

# ARE FRIENDS CLEAR OF MATERIALISM?

NICHOLS, MARY A

*Friends' Intelligencer* (1853-1910); Sep 24, 1898; 55, 39; American Periodicals  
pg. 680

## VII.

### ARE FRIENDS CLEAR OF MATERIALISM?

BY MARY A. NICHOLS.

THIS query does not apply to the so-called materialistic tendencies of the day. The present agitation of materialism is, I believe, only one of the many evidences that people are thinking. Far from being dangerous to religion, I hold it one of the hopeful signs pointing toward the rapid evolution of a truer spiritual religion than has yet been known.

The materialism of which I wish to speak may be defined as the garments in which religion has, all along, been clothed; the materials through which she has worked and by which she has been known. The origin, development, and present manifestations of this materialism may best be understood by a glance at the history of religion. As far back as we know anything of man, he has had something of a religious instinct, acknowledging the existence of a God. As an animal placed among physical superiors, this instinct was little more than an attribute of fear. Natural phenomena awed him. Their cause was confounded with its effects, and thus the Initial Power became objective to him, and fire, thunderbolts, winds, earthquakes, and rising suns became the object of his regard. Gradually these many gods were united in his thought into one, or made subordinate to one,—an external, far-away God, a being to be feared, praised, propitiated, and worshipped, but yet entirely foreign to the abstract qualities which constitute Personified Goodness, and bearing no subjective relation to the emotion which his manifestations produced.

With growth, this God, borne in the thought of primitive man, became more and more separated from the evidences of his power and at the same time grew less tangible. Having projected him so far into externality, it was necessary to build highways and bridges by which to approach him. This led to the introduction of images, the beginning of idol-worship, and also the beginning of a long era of more or less absolute, thorough, unacknowledged materialism. In the mechanical labor of bridge-building, the instinctive relationship which prompted the enterprise was entirely lost from sight. All energies were bent toward the production of something tangible, and tangible things must be material. So the Catholic Church has introduced its numerous images and sym-

bols. The Cross and the Virgin are survivals of the primitive tendency to project things spiritual. They stand as tangible representatives of what must otherwise exist only in the mind. But among the masses who kneel before the altars or cross themselves before the Madonna many see no farther than the graven image. Perception is cultivated at the expense of intuition, and so long as these materialistic crutches are supplied, there seems little hope that the spiritual man will learn to walk alone.

The same error appears in different guises throughout the Christian world. The larger portion of church organization and its tributary social machinery may be included among the materials upon which spiritual energy is dissipated. I believe that such institutions as church fairs, bazaars, and suppers, with their attendant quips and quarrels are consuming far more of the raw produce from which religion is made than their financial gains can ever replace.

The Bible, too, has been impressed into the service of material worship. Because it contains Truth, it is made to serve as a substitute for all evolved Truth, and like an opiate soothes without nourishing the soul dependent upon it.

The life of Jesus newly demonstrated the adjustability of the line where God ends and man begins? But the light of this truth is too dazzling for general acceptance. The thought of God within entails upon man a responsibility too grave, opens up for him a communion too exacting. He throws away Christ, an example, and puts in place, Christ a sacrifice. By this he secures something tangible. Christ a sacrifice requires only a mental acknowledgment, while Christ an example, demands spiritual life. In this exchange, but little of true spiritual religion is retained. Nothing is implanted within to hold man to a true ideal of Holiness and Truth.

\* \* \*

Thus far I have attempted to outline what I mean by materialism, and to show that throughout human history, spiritual life has been sapped to feed the complex material structure known as religious worship, by means of which, in turn, man has sought to satisfy his religious instinct.

I come now to the question, "Are Friends clear of this Materialism?" (1) Our exclusive use of the Bible as a study in our religious school, our recourse to text platitudes, and expressions which are relics of a Faith we do not hold, our inclination to idolize the ministry, all seem to me indications of a materialistic taint. Not until these half-gods go, can we expect the gods to appear.

(2) Have we not, in spite of the spiritual basis of our organization, been guilty of magnifying the importance of our forms and ceremonies, to a degree which has often concealed our vital principles?

Too often, the name Friend suggests to outsiders nothing more than plain speech, plain dress, and peculiar forms of worship. We sometimes hear discussed the propriety of Friends proselyting. Is not the necessity for such work largely due to this same materialistic spirit, which has tried to preserve intact the superstructure of the church at the expense of its

foundation principles? Experience proves that Friends' forms and ceremonies do not, in themselves, carry the suggestion of the vital principle which is our strength. The garb by which we were once known has already practically disappeared. Now if by the use of "thee" and "thou," of given names, of "First-day," and "Eleventh month," we are peculiarizing ourselves and prejudicing against the faith we ought to advance, let this usage follow the plain. We can still retain the essential principles of the necessity for beauty and harmony in dress and for an accent of brotherly love and true sympathy in speech.

Many of our business forms, as, for example, separate meetings of men and women Friends, have become mere dead timber, not only useless, but actually in the way of progress. Still they are retained because we fear to lose something of our material entity.

Our Society journal, the INTELLIGENCER, has, I believe, sacrificed some of its power for good upon this same altar,—devoting itself too largely to the dissemination of Friends' practices rather than their principles, and dealing in facts relating to the organization and history of the Society to the exclusion of matter containing new thought and new expositions of vital truths.

We are prone to lament the decline of the Society, but if its decline means that we have seen the non-adaptability of its garments to its needs, and have laid aside these garments to set free the spirit for broader usefulness, then may we be proud that the Society, as such, is in a decline. If by a sacrifice of some of these material limitations, which time has endeared, we have put ourselves in more active touch with the many live minds who have grown to a broad conception of truth, and thus have quickened the march of a truly spiritual religion, under whatever name, or under no name, then may we indeed rejoice that the supremacy of Quakerism has been superseded by the supremacy of the Kingdom of God.

Let this not be construed as mere iconoclasm! I would not condemn traditional usages because they are traditional, but *if they are* obstructions to the Inner Light and the Radiance of Truth, then let no sentiment preserve them; no habit stand in the way of their immediate and complete abandonment. Thus may we hope to attain to a higher spiritual plane and thus only hope to exert a true spiritual influence,—an influence which in time will make ridiculous the demand for a separate department of life known as its Religious Department, and instead will establish religion in every fibre of human society, and make it manifest in the operations of every-day life. This religion shall be known not by the magnificence of its churches or the multitudes of its church-goers; it will appear in business in the guise of uprightness and integrity; in politics as unselfishness, patriotism, and true statesmanship; in school as trained muscles and clear reason; in the home as beauty, cheerfulness, self-sacrifice, and love; and in every character as pure emotion, holy thought, divine conception, making that character a true exposition of the God that reigns within it.