

G-3419

True Religion an Aid to Virtue.

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

JULY 27TH, 1873, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

[From the EASTERN POST, August 2nd, 1873.]

On Sunday (July 27th) at St. George's Hall, the Rev. Charles Voysey took his text from Psalm xvi., 9, "I have set God always before me. He is on my right hand; therefore I shall not fall."

He said—Our meditations on the supremacy of virtue would hardly be complete without an effort to discern more clearly the relation between morality and religion. One of the most important questions that can be asked is, "What is the help which Religion gives to true Virtue?" I do not say that Religion ought to be abandoned if it could be proved to be of no value in the promotion of virtue, because Religion has other functions to fulfil in the economy of man; but it must be owned that Religion would lose nine-tenths of its value if it were of no moral use; and our duty would be to abandon it altogether if it were found to be a hindrance to morality. I am here forced to stand on the threshold of our enquiry in order to explain what is meant in this discourse by the word Religion. One is quite overwhelmed at the mass of different senses in which this and kindred terms are used, and it is positively alarming to think of the confusion that must overtake posterity in trying to understand the theological productions of this age. One can hardly take up a book or a magazine, or a weekly newspaper, without perceiving the perfect Babel we are in through our use of ambiguous terms, without any effort at definition. Controversy will one day come to a full stop, being choked by its own jargon. Theological polemic will at length fall into disuse when the light of day shall reveal every belligerent in the act of "beating the air," and thrusting at shadows.

To pass over the long list of senses in which the term religion is used, I will briefly repeat the definition, or rather the explanation, of it which I have often already given. Of course I do not give this as arbitrary and dogmatic, but only in order to leave no mistake as to my meaning.

Religion, as I understand and use the term, is the consciousness of a supreme God and of our relation to Him. It is the conviction of the heart that there is an invisible One who is Source and Ruler of the whole universe, and is especially the Lord of our hearts and lives; whose will is always good and must be obeyed; whose purpose is always kind, and may, therefore, be implicitly trusted; to whom we may turn for guidance, and on whom we may rest all our hope—in the words of my text, “I have set God always before me; He is on my right hand, &c.” To have this conviction is to be religious. To be destitute of all sense of God, so as to doubt gravely whether there be a God or not, is to be irreligious. Again, Religion is not merely an intellectual assent to the proposition, “There is a God, and He is good,” for a man may arrive at this conclusion in various ways, and yet not have any feeling of loyalty, or trust, or love towards God in his heart. Religion is intensely, but not exclusively, a matter of emotion. Observe further, that Religion is much more than mere awe and reverence. The Pantheist and even the Atheist may feel the emotions of awe and reverence excited by the contemplation of the grandeur and beauty of Nature; but while it is regarded as unconscious, and therefore irresponsive to human aspiration and devotion, it is impossible to regard it with religious feelings. The laws of Nature, which is the God of the Pantheist, are regarded by him as supreme, and nobly loyal to them he endeavours to become; but he owns that Nature does not know nor care whether he obeys her laws or not—that is his own business—nor is she conscious in the least degree of his loyalty or admiration. The Pantheist may be ravished with the sight of Nature’s beauty, but there is no return of his loving gaze, no gratified sense on her part of having filled her worshipper with bliss. The Pantheist may also be a very optimist of content and hope, abiding in the immutability and certainty of Nature’s operations; but he can never feel that rest and peace which those souls feel who know what it

is "to cast their burden on the Lord." In the Pantheist's God there is no consciousness, no individual will, no heart. But *Religion* recognises in God all these. It is the characteristic of religion to attribute to God more than all else—next to righteousness—tender sympathy and affection.

I am willing to admit that some of this, which I have called Religion, may be erroneous, and *must* be defective. We know how religion hitherto has been mixed up with errors and falsehood too patent to remain for ever rooted in men's minds. But Religion has outlived all primæval superstitions, and seems to have a vitality of its own by which it rises from the ashes of burned and buried creeds. In spite of the thousands who are just now destitute of all religion whatever, owing to the solemn mockery of maintaining a creed no longer credible, and owing in other cases to the intense disgust at having been so long the dupe of groundless superstitions; in spite of these, I say, Religion is taking fresh and stronger root than ever, and is putting forth new leaves, and even already bearing fresh and wholesome fruit for the healing of the nations. While morality owes scarcely a single thread of its binding power to the dying religions of modern Christendom, the true essence of religion, set free by the destruction of the tissue of creeds, is filling the air with its fragrance, and making glad the hearts of those who wept when their idols were shattered.

