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## TENNYSON'S RELIGIOUS LIFE AND TEACHINGS.

BY MISS A. G. WELD (NIECE OF TENNYSON).

It is surprising how many people still continue to read Tennyson's poetry with their attention so exclusively directed to the beauty of its form that they entirely ignore the soul within it, for whose sake the casket was so exquisitely wrought, and are thus led to assert that it is as an artist rather than as a teacher that Tennyson takes his high rank among the great poets of the nineteenth century; whereas he assured me that any measure of perfection to which he might have attained as an artist in metre was imperfect compared with the standard he had set before himself, since he felt that the gift of poetry was bestowed upon him by his Heavenly Father as "a great trust" that it might be the vehicle in which he was permitted to convey to his fellowmen the message he had received from the Master. He told me that his sense of the divine source of this gift was almost awful to him, since he felt that every word of his ought to be consecrated to the service of Him who had touched his lips with that fire of Heaven which was to enable him to speak in God's name to his age. So that great as was the delight he felt in the exercise of his art, the constant realisation of his responsibility so far outweighed to him the joy of production that he was wont to say to me that nothing he had ever written seemed to him to have reached that perfection short of which he must never rest, and that all he could hope was that he had brought men a little nearer to God; for as he sat day by day at the Master's feet with that humility of childhood which he kept to his dying hour, he felt no words of his could ever fully reproduce the messages which were being spoken to his own heart, and yet that he must strive with all his might to clothe them in the best language he could find. And so he sang on all through that long life of his, not that he might receive the

homage of his own or future ages as a consummate artist, but as one to whom, all unworthy though he deemed himself, the mission had been entrusted of raising the thoughts of all who should come under his influence to a higher, diviner level—the level to which he himself knew not how completely he had attained.

Tennyson liked best to dwell on the simpler side of religion as a child could understand it and so there is little of dogma in his writings, and this being the case it may be well to mention that in one of his many talks to me about religion he told me that he loved the hymn, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty", and should like to write such a one. His reverent admiration for this hymn was the measure of his indignant reprobation of the writings of those who would represent God the Father as an angry Deity only to be appeased by the sacrifice of His all-loving Son. "We must never," he said, "in the Trinity lose sight of the unity of the God-head, the Three persons of the Trinity being like three candles giving together one light." And so he firmly held that the Divine Father was just as much "immortal Love" as the "strong Son of God." That expression, "Strong Son of God", with which "In Memoriam" opens reminds us that Tennyson, to whom every word was of weight and meaning, has here placed in the very forefront of his great poem, the epithet marking the stress he laid on the Divine strength, that supporting strength to which he thought sufficient value was not attached in our present theology, which dwells too much on the weakness and sufferings of Christ in His Passion, instead of on His might, which an earlier Christianity has depicted in the mosaics of Ravenna.

Tennyson was gifted with a voice of marvellous depth and resonance, and never did its rich harmonies vibrate with greater fullness than when reading aloud a chapter of Isaiah which his knowledge of the original Hebrew caused him to be able to render still more impressively than he could otherwise have done. He was a constant and earnest student of the Bible, and so completely entered into its many-sidedness that he was able to do justice to those who laid stress on points in it

made less of by the church in which he had been brought up. In his conversation and his poetry he was ever seeking to help forward the desire of Christ "That they all may be one," and therefore, like St. Paul with the men of Athens, he was always looking out for points of agreement in matters theological rather than for differences, and he could realise attitudes of mind widely different from his own so long as they wore the earnest views of the men and women holding them. And so perfectly did he realise and depict these varied views that they have frequently been confounded with his own. For instance I have found it hard to convince Roman Catholic priests that any, save one of their own faith, could have known the special religious ideas of the Irish peasants to which he gives expression in his "To-Morrow", and the same might be said of the pillar-saint in "St. Simon Stylites" and the nun in "St. Agnes' Eve", whilst agnostics have been ready to claim Tennyson, because of the lines in "In Memoriam",

"There lives more faith in honest doubt,  
Believe me, than in half the creeds,"

neglecting to read the context which shows that the man indicated is he alone who, while honest enough to acknowledge his doubts instead of seeking to smother them out of sight under a creed that has become unreal to him, yet does battle with these very doubts in the strength of the power that he knew to be with him all through the darkness of that period of doubt, and

. . . . . "thus he came at length  
To find a stronger faith his own."

The conquest of unbelief is even more finely expressed in the poem entitled "Doubt and Prayer" where the man prays to that

"Love which is, and was"  
"My Father, and my Brother and my God"

that He would

"Let blow the trumpet strongly while I pray,"

"Till this embattled wall of unbelief"

"My prison, not my fortress, fall away!"

"While I pray"—this is the keynote to the whole religious life of Tennyson who was pre-eminently a man of prayer, and it is from his own experience that he wrote in the "Morte d'Arthur",

"Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer

"Than this world dreams of. Wherefore let thy voice

"Rise like a fountain for me night and day.

