

GSS12

# POSITIVE RELIGION:

ITS BASIS AND CHARACTERISTICS.

LECTURE IV.

BY THE LATE

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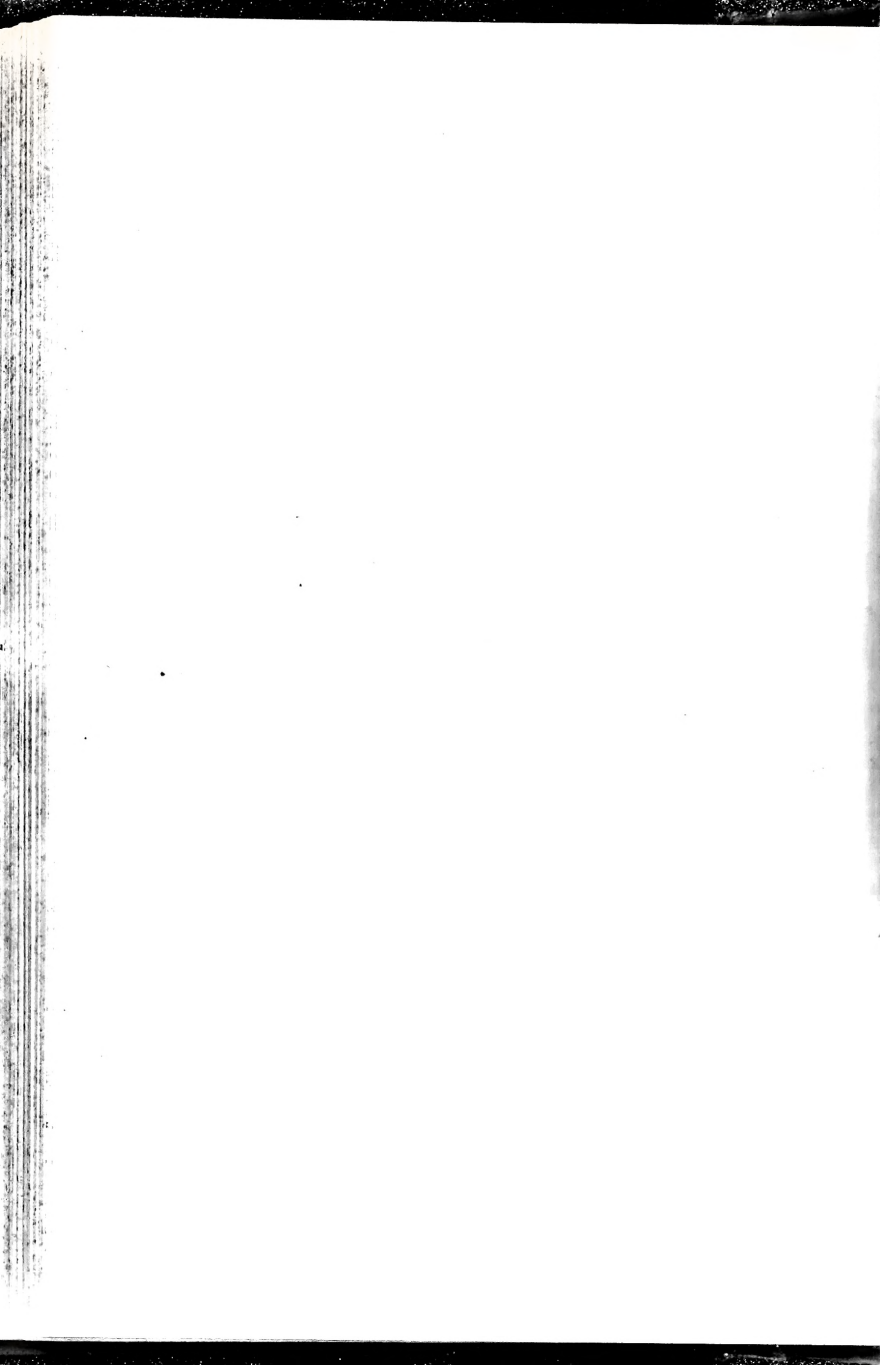


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WE are to travel together to-night over a region where you will require patient thought; not so much because the subject is especially difficult or recondite, as because it is one not very generally familiar. The result, however, will repay, I think, any amount of attention you may expend, as it will show us the possibility of worship even under the stringent conditions imposed by the phenomenal philosophy.

