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*THE PERMANENT ELEMENTS OF RELIGION.*¹

II.

To the doctrine of future reinstatement objection has sometimes been taken on the ground that the importance attached to our present acts must necessarily be weakened if we do not believe them to be irrevocable; that the conviction that this life is man's sole chance throughout eternity, his sole share in existence, must make him value it more, and less inclined to waste or spoil it, whether in his own case or that of his fellows. Any chance whatever of a revision of what he has once done might make him regard his conduct less seriously, and make him less careful of it. Experience, however, seems to show that this is not so, that the contemplation of an after life makes men more earnest, causes them to value more their own personality which is permanent, and less the circumstances which are transitory. But whether this be so or not, the doctrine of reinstatement appears to be the only expedient for remedying the injustice which the progress of civilized society produces. That result of progress cannot be either deplored or admired, it is simply unavoidable. If the flock is to be kept pure, as Plato said, tainted sheep must be kept out: a society in which persons guilty of the offences which it taboos moved freely and without disgrace is unthinkable; crimes cannot be taboos without those who have committed them being disgraced. But the resulting mischief, which is that persons who have once offended have no further reason for abstaining from giving offence, is remedied by the doctrines which on the one hand level all mankind by representing them all as too deeply tainted with sin to be able to reproach each other with impurity, and on the other represent the taboo as temporary, and

¹ Murtle Lecture, Aberdeen, December, 1903.

provide means for cleansing sooner or later any stain however deep. The expedient is, in fact, to treat the same persons as belonging to two separate societies—a civil society whose outlook is confined within certain horizons, and a religious society, with an outlook beyond the grave, and otherwise not conterminous with the civil community.

Although, then, those who habitually act rightly do so neither because they hope for anything to be gained thereby, nor fear the consequences of doing otherwise, the clarification of ideas has provided mankind in religion with an instrument that is potent in training those whose characters are in course of formation, and in reclaiming those whose conduct has been vitiated. The history of religion shows us indeed many cases in which wholly wrong values have been ascribed to acts, and in which the terrors of the supernatural world have been invoked to suppress acts that were either harmless or even beneficial. But yet the assertion sometimes made that religion is *per se* wholly unconnected with morals will scarcely stand the test of historical research, and gods and goddesses whose names we are accustomed to connect with evil things, when we learn more about them, are found concerned with the task of enjoining right and condemning wrong. Once mankind became convinced that their conduct was not indifferent to the power or powers by whom nature is controlled, the direction was given to the line of progress which identified the pleasure of those powers with the acts which tend to the preservation of the community. The identification of their pleasure with real morality has been attained, as much in human history has been attained, by a process which appears circuitous in the extreme; but here as elsewhere the triumph of progress has lain in the diversion of forces that were either useless or even harmful to the well-being and ennobling of the race.

And the third service of religion is as a means of

strengthening human weakness. The facts of the world as given by nature methodically studied, represent man as surrounded everywhere by abysses. What is behind him, and what is before him, are alike unknown, unexplored, stretching out into vast immensity. His own place appears fortuitous, his own destiny the result of accident. Methodical study constantly reduces the appearance of design in phenomena, accounting for that appearance by other causes, and of design and purpose in history as a whole the traces are yet more obscure. Probably to strong minds or to normal minds in times of quiet and prosperity this uncertainty and ignorance occasion little inconvenience, but weaker minds need some support, or need to have the abyss concealed from them by some sort of screen, and a little adversity is shown by experience to bring strong minds to the same level. It is not many months since some reverses in a war brought the most advanced of nations to talk of the need for a day of general humiliation in order to induce the heavenly powers to crown its arms with success. The inner history of men with the strongest will and the fewest scruples shows extraordinary relapses into even puerile superstitions. Now religion gives a final answer to most of these questions, and thus provides the stay which is necessary so often for human weakness. It introduces the human being to the power which lies behind phenomena, and, if it cannot always explain their purpose, it can assure him that they have a meaning, and that there is no reason to fear, since their conduct is in wise hands. The greater the confidence men have in the Being whom they supplicate for a special result, the greater it would appear is their resignation when the result falls out contrary to what they had desired and supplicated. Success brings fervent gratitude, but failure only in the rarest cases causes recrimination.