A modern wit has immortalised himself by describing the present state of religious feeling—if feeling it may be called—throughout orthodox Europe, in these terms: "To believe implicitly what one knows to be false." Let us hope that the time will come when it may be truly described thus: "To deny openly what one knows to be false," and when this stage is reached, "To know certainly what one believes to be true." Till this blessed change is consummated, we have but one duty in regard to religion. To be utterly true to the convictions of the hour, and to be honest enough as well as brave enough to abandon any position proved to be untenable. It is impossible on this, the deepest and highest of all themes, to attain the certainty of demonstration; to have such knowledge of God as would enable us, or warrant us, to teach with authority, as if it were scientifically verified, what we feel in our hearts to be true about God. It is alike impossible for the irreligious to *know*

that our convictions are false, or our feelings groundless, and it is unbecoming to dogmatise in the negative, as the orthodox have dogmatized in the affirmative. Time alone will show who is right and where lies the truth. Both of us are on the side of virtue; both alike regard it as supreme; both of us measure the worth or the worthlessness of any religion by its influence on the culture of morals. What better task could we pursue than to investigate to the very foundation the claim made for religion, that in so far as it approximates to the truth, or is set free from false admixtures, it is a very powerful laid to virtue?

Between the orthodox God, whose system is one of bribes and threats, and the God of Matthew Arnold, who is a "Power that makes for righteousness," and yet has no faculties for knowing when we are righteous and when we are not; who does not even know what righteousness is and has no power to think about anything—between these two—there is the God of pure Theism, who "thinks, and knows, and loves;" and is present to the soul as the most Holy One, the searcher of hearts, the Divine Father who loves to see His child willingly good—good from choice; a God who uses no coercion or enticement; who only whispers "Do this, because it is right." "Do not that, because it is wrong." Now, whether this be or be not a delusion of the mind which transfigures the human conscience into a Divine voice, at all events, it gives a sanction to the moral sense far more weighty than any other supposition yet known. It is only natural and human in the highest degree to attach unspeakable importance to what we believe to be mandates of the Eternal Will. Every thought, word, or deed, becomes magnified for good or ill, beyond all calculation, when it is regarded as conforming to, or rebelling against, the law of the most Holy One. And this part of religion—our recognition of a Divine Law-giver, an accuser and a judge—would never fail of its moral power were we always to *realise* what we profess to believe, were we "to set God always before us." We fail, not because it is for one instant a matter of indifference to us whether we obey God or not; but because we cannot, in the presence of temptation, and under pressure of physical allurements, realize to ourselves that God Himself is warning us from temptation, or urging us to perform some arduous duty. Indeed, we are religious in exact

proportion as we do realise His right of control, and in the same proportion is our religion a help to our virtue.

But, passing from the sense of Divine authority we come to the still higher conviction of the Divine friendliness—God's will that we should be good, joined with God's willingness to help us to become good; not by miracle, not by invariable answer to prayer, not by uniform rescue from temptation; but by the whole and mingled method of His discipline. Sometimes we are helped to virtue by being suffered to taste the bitter fruits of disobedience, or to be stung by the remorse which belongs to it. But to feel sure from first to last that One above, the most Holy, has devised all our past, present, and future as a means for the perfecting of our natures and the reproduction in ourselves of His own spotless image, must, without doubt, be a tremendous moral force, because it adds hope and encouragement of the highest order to the sense of solemn obligation. I know nothing more terrible than the weight of sin which used to be heaped upon our young heads by the reiterated falsehood that we had broken the whole of God's law if we were guilty in only one point. It was simple agony to be assured that a Perfect God demanded, and would be satisfied with, nothing less than a perfect obedience from man, which we knew could not possibly be rendered; and one only wonders why more brains did not give way under the never-to-be-forgotten weight of sin and doom. It made matters worse; resistance of temptation more difficult; hope of renewal impossible. One's only refuge was in atonement and substitution and imputed righteousness; leaving one no better than before and only an ungrateful slave. But now, what a change! Over again we can calmly repeat, but with an infinitely higher meaning, the old orthodox formula, "a Perfect God requires perfect obedience from man." Yes, indeed! But when? Not until he can render it. Not one moment sooner than all his faculties and surroundings shall have made it possible to him. But what does a "Perfect God" mean, but one perfectly just, and therefore requiring of us no more than we can render; so that perfect obedience is only doing our very best under our circumstances. A Perfect God can require no more; but He can require no less. Here the burdened sinner is pacified and encouraged; assured that God does not blame him one grain