We must begin by recognising a curious faculty or tendency common to our human nature, but much more active amongst some individuals and some races than others. I mean the faculty or tendency which leads us to objectively represent, and indeed to vitalise and give a personal existence, or, at all events, personal relations, to our general and abstract ideas. Under its impulse the mind becomes impatient of base and pure thought, simple ideas collected in classes and bound together by a common or general name, and by the instrumentality of fancy hastens to represent them in concrete forms, and to give them some personal relation to itself. Indeed, the tendency is not confined to the sphere of ideas alone, in the strict sense of the term; it leads us also, in some states of culture, to ascribe vitality to the inanimate objects of nature, and to place them in personal relations to ourselves. And thus, where it predominates, the whole universe

becomes living, and man's affections or personal feelings are elicited by every object around him.

But the activity of the tendency greatly varies in different races, at different periods, under different temperaments, and with different degrees of culture. It is predominantly active in childhood. The feelings the child experiences within itself are promptly transferred to whatever it comes into contact with, and hence its passions reciprocate the supposed intentions of all the objects around it according as these objects become to it the source of pleasure or pain. The tendency is also generally very active amongst people in a low and barbarous state. They infuse their own personality into all the great objects and all the powerful forces of nature, and seem, therefore, to themselves, constantly living in the presence of wills as active as their own. More extended observation sets limits upon, and in a measure corrects, its action. The distinction between things animate and inanimate are more accurately discerned, and the predication of will is withdrawn from the inanimate objects and forces themselves and is transferred to some being or beings standing outside and directing them.

This limitation of the tendency necessitates an important change in the religious conceptions. So long as it is unrestrained, and every object is vitalised, fetishism is possible and natural. Immediately a distinction is drawn between things animate and inanimate, the fetishism passes into polytheism or monotheism. A god or gods directing the forces of nature, and not the forces themselves, become the objects of worship.

The limitation, however, is not the destruction of the tendency. It often continues as active as ever, but in new conditions. There is the same impatience with abstract ideas; the same effort to embody them in a concrete form; the same yearning after personal relations to the objects. Hence, in religion, the god

or gods are realised as vividly as ever, and are recognised and addressed as intimately and personally present. More than this, the mere mental conception of them is a cross the soul becomes impatient to bear, and therefore the fancy strives to embody the conception in some outward form.

It is at this point (I wish you especially to observe, because of its subsequent application) that this tendency gives rise to art. The inward impulses urge to an outward objective representation of the ideas and feelings. Efforts are made to realise them by means of sculpture, music, and poetry, architecture, and painting. None of the arts were introduced to accomplish a purpose. They were, and are still, when genuine, the single, pure, and spontaneous products of this impulse or tendency towards objective representation. Whoever had attempted to accomplish some secondary end by them has always failed in the art. He who has painted a picture or wrought a piece of sculpture to gain a pound has never done anything worth the pound he has gained. Those who compose a song, or a piece to be played on an instrument, in order to make music, will be sure to compose what will deserve to be hissed out of creation. That does not of course refer to singing or playing what others have composed, much less to learn the manual art, but to the origination of the work itself. All art work must be from irresistible impulsion of the spirit—sculpture, because the spirit is burdened until it can embody its idea in substantial form; music, because the spirit cannot restrain the harmonious emotions from uttering themselves; painting, because the spirit must proclaim what nature and life are to it; poetry, because the frenzied love of the beautiful would cause one to die if it could not find a rhythmical expression. Accordingly, that which has ever called forth the most urgent ideas and emotions has from the beginning constituted the primary

