

G5528

Simple Religion:

A SERMON

PREACHED BY

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(Missionary of the Brahmo Somaj of India)

IN THE

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LESSONS.

Nánák lay on the ground, absorbed in devotion, with his feet towards Mecca. A Moslem priest seeing him cried : "Base infidel! how darest thou turn thy feet towards the house of Allah?" Nánák answered, "And thou—turn them if thou canst towards any spot where the awful house of God is not?"

The height and depth of all the world is centred in thee, Lord. I know not what thou art; thou art what thou alone canst be.

Once upon a time the fishes of a certain river took counsel together, and said : "They tell us that our life and being is from the water, but we have never seen water, and know not what it is." Then some among them wiser than the rest said, "We have learned that there dwelleth in the sea a very wise and learned fish, who knoweth all things; let us journey to him and ask him to show us water, or explain to us what it is." So several of their number set out upon their travels, and at last came to the sea wherein this sage fish resided. On hearing their request he answered them thus :

"O ye who seek to solve the knot,
Ye live in God, yet know him not.
Ye sit upon the river's brink,
Yet crave in vain a drop to drink.
Ye dwell beside a countless store,
Yet perish hungry at the door."



SERMON.

THERE is a deep and lingering sadness in the mind of the religious man when he contemplates how men have made things easy and important most difficult. In our usual worldly life this is painful enough, but it becomes much more painful when we find it repeated in our religious life. Religion has been made the most difficult of all things, though nothing in the world is simpler. My object in addressing you will be to elucidate some of its simplest principles. The first of these is Faith in God. Faith in God! The words call into our remembrance how many conflicts—how much ignorance and superstition—how much bitterness and disagreement! Faith in God! They call into our remembrance how much life and light and love! What power, what sweetness of joy! Strange recollections and feelings, the most opposite and inconsistent, are called up in the mind by that simple phrase, Faith in God. The old religious world would still hold by its Pharisaism, and what is worse, would ascribe to God the Pharisaism which belongs to itself. The God of that world would not accept the worship of the uncircumcised, would not accept the sacrifice of love and of trust which is not consecrated by

authorized ceremonies, forms, and phrases. The God of that world would exclude more than half the human race—would consecrate ignorance, darkness, and the domination of the few over the many. Yes, He would stand up against the spirit of the age, and hurl anathemas upon the divine utterances of Nature and Knowledge. He is only to be found in the sanctuary or nowhere. The universe is not His abode, He is too small for it. He is only to be found in the Sacred Book, or nowhere. The soul and the universe cannot teach about Him. The Moslem sage went and rebuked Nánák, saying, “Base Infidel! what! wouldst thou dishonour the House of God?” The misfortune is that many of us are not so strong in faith, or so powerful in mind as Nánák was, and cannot return that glorious retort that came readily to his lips—“Then show me the place which is not the House of God!” We silently, meekly, weakly accept the Pharisaism which is placed before us, bend before it, or rebel against it, and in rebelling against it, rebel against our God and our own soul. Nánák saw God in His sanctuary. He saw God sitting on the throne of the whole universe, with the sun and moon for His altar lights, with the canopy of the stars over His head; but we, we would follow our priest into the narrow precincts of our temple, and there or nowhere should we worship Him! No one respects Pharisaism more than I do. There is a strictness in it without which religion is often false liberalism. There is a fidelity in it which I admire, and which I court, but there is also in it much I cannot and dare not accept. I dare not accept that unnatural bondage of the intellect and conscience which theology would often impose. The greatest mischief which Pharisaism has produced has been to render servile the minds of those that rebelled against it. If one was a follower of the old religion, and if one conformed to all its dictates, it would not matter; but the misfortune is that

when one rebels against it, then is one most enslaved. The exclusive theology of the world would not recognise God in the world of His laws, and in the world of His nature ; therefore a scientific man, whose mind is unprejudiced and liberal, seems forced to reject the entire notion of a God. Because there is the one extreme of superstition and orthodoxy, therefore he must go to the other extreme of scepticism and unbelief. Yes, this has been the greatest misfortune of the world. This unbelief is to my mind the direct effect of the slavery which a narrow theology imposes, the effect of a necessary reaction, a servile sedition.