The belief that events are ordered by a wise will and

intelligence appears to be what underlies this power of religion to strengthen and console. By bringing man into some relation with the Ruler of the world, it gives him by prayer or sacrifice, or some other mode, the power to interfere somewhat himself with the direction of events. To the council where the future is deliberated and arranged it introduces, if not his vote, at any rate his petition; into the causes which operate on the great world machine, it gives a place to his individual will and interest, his loves and hates. Whither the arm of the mightiest cannot reach, where the united forces of mankind are ineffectual, thither the voice of prayer penetrating can, it teaches, move the hand that moves the world. And if experience shows that the effectiveness of this force cannot be relied on, still the knowledge that events are arranged and directed, and not left to blind forces, gives the system which furnishes it the value for life with which we are now dealing. Just as man reads into the operations of nature motive and design, so he interprets the course of events as realizing some intention with which he can sympathize, and fragments of which he can understand. And as to the gratification of his own schemes he is willing to sacrifice his comfort and even himself, so he is prepared to be sacrificed in the realization of a scheme with which he identifies his own. His own sufferings and losses are not in vain if they contribute to the furthering of the object which should be furthered. The focus of his own religion provides a point round which the data of history can be grouped, to which they led up, and whither they again converge; as the Jews put it, all the prophets prophesied of the Messiah, giving as it were clues concerning the direction whereto events were trending, showing which side would be ultimately victorious in the world-struggle, and with which side man should cast in his lot, introducing into his conduct the spirit of loyalty, which accounts for

difficulties by the nature of the whole plan, by his own ignorance, by anything rather than any defect in the arrangements of the sovereign organizer.

Nor should we overlook its value as compensating for the inequalities of life, and so inducing contentment and tranquility, where otherwise there might be discontent or repining. The need for a world that sets this right is at least to some extent felt in proportion to the degree in which the arrangements of the present dispensation fall heavily on individuals. Hence a doctrine that the mere fact of a man being miserable in this world will be a title to happiness in another is one from which few important religious systems are free, and which has to some degree the authority of the Gospel itself. Of it that asceticism which courts torture in this life in order to increase the compensation to be received in another is the abnormal development. But in cases where the torment is not voluntarily undergone, but is the product of misfortune or disease, those who are familiar with the hospital and the workhouse will probably attest the soothing and comforting effects of religious beliefs. Represented as a surgical operation, which by temporary or momentary discomfort procures permanent ease and happiness, the misfortune assumes an utterly different character from that which must attach to it when it is regarded as having no purpose, no meaning, no kindly intent. Diverted from the agony which he is enduring to the contemplation of the happiness to which access is thereby provided, the patient is less inclined to envy those who have indeed no such trial, but can look forward to no such result. The nakedness of nature, with its unfair arrangements which hit many so hard, is thus fully concealed; and death itself tolerated or even welcomed, not as a mode of obtaining cessation from trouble, but of entry to a kingdom that has been earned.

In all three functions, of which the first appears to touch

the surface of human life, whereas the others sink deeper, it is clear that there is much common ground, nor is it easy to say where one function terminates and another commences. And with regard to all it may be observed that man adds to the data of nature something similar to that which the artist adds when out of a block of stone he produces a statue. Consecrated days, consecrated places, consecrated persons, exist for the mind that is capable of appreciating the notion of sanctity: for nature and for other animals than man they exist not. Where nature presents a mixture of what is agreeable to man and what is disagreeable, collateral surfeit and starvation, happiness and misery, religion sees only a family provided for by a loving father, or a good force resisting and steadily overcoming one that is evil. Out of the block of marble it rejects all that conceals or interferes with the statue which it does not create but find. The objection to the process, because the objective reality of the result cannot be proved, seems akin to that which some fanatics have cherished against the plastic art itself; the makers of statues, Mohammed taught, would be punished more severely than any other criminals: for they would be told to give life to their creation, and would be unable to do so. As grave an objection to their art as that which is raised against religious systems, when they are judged not by their practical results, but by their metaphysical groundwork. To make a living figure was not in the sculptor's intention, nor would such a feat have gratified the desire which it was his purpose to supply; and likewise it is not the end of the religious system to provide an account of phenomena which is objectively true, but one which will render life decent, and help man to be moral and to be resigned and courageous.

That is the service to which the instinct of worship can be made subservient, just as the organs of speech can

be made to express ideas ; though no one believes now in any object having a natural name, and though there are no natural names, yet one language can surpass another in euphony, in clearness and expressiveness.