materials of art. And so the history of genuine art has been scarcely anything but the history of religious ideas and emotions striving to embody themselves in an objective form. This has led some critics to call religion the parent of art. What I have said will show you the appellation is incorrect, and that it was merely the strength and urgency of the religious ideas and emotions above others which compelled the tendency to objective representation to make them the first objects of its representing efforts; for the tendency must needs manifest itself according to the character of the ideas or emotions most occupying and burdening the soul, and in all the great eras of art these ideas and emotions were religious. Hence art has become the clearest and most distinct record of a nation's religious life—the conceptions and sentiments upon which it was founded. It is not in Thucydides and Herodotus—not in Plato and Aristotle even, but in Homer, Æschylus, and Sophocles, in the Apollo Belvedere, the Venus de Medici and de Milo, the Laocoon and the Niobe—that the real inner life of the ancient Greeks is revealed to us and to their profound religious ideas. In strict keeping with this too is the fact that the most artistic nations have ever been the most given to what is called idolatry, and to elaborateness of religious forms and ceremonies. The Hebrews and Persians, the most strict of monotheists, and to whom abstract ideas were least oppressive, had no idols in their advanced period, and were nearly destitute of the artistic faculty. The Egyptians, Hindus, and Greeks multiplied their idols and brought art to perfection. The same contrasts exist between the northern and southern races of Europe, of which you may take Scotland and Italy as the extreme types. In Scotland the religion is embodied in the abstract notions of the Confession of Faith and the Longer and Shorter Catechisms; in Italy it is embodied in the mass and Mariolatry; Scotland has erected Free kirks at so

many pence per foot ; has given birth to Burns and killed him ; has of late years produced some men who could paint a little, and sent them to get their living in London. Italy has erected St. Mark's and St. Peter's (amongst others), has given birth to Dante, Tasso, and Petrarch ; has nurtured Titian, Fra Angelico, Raphael, and I know not how many others of the same sort, and claims as her own Palestrina and Mozart. If religion were the parent of art this contrast would prove the religion of the Italians to be stronger, more fervent, more productive than that of the Scotch. But religion is not the parent. As we have seen, art is the consequence of an impatience with abstract ideas and feelings, giving rise to a tendency to seek for them any kind of outward impression and embodiment ; and in the case of the Italians it assumed the particular forms we have alluded to in virtue of the special culture of the times.

But now, it is important to observe, the force of this tendency to objective expression seems directly connected with the depth and intensity of our sense emotions, *i.e.*, of those emotions or feelings which are directly excited through our various senses ; and also, the perfection of the expression depends primarily upon their purity, adequateness, and full culture. The ancient Hindoos and Egyptians would both furnish us with convincing illustrations of this truth. But I refer now to the Greeks alone because they are better known. In them the culture of the senses was carried to its utmost perfection—their whole nature was in complete harmony. They were the most rational and the most sensuous race that ever lived. No people have surpassed them—I would scarcely say any have equalled them—in intellect ; and no people have had such eyes to see, such deep emotions to feel, the beauty and sensuous glory of all nature. In gigantic stature of intellect no human being that ever lived came up to Aristotle by the whole head and shoulders ;

and yet no other people ever seem to have dreamed of such exquisite forms as those of the Apollo and the Venus. In everything they did and said you see the depth and intensity, the purity and culture of their sensuous emotions. Accordingly, in keeping with the principle I have asserted, no people were ever more impatient of unembodied, unrepresented, abstract ideas and feelings. They were always striving after objectivity; their philosophy no less than all their other works proves this—Plato, the idealist, no less than Aristotle, the realistic. Their method of philosophical inquiry was purely subjective; but the subjective creations to which it led were instantaneously projected upon the outward world of sense, and existed for them not as abstractions of the fancy, but as realities of nature. In religion this comes out still more palpably. In their inmost thought and feeling the Greeks were always pantheistic. The gods of their polytheism were the mere offspring of their impatience to embody the pantheistic conception in form. Over them all, over all the universe, was that awful, terrible, incomprehensible power they called Fate or Destiny. This was their real, their universal god. It gave birth to all things, gods and men not less than the physical forces of nature, and yet against it both gods and men had to maintain a perpetual struggle, and to them the struggle seemed most awful. With the thought of Zeus they could toy; but the thought of this mysterious, all-creating, all-determining Fate caused their whole being to melt with the most intense and profound emotion. Impatient of the mere thought, however, they embodied it in everything. It is the sublime idea which inspires the tragedies, and moves us so deeply in the representations of Hecuba, Medea, Electra, and the rest. And it is this which most of all we feel in the statues of the gods, in whose countenance and form the individualities of the character are subdued by that sublime calmness and indifference