The two evils I deplore most in connection with exclusive theology are, in the first place, the evil of exclusiveness and superstition ; in the second place the evil of false liberality and scepticism. The true man of science, when he contemplates the world, traces and understands its laws—ascends from fact to fact, from the deep bottom of the sea to the ethereal regions of the sky, and sees that outside and beyond the domain of intellectual investigation there is a mystery which Science cannot solve and Reason cannot explain—the great problem of problems—the great mystery of mysteries—which has hung over the creation since the day of its birth. And then within the inner world, where the laws of mind are acting, as the laws of matter are acting outside, the man of science beholds certain wants, cravings, and instincts which reason cannot satisfy, which philosophy cannot remove. If I am not mistaken, this is the conclusion recognised by the most advanced scientific men of your country. I call this a faithful admission. I call this a great truth, which has to be owned by science and placed before the religious world. The scientific man has done what he can do. He has discovered all that he could ; at least, he has defined the region of his discoveries. He has solved and explained all within his own sphere, and

the problems which he cannot solve he places before you honestly and faithfully. Now it is for the man of Religion to come forward, and, in the name of God, to try, if he is able, to solve the mystery which science recognises but cannot explain. Here, to my mind, begins the world of true religion. If theology is able, let it come forward and establish its position here. If it is not able, let it retire to its own place in the arena of human speculation. Let the solitary soul, seeking God and Truth, winged with Inspiration, look up towards heaven and answer the great question that the universe asks.

Yes, there is a mystery, in the darkness of which the world has sat and worshipped for many centuries. There are wants which have inspired the profoundest worship and the grandest faith of which human nature is capable—that noblest self-sacrifice which makes up the manhood of the world. Religion deals with that mystery. Religion deals with those wants. Yet does the mystery always remain a mystery? Is there no light in God's heaven that dispels this darkness of the soul? There is. Let us look at the mystery in the face. What is it? Why to my mind, and I proceed upon the admission of the scientific man, this mystery is the great grand mystery of Life. Over the face of all things, in heaven and earth, and the soul of man, there is a lurking, indwelling Life which I am awe-struck to behold, and which I cannot explain. My profound spiritual forefathers, who sat on the ice-crowned mountains of my fatherland and worshipped there in solitude and silence—beheld this mystery of Life, and bent before it and adored it. They called this mystery the Life of Life—the Life of the Creation—the Spirit which enters into everything, but is different from all, which gives brightness for darkness—life for death—design for disorder, and harmony for discord. Go down bravely into the depths of this mystery and you shall find a Life

in it, a Spirit, a Soul. It is nothing more than that all-pervading, that throbbing, glorious Life which makes the universe what it is—a grand, growing, living thing. It is the Spirit, the Soul, that makes us what we all are, and within which we live and rest. It is the ocean, within which the whole universe floats away. It is the Presence of God.

This great mystery, then, is a great Life, a great Presence, which the soul recognises, reverences, and calls the supreme Soul, the supreme Spirit, nay God! The prophet craves to understand it more and more, because to him it is a Life which illumines all the mysteries of the world. It is a Spirit, a Personality, that can satisfy the deep insatiable wants of one's own profoundest spirit and personality. The soul appeals to, and is appealed to by, its kindred relations, and in matter beholds a Spirit, and in spirit a Life, Presence, and Personality that answers its questionings, and bids it rest, and doubt not. The great spiritual poet finds this Life and Spirit symbolised and embodied in his heart, in all that is beautiful, lovely, and sublime in the world. It furnishes him with the grandest and the most profound inspiration of poetry of which his soul is capable. The power of this Life surrounds the mind with that awe and utter sense of dependence, under which the fatalist crouches down trembling with fear. This is the All-Dispensing and superintending power. It is this Life, which is at the bottom of all things—of all the beauty, and of all harmony with which the world is full. This is the presence of God. To the philosopher it is a great mysterious Mind; to the poet it is a great mysterious Beauty and Love; to the superstitious and the fatalist it is a great mysterious all-crushing Power; to the humble man of faith it is the fulness and presence of the Spirit of God. But it is perceived by all. Yes, I should not conceal from myself or from you the fact