In all three functions the question of the objective reality of the teachings of religion in no way affects its value to the community. If men walk safely and courageously because the abyss is screened off, it matters not at all whether the screen be solid, or thin, unstable, and easily pulled away. The consolation which replaces to the miserable all that the fortunate enjoy is a valuable asset to mankind ; its value is not extinguished by the demonstration that it is illusory. The motives that will inspire men to work for the common good and sacrifice their own pleasure and profit to that of their fellows have all the characteristics of a force ; often indeed they have been wrongly utilized ; but it does not follow that they should be wasted.

The permanent elements of religion lie, then, in the permanent needs of mankind, and the existence of religion is bound up with their continuance. And though all three may be said to be of unlimited duration, probably with the progress of mankind the function of religion as moralizing and strengthening loses in importance, whereas its function as adorning life gains. With the advancing knowledge of nature whole regions wherein man once found his way by prayer and sacrifice are flooded with the light of science. Bounded indeed by abysses, the road whereon he walks becomes continually broader and smoother ; the fantastic figures which in the darkness or haze of ignorance filled the air are found out in the light of knowledge to be smoke and vapour. But the time is still at an immeasurable distance when the elements of uncertainty in man's life will have been reduced to a minimum, and when it will cease to be dominated by fear and hope. Still less can we

look forward to a time when the differences in strength and stability that are to be found existing between different ages, different sexes, and different races will have been merged in uniformity.

So too the need for religion as a moralizing and reforming force appears to be of unlimited, but not necessarily infinite duration. That vicious inclinations may be stamped out as diseases are stamped out seems not impossible; and according as the effort of inculcating morality becomes less, and the need for reformation diminishes, there will be the less need for calling in the aid of belief in unseen forces to make men virtuous. There are those who think the time for this has already come, and that morality can be best taught without promises and threats, and without authorization; but the fact that recurrence has constantly to be made to those aids in cases where men have tried to dispense with them appears to show that such a view is in the present state of human progress visionary or premature.

But while in process of time the human mind may grow vastly stronger and the human will vastly better, the need for what we have called the ornamentation of life will rather strengthen than weaken. It is the tendency of science to exhibit more and more of the nakedness of nature: in the study of history to find less and less of a directing providence, organizing events after the style of a popular romance, in which the good are rewarded and the villains punished; hence the side of life which is ideal becomes more and more necessary as progress encourages materialism.

The correct analysis of the functions which religion performs in society has a tendency, in the first place, to make religions more mutually tolerant; in the second, to cause their assimilation within certain limits. A standard being given, as the result of a study of what mankind require or

need, the comparison of various creeds is based on the extent to which they fulfil such requirements. And at times comparison is easy, and a mere statement of the facts gives us the right to applaud or condemn. Certain ceremonies can be condemned as unaesthetic or barbarous; certain mythologies as demoralizing; the encouragement of certain tendencies as pernicious either to the persons in whom they are fostered or to others. There is no intolerance involved in condemning practices or doctrines on any of these grounds. But where their continuance is not manifestly inconsistent with the interests of the race as a whole, it will probably be acknowledged that there are subjective varieties which will both account for and justify the continuance of many different creeds. Even if a creed fail to come up to the best known standard of what is refined and moralizing, it will be acknowledged that for some minds the best is unsuitable; just as the brilliancy and clearness of light may be known by tests, yet it is not certain that the most brilliant light is suited to every eye.

For the assimilation of different cults we have evidence in what has been going on in the last centuries and may be expected to continue in the future. To some indeed the purification of other cults besides the Christian seems visionary and unpractical; but is it not equally so to hope for the conversion on a large scale to Christianity of millions of men who have a well reasoned theology of their own, and on whom many generations of missionaries have worked with no effect; most of all at a time when the belief in the historical basis of Christianity is continually becoming, at least in the opinion of the most authorized, more and more insecure? In place of such a hope we regard it as more probable that the improvement of the standards of Christian countries may cause those of non-Christian countries to improve. The higher morality

being ascribed in Christian countries to their religion and identified with it, similar standards by force of imitation will spread to those countries of which Christianity is not the official religion; and will by patriots be made out to be in harmony with their official or native systems, however little connexion there may historically be between the two.

Judaism, Parseeism, even Mohammedanism as interpreted by those who have chosen to follow European lights, differ but slightly, if at all, in the conduct which they inculcate; the difference between the teachers lies not in their conclusions, but in the process by which they are attained; dimly or clearly they perceive that the veneration which their races have inherited for certain names and certain books may be utilized for the benefit of the community, and that that possibility of utilization is the only chance which the system has of holding its own; efficiency here as in every other department of life deciding whether the instrument shall continue in use or not. And the historical fact that the efficiency of the premier religion has varied vastly in different ages, from almost entire uselessness in some to extreme potency in others, gives them some ground for hoping that the failure of their own systems in the past may be consistent with success in the future.