For what are men better than sheep or goats.

"That nourish a blind life within the brain,

"If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer

"Both for themselves and those who call them friend?

"For so the whole round earth is every way

"Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.

More than half a century had passed since he had written these lines when Tennyson told me that not one earnest prayer of his had ever failed to receive an answer, for to him prayer was

"A breath that fleets beyond this iron world

And touches Him Who made it."

He said that "the reason why men find it hard to regard prayer in the same light in which it was formerly regarded is that we seem to know more of the unchangeableness of Law." But on this point we must remember that

"God is law, say the wise; O Soul, and let us rejoice,"

"For if he thunder by law, the thunder is yet His voice."

Prayer he compared to "opening a sluice between the great ocean and our little channels, when the great sea gathers itself together and flows in at full tide."

Tennyson being not only, like his brother Charles, my uncle by marriage but also being my guardian used to be as a father to me in religious matters and it was of these that he talked the most to me when I lived close to him in the Isle of Wight and seldom missed a daily walk with him. The province of religion was a very wide one to him for he looked for and found everywhere the presence of God and so all men and all things were sacred to him. Like Shakespeare he could discover the spark of good among the ashes of evil, and though he knew full well that all earthly good must needs be imperfect he took no delight in finding the evil that might be mingled with it unless by so doing he was sure of being able to help to purge away that evil.

Tennyson considered worldliness one of the most besetting sins of the age and one harder to root out than untruthfulness and impurity, because while none could harbor those sins without their presence betraying itself, worldliness could exist unsuspected until it had poisoned the whole nature, unless a constant watch were kept over the motives of every action. He believed the study of nature in a religious and scientific spirit to be a great antidote to worldliness, as showing the individual his true position in the universe; for, as he said to me, "When I think of the mighty worlds around us, to which ours is but a speck, I feel what poor little worms we are, and ask myself, 'What is greatness?'" And yet the human mind crushed by the contemplation of the immensity of God's creation is raised again, my uncle deemed, by the fact that "God reveals Himself in each individual soul" which can therefore be great in the greatness of God.

Tennyson considered the freedom of the human will, and the starry heavens as the two greatest marvels that come under our observation and night after night did he mount to the platform on the roof of Farringford (his house in the Isle of Wight) to study astronomy of which he knew not a little, as he did also of geology and botany. By constant reading and earnest converse with his many scientific friends he kept himself abreast of all the great discoveries of our time in science

and archæology, which always led with him to the greater confirmation of his faith in God because he knew that all truth, once proved to be such, must be Divine.

The whole circle of Tennyson's poetry bears witness to his intense love of Nature from the tiniest shell and flower that never escaped his notice, to the fossil bones of the huge Saurians; and when looking over a wide stretch of landscape he would reconstruct it in his mind's eye as it was in long past ages so vividly that he would make those to whom he spoke see it with him. Then perchance he would suddenly turn his mind from the contemplation of that mighty river of old "as big as the Rhine and the Rhone rolled into one" to watch the sunlight gilding to a deeper shade of gold the fragile rock-cistus bloom at his feet and tenderly plucking the delicate flower would hold it lovingly in his hand and looking up say to the companion of his walk, "There is not a flower on all this down that owes to the sun what I owe to Christ."

The fine stature of Tennyson at Lincoln represents him with the little plant of "Live-in-idleness" which he plucked out of the "crannied wall" at Farringford and of which "little flower" he wrote

"If I could understand

"What you are root and all, and all in all,

"I should know what God and man is.

Into the conceptions which with our limited capacities we are able to form of God Tennyson considered that a certain amount of anthropomorphism must necessarily enter "because though there may be infinitely higher beings than ourselves in the worlds beyond ours, yet to our conception man is the highest form of being. "E... says," he continued, "there is something higher than God. If there be, then it must be God. Whatever is the highest of all must be the Deity, call it by what name you will. Matter, space and time are all illusions, but above and beyond them all is God, who is no illusion. Time has no absolute existence, and we can as little con-

ceive of space being finite as of its being infinite. We can really understand the existence of spirit much better than that of matter, which is to me far more incomprehensible than spirit. We see nothing as it really is, not even our fellow-creatures." This conviction of how hard it is to know our fellow-creatures, and therefore how easy it is to misrepresent them made him put the best possible construction upon people's words and actions. I am sure his attitude toward them made them better men and women than they would otherwise have been, for they were ashamed not to be what he showed that he thought them. This attitude of Tennyson's was greatly brought about by the insight he had gained into the heart of his beloved friend, Arthur Hallam, of whom he and his brothers and sisters and my own mother and her sisters often spoke to me as of one who had died but yesterday, so vivid was the impression his short life had made upon their long ones. My uncle used to dwell much upon Arthur Hallam's stainless purity and absolute truthfulness, and this it was that made him feel that the lessons of perfect purity and of utter truthfulness which he strove to teach in the whole cycle of the "Idylls of the King" were not impossible to be put into practice by the sons of men. Indeed he put them most fully into practice himself for no man that ever lived came nearer than he did to perfect truthfulness. He was often a martyr to his determination never to say anything that was not strictly and absolutely true; for none could be more sensitive than he was about paining people, and yet he would discard all smooth speeches that would have given pleasure, but would not have been quite sincere, and would just say right out the wholesome, though sometimes unpalatable truth instead, feeling utterly miserable for hours, and sometimes for days afterwards, with the fear that in this moral surgery which his duty to God required him to perform he had not handled the knife as gently as he might have done. Unless, however, by his keeping silence the cause of truth would have suffered he would never mention any matter that might injure a single human being. To his mind as to that of St. James that religion was dead