that, had we but the right mind, we would perceive God—we would have the perception of His spirit within our spirit. What is faith in God, if it is not a direct perception? I honour the indirect and the second-hand belief in God which is prevalent amongst most men, but to my mind belief in God is never perfect unless it is realised as an act of perception. Do you take objection to that word? What is it that produces within my mind an impression of a deeper, higher, and more glorious wisdom than that which I myself possess? How is it that the fact of a strange wisdom and knowledge enters into my being, if it is nowhere? Can the darkness of ignorance create wisdom out of itself? Can that wisdom which the mind beholds exist, without a mind which contains it? How is it, that strange beauty comes and makes its impression within my soul, when I myself possess it not, and, that goodness which I am awe-struck to behold, lightens all around me? Where does it all come from? What is beauty without the Beautiful, and goodness without the Good? What is perception? The recognition of impressions which outward objects make upon our minds. It is from the impressions that we conclude the existence of the outward objects which produce them. And exactly the same argument holds good in relation to faith in God. If I am faithful enough to find that a mighty encircling wisdom strikes up within me a divine fire of knowledge and insight that was not in my soul before—and a beauty and a tranquillity in which creation is steeped, and a love which enlivens everything, and a power which commands the universe—(if all this happens) I immediately conclude that there is within me and around me a Spirit which has touched me! Not to believe in that Spirit is as impossible as not to believe that the world exists. Faith in God is a perception, the strongest of all perceptions. To God then belongs the wisdom, the life, the beauty, the harmony, the love,

power, and purity that stand out before us within and without. Everyone—at one time or at another—doth behold the Spirit of God. Yes, He doth pass the door of my house, but I know Him not. He comes and goes within and without the soul, but the soul says it hath not seen Him, and cries and cries again: “Lord reveal Thyself to me.” He doth reveal Himself, He hath revealed Himself, will always reveal Himself to those men and women who really seek Him, and for them faith grows perfect into surest and profoundest knowledge.

When the spirit of God is thus recognised in the soul as the Life and the Truth, the soul cannot but assume a peculiar attitude, standing face to face before Him. How can we stand before wisdom, power, love, and purity like His? How can we stand before His spirit, as we often do, listless and unabashed, without reverence and without life? Ah! when the spirit of God is recognised, the soul stands transformed before Him; the breath of His presence and power calls into bloom all its powers of love and faith, all its aspirations after purity and salvation, and the pious soul bends before its Lord as the tree bends down under the load of its own fruits. This is the attitude of true and spiritual worship. It is too painful to notice how worship, with men, often means only forms and empty words. We cannot dispense with forms and with words, I know, but what are they without the natural and earnest feelings which the Father’s presence evokes in the soul? Alas, these vain ceremonies and forms have, on the one hand, driven men to utter prayerlessness; and, on the other hand, degraded them into offering selfish appeals for material benefit. There is only one prayer which I know, which I preach and practise, the infinite repetition of which fills the hearts of all good men, “Lord, pour into my heart Thy spirit!” That is the one prayer which man can make, infinitely, endlessly, ever growing upon

the soul; still the same great unsatisfied craving, longing the more the more it is answered, always seeking, asking, hungering, thirsting, praying here and hereafter, and receiving through all eternity. When the wisdom of God is seen, and the ignorance of the soul is owned; when the mercy and love and goodness of God are beheld, and the dryness of the soul is felt; when the power and the purity of the Lord are understood, and the true humility of man's heart presents itself in all its nakedness—no other prayer arises except this prayer: "Lord pour Thy spirit within me." What wealth can be greater than the possession of the spirit of God? What happiness is more precious than the happiness—the unspeakable blissfulness—which proceeds from a consciousness of God's love. Aye, and what treasure can we covet more than that treasure of righteousness, the purity of will which exists in Him in fulness? If you are afflicted in the world, go and tell Him your afflictions. I have nothing to say to it; but, remember, that what you call affliction may be happiness disguised. In this world the arrangements of life are so strange, that good is often thought to be evil, and evil good. That which ought to make us anxious and sorrowful fills us with joy, and when we ought to laugh and rejoice we sit weeping and brooding in melancholy. Do not therefore stand before the Throne of God and ask deliverance from that which you do not understand; lest in praying for fancied prosperity, you pray for evil and misery, but ask from Him that of which you are sure, that which your soul ought to prize above all things, ask from the Lord the wealth of His spirit. Let the physical world act according to physical laws. Let rain and sunshine, riches and poverty, health and disease, life and death, come and go according to the laws that regulate them. Keep those laws and break them not. But, when you pray to God, pray for nothing except for His love, and