more than he must blame himself; and consoled by the hope that his present exertions, and even failures, shall work in at length to the purification of his soul. It is something to be virtuous *for*, if one knows that virtue in one little thing will lead to being virtuous in many great things; and that the more one tries the sooner one will succeed. It is some encouragement to be as virtuous as we can be *now*, to believe that we shall be perfectly virtuous hereafter. And this hope and encouragement, I say, are the direct fruits of true religion. Perfect trust in God's good purposes *does* provide this invaluable aid to virtue. Just, in fact, as the old falsehood paralysed moral effort through utter despair of success, and then sent conscience to slumber by saying, "All your righteousness is as filthy rags;" so the new truth stimulates to an enthusiasm of virtuous effort, and comforts the soul, not only by assurances of Divine approval, but by promise of entire success.

Moreover, a religion like this which recognises the universal and impartial love of God for all mankind is a powerful aid to virtue, by inspiring affection between man and man. It was, perhaps, excusable under the old creed to hate those whom God was supposed to hate, and to count them our enemies; but it is impossible to feel the same animosity towards anyone in whom at the time we recognise one who is very dear to God, and who, like ourselves, is destined to perfect holiness. The mere fact of our common relationship to one Divine Father, and our common hope of being thoroughly cleansed from all sin and cured of all defects, must have its influence in softening down our asperity, and in awakening our mercy and forbearance. Whatever helps to kindle affection between man and man is a real help to virtue. It would be an evil day for mankind, if a mere sense of duty—invaluable as that is—only remained as a spur to right conduct; if our motives for doing good were to be stripped of the lovely adornments of tender feeling and sympathy, and our lives were only regulated by the cut and dried rules of mechanical morals. In truth, it seems to me, though I say it with all diffidence, that love is the real root of all virtue, and not its tardy fruit. Men have begun by acting from tender emotions and kind feelings, and then have discovered that their conduct was beneficial. Even Utilitarianism must fall back on love and kindness and the desire to do good, as the root of all

morality. For why should it be right to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number, instead of promoting the greatest happiness of the few who are best able to enjoy and appreciate happiness? Because, behind and beneath it lies the native kindness of the human heart, the instinct of generosity, the longing that all may share in our happiness, which, when wisely directed and organised, is called morality or virtue. Most true it is that we need the help of reason in the discovery of the best method of showing kindness; and our defective reasoning requires the correction of experience that we may learn how to select, and how to perform, what is really best for the common good. But, in general, the impulses of a kind heart go straight to the point, and are, in nine cases out of ten, infallibly virtuous.

It is through his affections chiefly that man has ever attained a true morality, and it is by his affections mainly that the standard of morals is kept steadily rising. Love deepens and widens sympathy, sympathy thus enlarged reveals to us wants and wrongs and sorrows of others to which we had before been blind, and this revelation is followed instantly by fresh calls upon our sense of duty, by new demands of the conscience. If I am my brother's keeper, and try to behave accordingly, the longer I keep him, the more faithfully I watch over his needs and perils, the more I shall have to do for him, and the greater will be the claims made upon my love and sympathy. It is notorious how we grow to love more those to whom we have shown kindness. In this sense also it is true that "it is more blessed to give than to receive." The love born out of bounty is far greater than the love born of gratitude.

If love then be rightly regarded as the proper root of virtue, and a religion be found which tends to inspire love between man and man, that religion must be a powerful auxiliary in promoting virtue. It is on this ground that we must admire those precepts of Christianity, and of all other religions, which inculcate "love to the brethren," and also detest and abjure those principles, beliefs, and precepts which inculcate first exclusiveness, and then hatred, malice and all uncharitableness towards those who are not theologically "brethren." As a religion, Christianity—as developed in Europe and America—has been nearly as much a source of strife

and hatred and selfish ambition, as a source of peace, charity, and good-will. It has hitherto, therefore, been nearly as great a hindrance to true virtue as a help to it. By its fruits it can be known; and by its fruits it must be judged. And in so far as it has taught what is true, it has blessed mankind; in so far as it has taught what is false, Christianity has been its bane.

The same sifting will be applied to the Religion of which I have spoken to-day. Its faults will show its truth and its falsehood; will disclose its weakness while declaring its power. Meanwhile, it is a comfort to know that in the long run truth alone is friend to mankind, while every falsehood is its foe.