which can only come from a nature at one and in harmony with destiny. Why has the world never since seen such perfection in Art? Because never since has it possessed a race with ideals of humanity so lofty, and at the same time with the senses and the sense emotions so refined, so developed, and so richly cultured. The only approach ever made to the perfection of Grecian religious art was by the Italianised-Gothic people of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. But their intense sensuousness was tainted by the Christian notions of asceticism, and therefore never attained to that full culture which alone could have brought their art to a level with the Grecian.

But, enticing as the theme is, these observations must suffice us now in illustration of the principle I have been endeavouring to establish. I trust enough has been said, however, to show you that there is in men a tendency to embody their abstract ideas and feelings in outward forms and expression, through this embodiment, and to bring all things into personal relations to themselves; that this tendency gives rise to art in its various departments, and some religious ideas and feelings have hitherto been the most predominant and so the most urgent for outward embodiment. Art has hitherto in all its great eras been mainly concerned with the expression of religious ideas and feelings; and finally, that the urgency and strength of this tendency to objective expression, and the perfection of the art, by means of which the expression is made, seem mainly to depend upon the intensity, fulness, development, and perfect culture of the senses and the sense emotions.

Now, these principles being, in my judgment, clearly and irrefutably established by an analysis of our human nature, and by the history of all people in the past, I think they furnish us with data from which we may derive some tolerably accurate conclusions with regard to the possibilities and conditions of worship under

that form of religion determined by the phenomenal philosophy. At present, no doubt, the tendency amongst those who have embraced the philosophy is to abandon all kinds of worship. The old forms are felt to be perfectly incompatible with the new conditions of thought. And in itself, at first sight, it may well appear that the worship of what is unknown and unknowable is an absurdity and a superstition. Hence the majority either give up all idea of worship whatsoever, or attempt to substitute for the old something which possesses none of the characteristics of worship excepting the name. At this, however, those will not be surprised who remember that, until the system of philosophy has been generally diffused, and it has become a form of national life, its full, permanent tendencies cannot be known (excepting by inference), and a great deal will seem to result from it which are only peculiarities of the individuals adopting it under their isolated circumstances. I cannot stay to illustrate this remark now ; but it will be found applicable to all systems of religion and philosophy in the early and struggling periods of their history, and fully explains why phenomenalists so generally abjure all worship, and yet without making it necessary to suppose they must continue to do so.

On the other hand, the principles I have expounded to-night justify the assertion that worship will be found as inevitable under the influences of phenomenalism as under every other form of thought. For worship is nothing but an attempt to objectively embody or express the religious ideas and feelings. Unless, therefore, it could be shown that the phenomenal philosophy destroys all such ideas and feelings, or else destroys the tendency to objective expression, worship must be as inevitable under its forms of thought as under every other. Now, that it does not destroy the religious ideas and feelings, I think I clearly showed in the last lecture. It rather deepens

them, and gives them a sublimer reality. When it proves to us that we have no faculties to penetrate the great mystery of existence and to know God, it deepens and intensifies our sense of that mystery; and in the awe, reverence, and conscious littleness which spring up within us, we have the essence of all religion. We cannot but believe in a something which is the determined condition of the universe; that we cannot know it only makes us realise the thought more vividly, and feel its mystery and awfulness more deeply. And this is religion, in its truest, inmost sense. The phenomenal philosophy, therefore, does not destroy, but fosters, religion.