the sweetness of communion, of salvation. Prayer is the way to get them. Ask the Lord for what He alone can give. Ask when you are bent down by the weight of your faith and love; ask in the light and mystery of His presence; ask Him in this attitude, in the silent language of the soul, or in the impassioned words that spontaneously come to the tongue, in the tears and throbs of the spirit, which the Lord can count, but no human being can, yea, that only is the attitude of worship—that only is the language of prayer. It is a sad thing to find out how often we are all satisfied merely with the husk of worship, throwing out of sight altogether the real bread and life for which the soul is dying. Men and women, be not deceived by mere glaring, glittering toys of words and forms wherein the wealth of the spirit is not to be found. It is Love that is worth having. Behold the Love of God, who stands face to face with the depths of the faith of your spirit. It is Wisdom that is worth having. Behold the infinite ocean of the Wisdom of God, who sits enthroned on the awful splendour of all the worlds. It is purity, righteousness, tranquillity, that is worth having. These exist in their fulness in His spirit. Therefore, in the presence of Him, let us bend down in the attitude which best befits the soul, and let us ask from Him, the overflowing fruitfulness of that piety, which is love and wisdom, and righteousness and peace, passing understanding!

And when there is faith in Him, and when there is true worship, there must be true life also. True life to me is nothing more than self-sacrifice. The word sacrifice is much more often misunderstood than any other word in the dictionary. Sacrifice often merely means self-abnegation, suffering, and death. To my mind this meaning is sad. Sacrifice means true life, consecrated to the service of God. Sacrifice means, on the one hand, an all-powerful passion of the spirit; and it means, on the other hand, that

labour, that unceasing, disinterested work which the faithful servant of God renders unto Him and unto the world. True love is known by its devotedness and its intensity; and what is our love to God, if it is not an intense, devoted love—if it is not a passion—if it is not a flame of enthusiasm which consumes all other passions in the depths of the soul? That half-hearted, sentimental, unreal devotion which men commonly call piety is very distressing. How can I be free from the carnal passions of my own nature unless there is a more powerful passion to hold them down, and to turn them from evil unto good? It is a passion only that can check another passion; and if the foul desires and wrong feelings of our nature are to be checked, they can only be checked by that powerful, intense enthusiasm of love with which God's servant ever looks to Him. When there is this passion of piety, it cannot fail to manifest itself in the real acts and conduct of life. What is that love which would not serve? What is that passion which would not bear evidence to itself in life? So, therefore, the true lover of God devotes his existence to labour, and to service, and to those deeds which are acceptable before Him. It is often found that in loving God, and in trying to serve Him, we are avoided by men, and even persecuted. Those whom we are trying to serve often rise up against us, and cruelly stab us in the heart. This is suffering which often marks the life of the most religious men. Ah! it is very great suffering indeed. When my love is frustrated and trampled upon, I feel an agony which finds its parallel nowhere. The persecution of which I speak may take the form of physical outrage, or moral cruelty. And thus the idea of suffering enters into that of true sacrifice. But then if there is agony in this service of love, is there not also a reward beyond all comparison? What reward do you want for your love which you give unto God,