which did not show its fruits in self-sacrificing service to one's fellow-creatures, and though his soul could be wrapt in such spiritual ecstasy as he describes in "St. Agnes' Eve" and "The Holy Grail" yet his idea of heaven was rather that of being "engaged in perpetual ministry to souls in this and other worlds:" being enabled to accomplish this in tireless activity by a union with God closer than any possible on earth, though even here Tennyson believed that those who truly seek God will find Him to be "closer than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."

Much of Tennyson's religious life and teachings may be learnt from the pages of his son's memoir of him, whose title page bears the quotation,

"I have lived my life, and that which I have done  
"May He within Himself make pure."

A great deal may also be gathered from the noble poem entitled "The Ancient Sage." I was constantly with my uncle during his writing of it and he told me that it represents what he would have believed had he lived, as did the Sage,

"A thousand summers ere the time of Christ",

therefore he said you must add on Christianity to get at his true theology.

I once asked my uncle whether he agreed with Bacon's dictum that Pilate's question, "What is truth?" was put jestingly. "No," he unhesitatingly answered, "it was in no spirit of jesting he uttered those words. They may have been accompanied with a shrug of the shoulder, and spoken in a cynical tone, but I believe rather that they were wrung from the depths of a heart that had learnt that there was no truth in the religious systems then in vogue, and knew not where to seek it. Alas! that we should hear this cry repeated in our own age and that men should fail to find their soul's craving for truth satisfied by Christianity. The great spread of agnosticism and unbelief of all kinds seems to me to show that there is an evil time

close at hand. Sometimes I feel as if it would not surprise me to see all things perish. I firmly believe that if God were to withdraw Himself from the world around us and from within us, for but one instant, every atom of the creation, both animate and inanimate, would come utterly to naught, for in Him alone do all beings and things exist. Wherever life is there God is, specially in the life of man. I believe that beside our material body we possess an immaterial body something like what the ancient Egyptians called the Ka. I do not care to make distinctions between the soul and the spirit as men did in days of old, though perhaps the word spirit is the best to use of our higher nature, that nature which I believe to have been in Christ truly divine the very presence of the Father, the one only God, dwelling in the perfect man."

Tennyson often spoke to me of the actuality of Christ's presence to him in the Holy Communion—a presence which he considered the divinity of our Lord alone rendered possible. He dwelt much on the grandeur of the title "The Son of Man". "We are all sons of God," he was wont to say, "but one alone is worthy to be called "*the* Son of Man," the representative of the whole of humanity. That, to my mind, is the diviner title of the two, for none dare apply to himself this title save Christ, as thus representing the whole human race."

Most of my uncle's talks with me about religion took place on the Beacon Down, a lofty eminence now crowned by the Tennyson memorial cross, but then by the beacon which gave its name to the down, and which always seemed to me to be a fitting emblem of the poet-prophet whose whole life was a striving to be the beacon that he felt God had destined him to become to the storm-tossed mariners on the sea of life. It was for their sakes that he wished the hope that was in him to be recorded in any collection of his poems published, by always ending them with those now well-known lines that are among the last he wrote:

“For tho’ from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face,  
When I have crost the bar.”

If I ever reach the heavenly haven beyond the grave it will be largely because my uncle's beacon-light showed me the way. Nothing that others ever spoke to me, and nothing I ever saw ever made the impression upon me that his words and manner did when one day as we were descending the steep, grassy slope from the beacon he turned to me and said in exactly the same natural way as a child would express his delight at his father making him his companion: “God is with us now on this down, as we two are walking together, just as truly as Christ was with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus: we cannot see Him, but He, the Father, and the Savior and the Spirit, are nearer perhaps now than then to those that are not afraid to believe the words of the Apostle about the actual and real presence of God and His Christ with all who yearn for it.”

I said I thought such a near actual presence would be awful to most people. “Surely the love of God takes away and makes us forget all our fear,” he answered. “I should be surely afraid to live my life without God's presence; but to feel that He is by my side now just as much as you are, that is the very joy of my heart.” And I looked on Tennyson as he spoke, and the glory of God rested upon his face, and I felt that the Presence of the Most High had indeed overshadowed him.