In such cases it would seem to be the wiser course for the missionary to encourage rather than to ridicule the new gloss that is put on the old text; to hold that if those representatives of non-Christian cults who wish to emulate Christian virtues can do so by forcing them into the framework of their own religion, they should be encouraged in the attempt; the difficulty of reforming the race being so great that each movement that aims thereat without introducing fresh evils deserves our sympathy.

But it is also a fact that the doctrine as well as the

practice of the less fashionable religions has a tendency to assimilate itself to that of the most advanced civilizations. Analogues are sought and easily found in the native cult to the concepts in which the world-religion expresses itself; while native names are retained, the difference in doctrine lessens, since the needs which dogmas gratify do not differ widely in different human breasts. And further, there is a tendency even to assimilate ceremonies, and to find out reasons for adopting the same seasons for festivity and mourning. Thus some of the wiser of the Jews of our day are adopting the Christian Sunday as their day of rest instead of their Sabbath; rightly holding that the change can involve no principle of their religion, and that it is better that their day of rest should unite them with their fellow-citizens than separate them.

But if this is the case with systems which have often been hostile and antagonistic, it is yet more likely to result with those whose differences are smaller. When the problem of theology comes to be to find out what doctrines are most conducive to human progress and human happiness, the possibility of approximately solving it, and so of obtaining ultimately some sort of harmony, is considerably increased. It is no longer a question of interpreting and comparing texts, or of ascertaining by archæological inquiry the nature of ancient ceremonies, but of investigating the working of various beliefs on the human mind, and the effect, if any, which they exercise on the character, a process in which deductive and inductive methods must necessarily supplement and correct each other. The claim made by revelation is not so much that of conveying to mankind information which could not otherwise be obtained; it is rather to be the acknowledged authority for religion, the recognition of which is requisite if the services which have been analyzed are to be performed. The purpose of the scientific inquirer is to lift the veil, that

of the apologist to replace it ; let it be once recognized that there is a time for replacing as well as a time for lifting, the two will be found to be co-operating, to be in a way antagonistic.

The need for sacred books of recognized authority can easily be shown whether from history or from *à priori* considerations. Paganism collapsed because, having no recognized authority for its beliefs and practices, it was confronted by a system which was founded on the recognized word of God. Islam carried Arabia by storm because it could oppose the word of God to beliefs for which there was no authority ; and before it those branches of Christianity which had no vernacular Bible perished, whereas those which had one survived. Accessions in our time are made both to Christianity and to Islam from tribes that have no sacred literature, but those which have sacred books rarely abandon their religion. For the ornamentation of life, as the ancient religions show, much can be done with the aid of myths, stories which are not ordinarily believed, but to which association has lent a charm ; but those which are to help in reforming the fallen and strengthening the weak must be believed. The assertions made by him who aims at these effects cannot rest on his own private authority, for the door is thus opened to charlatanism ; their authority must be one that is popularly regarded as sufficient, such as is attached by proverbs to the Bible or the Gospel, each of which is in popular parlance synonymous with infallible truth. It is that which in theory the preacher merely inculcates or enforces ; and the power behind him is a sort of atmosphere created by a series of generations with whom the belief in the soundness of that authority has been normal, and disbelief in it paradoxical.

It has not, however, been ordinarily necessary to press the authority of a sacred book too closely, the amount of emphasis laid thereon being made to vary in accordance

with the principle that they who are whole need not a physician, but those that are sick. In many communities it is found that what is ostensibly the sacred book has been ousted by matter that is far inferior both morally and intellectually to the original volume: whereas in others it has given way to beliefs and practices which present a real advance on the earlier condition. Probably in all the cases in which complaint is made by reformers of the burying of the word of God under a mass of secondary matter the introduction of that secondary matter is not merely due to perversity, but in part at least to the supervention of needs which the earlier sacred books were not calculated to supply. But what can be learned from all these cases—and the religions which have had the greatest popularity supply illustrations—is that the authority of the sacred book can at once be ostensibly recognized and virtually superseded. Reverence can be maintained for it simultaneously with a tendency towards extreme divergence from what it literally teaches, whether this divergence be in a progressive or in a retrogressive direction; a proceeding which at times is covered by the arts of the apologist, whose purpose is to reconcile the oracles with the data of experience, constituting the mass of knowledge that accumulates between the production of the oracles and the apologist's time. His function may be represented as that of bridging over the gulf between the world of every-day life, regulated by rules that work invariably, the world of causes with precisely calculable effects, the world whose history and mechanics are ascertained by observation and experiment; and the world in which the dealings are between God and the soul, in which morality from being an expedient for compassing individual and general well-being is raised to the rank of an eternal law, and in which man from his humble position as an accident of matter is exalted to that of an immortal.