except that you love Him and He accepts your love? If we offer ourselves—if we suffer—that suffering is transformed into joy, is turned into heavenliness, when God's love touches it, and it proceeds from our own love. There is a glory in the suffering of the good man which the world often deifies. There is an internal glory in the suffering of the faithful servant of God which more than recompenses the amount of its pain. The price of life is a very heavy price to pay, to us who love our lives so much; the price of life finds its equivalent nowhere; but what is there in the giving away of life, when there is a deeper, more joyful, and beautiful life to be found? Let those men and women who do not know that life weep, if they will, but let them weep for themselves, and not for him who prepareth to go to his Father's mansions of everlasting blessedness. To the man of service and faith, death, terrible as it is, is a gain, because it is an earnest of that final triumph with which love must in the end be crowned even on earth. True sacrifice, then, is God-loving, brother-serving, self-forgetting enthusiasm; true piety, endless uncalculating self-surrender unto God, and to His very Own work. How can we serve Him? How can we frail mortal beings serve the perfect One, the God of infinite wisdom and power? That service which we want to give unto Him is to be given to His world. He does not on His own account want our service, but when we can serve His children, when we will simply and absolutely work with Him, He counts that as the best service to Himself. True service, therefore, is devotion to the good of the world. And thus the pious man gives his life as sacrifice of service for the good of the world because of the depth of the love which he fosters for God.

Thus, true sacrifice, true worship, and true faith, these three form, to my mind, the essential principles of religion.

These are the three principles taught by the church to which I belong. No theology have we got, all our theology is our earnest, intense faith in the presence of the spirit of God within us. No ceremonial, no ritual have we got, except the grand formless ritual of love and of worship, which the soul spontaneously offers before the Throne of Infinite Love and Wisdom ; no other sacrifice, no other atonement do we recognise, except that sacrifice which proceeds from the intense enthusiasm of piety in the soul, giving evidence of its power and truth in unchangeable devotedness, in life, and in death. What name is capacious enough for these principles ? If the name Brahma Somaj appears to you too narrow, I will not hesitate, for a moment, to advise you to disown and discard it. Take the spirit, and let not the name be any stumbling block to you. Has God any name ? No, we call Him God, because we know no other word. What word would measure the depth, the height, and the breadth of that Spirit, who includes in Himself all that is good, beautiful, and true, who is in everything we know, who is more than anything we can conceive, or can express ? What name shall fully express and embody that grand and glorious worship of love, which humanity in all its forms and stages has ever offered to its Father, always until now ? What name would measure that sacred offering of self-sacrifice, that service and labour, that fidelity and trust, that sorrow and agony through which God's servants have tried to do their duty to Him and by the world ? There is one great nameless Brotherhood over-spreading the whole world, of which I claim to be a member, of which I call upon you to be members. I know no other creed, than that there is only one Father, and here, in your presence, I recognise Him to be your Father as He is mine ; I recognise Him in every sanctuary, in every temple, in every philosophy, in every science, in every

faith, in every nation, and in every soul. I bow down honouring every sacrifice that is offered to Him by men who are in the midst of error, or by those who are partially free from error. All over the world there is ignorance and darkness; all over the world there is true faith and love. He that loves darkness is enslaved by it in the midst of night, and would not see the sun that hides its face behind a transient cloud; he that loves light and truth beholds sunlight behind the darkness that for a moment seems to sit upon the face of the earth. Light always triumphs over darkness. He that has no love in him, despairs before the bitterness and evil that have raged, and still rage, around us; but he that hath true life in his soul, beholds humanity and truth united in one bond of love with the Father, who is infinite love. Let ours be that nameless and formless Faith, that which is the perception of the continued Presence of the One True God; ours be that Worship without language and without ritual, which is more real and more beautiful than any other sentiment of which human nature is capable, and let ours be the Sacrifice of daily labour, and never-ending service in the cause of humanity, which is the cause of God. And God's Spirit which watches in silence, and in the solitude of every heart, and God's Truth which dispenses its light, like His sun, upon the righteous and unrighteous, and God's Love, that encircles and embraces the entire universe, be with us all. May He make the future more glorious than the past, and, in the present, give the earnest of the future. Let our religion be simple, our faith be simple, our worship be simple, and our service be simple, and then our prayer to God and our sacrifice for brotherhood shall be accepted by God now and for ever!