But now, seeing it does not destroy religion, the primary element in worship, the ideas and feelings working in the mind, let us ask if it destroy the second element, that tendency to embody or express our ideas and feelings in all objective form, the nature of which I have endeavoured to explain. Clearly it cannot, if that tendency arise out of a primary law of our nature, as I think every one must own that it does, seeing it is common to all people, although in different degrees, and manifesting itself under different conditions. Nay, if it be conceded that I am correct in those assertions I have made respecting the connection between the culture of our senses and sense emotions and the strength and intensity of the tendency, then most assuredly the phenomenal philosophy must have the direct effect of greatly intensifying the tendency. And the reason of this appears in the fact that the philosophy must necessarily lead to a culture of our whole physical nature, and so of our senses and sense emotions to a degree and in a rational manner which has not been known since the times of the ancient Greeks. Indeed, you already see this consequence of it in active operation. Biological studies, which have done so much to foster the phenomenal philosophy, and which, on the other hand, are almost

entirely due to the influence of its spirit, have already revealed facts connected with sense and sense emotions which not only show their importance in our system, but the absolute necessity to our full development of their culture upon rational principles. Accordingly, attention on every hand is awakening up to this subject, and even those still bound to the old orthodox and metaphysical doctrines cannot escape the influence.

And hence, in keeping with the principles I have expounded, there is also a great awakening in the taste or love for art, and especially in those nations most coming under the phenomenal spirit. Everywhere music, painting, sculpture, architecture, are more sought after; everywhere true poetry is better appreciated. If Art be yet wavering, uncertain, and unsatisfactory, and we have still to go back to the older springs to slake our thirst for poetry, the fact arises out of circumstances I may at some future time explain. But the revival of the taste, the longing after such things, comes to us as proof of the intensifying of the tendency to objectivity, and to that the extending influence of the phenomenal philosophy is operating in favour of that tendency.

I think, then, that these considerations, amongst others, serve to prove that worship will still be necessary to us in the new era of thought upon which we are entering, and that the phenomenal philosophy strengthens and intensifies both the elements of which it is constituted, *i.e.*, the deep, religious emotion, and the tendency to give that emotion an outward, objective expression.

But you will recollect that I have already pointed out that the precise form the outward expression assumes must depend upon the general culture. Or perhaps I should say rather, that the general culture or method of thought will necessarily influence the ideas and conceptions; these ideas and conceptions will modify the character of the emotions; and thus

the objective expression of them will, in proportion to its truthfulness, vary with the ideas and conceptions. Accordingly, when the state of culture allowed men to think every object around them possessed a will like their own, the emotions each object called forth were expressed in the form of fetish worship. When their culture allowed them to suppose the conceptions of their fancies possessed a substantive existence, and their religion in consequence became polytheistic, then, as amongst the Greeks, it became possible to worship these fanciful conceptions by prayer and songs, to represent them in statues, and consecrate to them the services of Art. When men came under the Christian culture, the ideas of God in a bodily form were proscribed, and consequently all material representations were excluded from the worship; but the ideas of God as possessing mental and moral qualities were allowed; the corresponding emotions reciprocating the divine affections were cherished, and the worship became an expression of this mental conception accordingly. It would considerably help my exposition, and be exceedingly interesting, if I had time for it, to point out how the introduction of the metaphysical and yet materialising doctrine of transubstantiation necessitated a gorgeous ceremonial, and how the Protestant-attempted recurrence to the purely mental idea of God necessitated the bald forms of Presbyterian and Congregational worship. But I trust you will follow out the clue I have given you to the explanation for yourselves.