The task of the apologist is therefore one which is in agreement with the interests of the community, whether it be in his power to produce arguments that science can recognize, or whether it be only possible for him to make out a plausible case for a system of which the benefits can be very considerable. Just as we have seen that life can be equally ornamented whether that ornament be impenetrable, or be merely sufficient to cover, but capable of being rent away, so what is wanted from the apologist is rather that he should render the employment for certain purposes and on certain occasions of antiquated opinions tolerable and permissible than that he should put back the hands of progress in all spheres and for all times and occasions.

The arts of the apologist, employed it might be thought in the interest of a particular dogma, are employed in the interest of human society; certain means having been discovered by experience to be the sole cure for a variety of ills, it is his purpose to strengthen the hands of those who use them. Working on the sound principles that those who are whole need not a physician, and that the sinners, not the righteous, need calling to repentance, his aim is not to maintain anything superannuated in the face of progress, but to render suitable for modern wants the weapons for which neither has a substitute been found, nor is there any prospect of finding one: performing for science itself this great service that he helps to maintain the world in a condition which is favourable for scientific progress; for society that he helps to supply a perpetual corrective to the deficiencies which its progress brings more and more to light.

For the reconstruction of the beliefs which the nineteenth century destroyed we need not then look for wonderful confirmation of Scripture, though it is quite conceivable that many a fashionable opinion may be yet overthrown; but to a more general recognition among the educated of the

services which religious beliefs and institutions perform, of the loss to the community which their abolition would involve. Into the arguments by which these are analysed it is unnecessary to introduce any premise which does not rest on observations and experiences which any age and any country can provide. Where, therefore, the sacred books which form the groundwork of religion are unable to maintain their own claim to sanctity, where, if that be demonstrated, their content is in disagreement with the results which experience has made certain, it is not impossible to confer on them a factitious and conventional sanctity, which is all that is required for the function which is demanded of them. Such sanctity as is conferred on sacred places, sacred buildings, sacred persons, is similarly factitious and conventional: nature understands it not; only men who have been initiated understand it; and when the needs of the community require, it can be withdrawn. To those, however, who have been initiated, consecrated ground and consecrated buildings mean something, awake certain emotions, arouse certain feelings, which seem totally different from what is ordinarily associated with the terms factitious and conventional. Those feelings appear to be no whit less strong than they were when men believed that sacred places were protected by heavenly flames which consumed those who violated them, or that disrespect to sacred persons and offices would be punished by natural convulsions. The community reserves to itself the right to assign the limits within which that sanctity may be recognized; but within those limits it not only permits but encourages, or at times can even command, the gratification of the emotion with which that term is associated. The properties which are to be found in wood and stone, bricks and mortar, do not leave them when they form part of a consecrated building: yet those who are fully aware of this may also hold that the community is better off for

having consecrated buildings, invested with a dignity and with privileges which unconsecrated buildings do not share.

That degree of sanctity the community will see fit to leave intact to the sacred books whence are derived the doctrines and the histories which are inseparable from the ceremonies of religion, and which render them commemorative or sacramental. A time there was for iconoclasm when every malefactor could find refuge in a sacred place, when for half the year no work might be done for fear of violating saints' days, when whole realms of nature were left unexplored for fear of disproving some assertion in a sacred book ; such superstitions had to be pulled up by the roots to enable men to learn that not only the Sabbath, but all dogmas and ceremonies are made for man and not man for them. Yet the community whose Founder taught the subordination of the Sabbath to human needs is also the community whence the consecration of one day out of seven has spread furthest and widest ; retaining that consecration for many a reason which experience and the study of human nature suggest ; and covering those reasons over with the ornament of a historical or mythical commemoration either of the completion of the universe or of its regeneration. And that religion will be completest and best suited to mankind in which each institution and each dogma admits of a similar analysis : made indeed for man, and contributing in some way that admits of explanation to the ennobling of the race, yet decorated and adorned with sacred histories, connected with the conception of man as above nature and immortal. The Sabbath and all other religion were made for man and not man for the institutions.

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