose in the name of which it recommends attention to ourselves should at once ennoble and regulate such attention, whilst we avoid equally excessive care and culpable negligence.

*The Woman.*—But, my father, this very sanction of the egoistic inclinations, constantly stimulated as they

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00087-1 - The Catechism of Positive Religion

Auguste Comte

Excerpt

[More information](#)

moreover are by our bodily wants, seems to me still incompatible with an habitual supremacy of our weak sympathetic feelings.

*The Priest.*—And therefore, my daughter, this moral improvement will always form the principal object of the art of man, the constant efforts of which, both individual and collective, bring us nearer and nearer to it, but never attain it completely. This progressive solution of your difficulty depends entirely on social existence, in accordance with the natural law which develops or restrains our functions and our organs in proportion to their exercise or disuse. In fact, domestic and civic relations tend to compress the personal instincts, from the struggles which they occasion between individuals. On the contrary, they favour the growth of our benevolent feelings, the only ones that admit of a simultaneous development in all—a development by its nature continuous, as the mutual stimulus is continuous, although necessarily limited by the aggregate material conditions of our existence.

This is why the true moral unity can only satisfactorily exist in our species, social progress appertaining exclusively to the best organised of the races capable of society, except so far as others join it as free auxiliaries. Still, though such a harmony cannot be developed elsewhere, it is easy to trace its principle in many higher animals, which even furnished the first scientific proofs of the natural existence of the disinterested affections. If this great conception, at all times a presentiment of universal experience, had not been so long in taking a systematic form, no one would at the present day tax with sentimental affectation a doctrine which may be directly verified in so many species inferior to our own.

*The Woman.*—This satisfactory explanation leaves me, my father, only one last general elucidation to wish for, as regards the intellectual conditions of religion. Athwart the incoherence of the various special beliefs,



## I.—INTRODUCTION. (1)

41

I do not clearly apprehend what constitutes the essential province of faith; yet faith must admit of a sense common to all systems.

*The Priest.*—Practically, my daughter, our faith never had but one and the same main object: namely, to form a conception of the whole order under which man lives, so as to determine our relation generally to it. Whether we assigned it to fictitious causes or studied its real laws, our object was always to understand this order which is independent of us, so the better to submit to it and the more to modify it. Every system of religious doctrine necessarily rests on some explanation or other of the world and of man, the twofold object at all times of our thoughts, whether speculative or practical.

The Positive faith sets forth directly the real *laws* of the different phenomena observable, whether internal or external; *i.e.*, their unvarying relations of succession and resemblance, which enable us to foresee some as a consequence of others. It puts aside, as absolutely beyond our reach and essentially idle, all inquiry into *causes* properly so called, first or final, of any events whatever. In its theoretical conceptions it always explains the *how*, never the *why*. But when it is pointing out the means of guiding our activity, it on the contrary makes consideration of the end constantly paramount; as the practical result is then certainly due to an intelligent will.

Yet though vain in its direct results, the search after causes was at the outset no less indispensable than inevitable, as I will explain to you more particularly, as a substitute and preparation for the knowledge of laws, a knowledge which presupposes a long introduction. In the search for the *why*, which could not be found, men ended by discovering the *how*, which had not been the immediate object of inquiry. Nothing is to be really blamed but the childish persistence, so common still with our literary men, in the attempt to penetrate to causes when laws are known. For as these last alone have any

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00087-1 - The Catechism of Positive Religion

Auguste Comte

Excerpt

[More information](#)

relation to our conduct, the search after the others becomes as useless as it is chimerical.

The fundamental dogma, then, of the universal religion is the proved existence of an unchangeable order to which all events of every kind are subject. This order is at once *objective* and *subjective*: in other words, it concerns equally the *object* contemplated and the *subject* contemplating. Physical laws in fact imply logical laws, and the converse. If our understanding did not of itself obey any rule, it would never be able to appreciate the external harmony. The world being simpler and more powerful than man, order in man would be still less compatible with disorder in the world. All positive belief, then, rests on this twofold harmony between the object and the subject.

Such an order can be shown to exist, but it can never be explained. On the contrary, it supplies the only possible source of all rational explanation, the essence of which is the bringing under general laws each particular event, which thus comes within the sphere of systematic prevision, the only distinctive aim of all true science. And therefore the universal order was not recognised so long as arbitrary wills were in the ascendant, for to them men naturally at first attributed all the most important phenomena. But it was recognised at last in reference to the simplest events, in defiance of contrary opinions, on the evidence of experience constantly recurring and never belied, and from the simpler the recognition gradually extended to the more complex. Not till our own time has this extension reached its last domain, by representing as always subject to invariable laws the highest phenomena, those of the intelligence and of society—a point still denied by many cultivated minds. Positivism was the direct result of this final discovery, the completion of our long initiation and, as such, necessarily closing the preliminary era of human reason.

*The Woman.*—My father, the Positive faith on this