Upon the principles thus far explained, it will at once be seen how the phenomenal philosophy must still more than Christian monotheism limit these objective expressions of worship. For, limiting the ideas to the phenomenal, and declaring that God is in Himself unknown and unknowable, merely the conceived *something* to which the phenomena of the universe is referred as its unascertainable antecedent, the

emotions excited by them can have in their character nothing of the affections called forth by human beings, and therefore all the direct expressions of them objectively can be nothing else than the pure outpouring of the feelings of wonder, awe, and reverence, which the sense of the great mystery calls forth. Now, even if there were nothing else possible, since in these feelings the essence and primary elements of all religions are contained, the outward worship would be as real as in any other religions. Nor would the objective expression be confined to one form. Not only poetry and song, but sculpture, painting, and, above all, architecture, might be used as freely as under the Grecian conceptions, and much more freely than is consistent with Christian monotheism. But of this I shall speak again.

But observe this is not all. I have shown that this great mystery is not only spread over the universe as a whole, but encompasses every particular particle and every particular force. Each aspect of nature thus becomes identified with it, and moves our emotions according to the relations which under its determination thus become evolved. The emotions thus awakened also seek their objective expression and mingle in the worship of the one great mystery. The expression thus becomes a glorification and adoration of the mystical in the powers of universal nature and may even assume the forms of trust, longing, and desire, according to the relations those powers sustain. And I take it, it was the perception of this truth which led a certain metaphysical school in Germany, approaching the subject under pantheistic forms, to propose, a few years since, the restoration of the Grecian *Cultus* as the only possible religion for the cultivated. The phenomenal philosophy could not do so. Its method excludes the conception of all fancied beings whose existence cannot be proved; but it takes up into its knowledge those forces of nature, the

Greeks personified and deified ; it views them in their relations to man and in their relation to the great mystery ; it could not and would not check those natural emotions they inspire, and thus the worship of all that is great, beautiful, and good becomes inevitable. And when Nature, the Universe, God, is viewed under these aspects, another source of emotion is speedily opened. The mystery which enshrouds all things we still long to penetrate. The longing quickens our thirst for the knowledge of the laws and successions within our horizon. Especially we long to become so conformed with these laws that we may move in harmony with that destiny which determines all things, and so have the blessedness of a free and indifferent life. Now, in worship, these longings take the form of aspiration—aspiration after the fuller and a perfect knowledge ; aspiration after complete conformity with the highest laws of our being ; aspiration after the free, indifferent, blissful life of humanity in repose with destiny. The aspiration creates for itself a lyrical expression. The deepest, purest, noblest worship is in the lyrics it creates.

Nor is it necessary to worship of this kind that an auditor should be assumed. The true lyric is often inspired in absolute solitude. It pours itself forth in overwhelming feeling like the mountain spring, freely and without reflection. Its essence is not in address, but in utterance. Like the Hebrew lyrist, who exclaimed, "Whilst I was musing the fire burned, then spake I with my tongue," so all such utterances, when real, well up irresistibly and impulsively from the depths of feeling within, and flow forth independently of all outward circumstances.

In these later sentences I have spoken I may have seemed to be thinking only of the worship which makes use of words for its utterance. But I have already expounded to you principles which will warn you that such could not be the case. Still more than

other religions the religion founded on phenomenalism will be sure to appropriate to its use everything true in thought, lofty in aspiration, noble and glorious in life, beautiful and lovely in form ; for to it every such thing in nature becomes an inspiration, and every such thing becomes to it a symbol of its deepest emotions. It must needs therefore lay an embargo upon all nature and all art and make them subservient to its purposes. It is therefore that I anticipate an era which, because of its truer knowledge and method, shall surpass the most golden period of Grecian culture—when religion freed from superstition shall once more, not in phrase merely but in very deed, consecrate all nature as a sacred temple, and everything noble and beautiful and good, whether in humanity or the physical world, as an object before which one may bow down to invoke his adoration and love ; and when Art, no longer raising a feeble hand in wearying mutation, inspired with a new life, shall consecrate her genius to the glorification of the great All-in-all, that Power we cannot comprehend, but which not the less we worship from the inmost depths of our being.

