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Religious Education

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Distinction Between Morals and Religion*

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As soon as the activities of any being become acts for ends, they have moral quality. Non-moral action is action on the plane of mere instinct or impulse, where considerations play no part.

It is the consideration, or the end aimed at, that makes an act morally good or morally bad. An act directed toward a bad end is immoral, though ignorance of its badness on the part of the agent may modify our judgment of his character. Similarly, action for any good end is moral action, though the character of the agent be only partly expressed therein.

These are merely formal distinctions; to reach a notion of concrete morality we must consider the actual ends that men pursue. In a broad sense, action that is directed to social ends is moral, and action that is directed to anti-social, or even unsocial ends is immoral. By social ends I mean primarily the good of human persons, however that good is conceived. We may differ or be mistaken as to what is good for men in general or for a particular man, but we are formally moral as long as we act for that which seems to us to be the real good of human beings.

Though the notion of humanity is central, it is not exclusive. It radiates in the direction of all life that is conceived as capable of goods and ills like those which we ourselves experience. Thus, moral aims come to include the animal life about us, and, if we believe that there are higher orders of life than the human, moral conduct will include them as ends as far as our acts can affect their good.

Morality thus comes to include the relations of men to their gods, and each religion acquires ethical quality corresponding to the notion of the godhead. Any religion that worships gods

*A paper read at the Meeting of the Council of Religious Education, Niagara Falls, July 2 and 3, 1907.

who pursue social ends is to that extent an ethical religion, and obedience to such gods becomes a part of morality. But obedience in this case is not a mere yielding to compulsion or superior power, but the following of a leader whose purposes the worshipper himself judges and approves.

A moral man is distinguished from an immoral one, then, by the degree in which social aims control his conduct.

What, now, distinguishes the religious life from the irreligious? We premise, of course, that for us religion must be thoroughly socialized. That is, it must be ethical religion.

(1) The religious man is distinguished partly by the quality of that which he takes to be the social good. For him the good is spiritual as distinguished from external, material, or merely sensuous. That is, for him the truly human life is not made up of the possession of things, or the possession of power, or the enjoyment of sensuous pleasures, but of the free and social exercise of the higher or spiritual capacities, namely, his capacities for truth, the appreciation of beauty, and the exercise of unselfish love. That is to say, personality is the final end of action for the religious man. I speak, of course, of the religious issue as it comes to us at our stage of civilization. There can be morality or socialized conduct that does not reach this stage of spirituality. On the other hand, when morality does reach this stage; when it takes spiritual personality as a finality for itself, reverencing it as something holy, as somewhat not to be used but to be served, then morality already includes a part of the religious attitude.

(2) The religious man is distinguished also partly by his conception of the possibilities of the spiritual person. As personality is a finality for him as an end of conduct, so it becomes more real to him than anything else. He tends to think of it as capable of surviving death and thereby having scope for the realization of its high ideals. The religious man therefore lets loose his hopes, looks for the ultimate triumph of all that is highest and best, and lives more generously than he could upon any mere calculation of empirical probabilities.

(3) The religious man is characterized, further, by his conception of the range of personal reality, or by the extent that he gives to his notion of society. The whole of his world acquires social meaning. The very ground of things is social. Or at least he looks and longs for such an ultimate basis of society. That is, he has faith in God, or seeks to find God, and his moral life becomes devotion to the Kingdom of God.

You will notice, of course, that I am not attempting to construct a formal definition of religion. Our present interest is not to find what we have in common with lower religions, or even

to formulate the inner principle of the evolution of religion in general. What we are after is insight into the practical religious issue as it comes to us in our own life. This issue seems to me to consist in the three points that I have named. Shall we take a spiritual view of human good? Shall we give scope to our highest ideals, trusting that personality is capable of an immortal destiny? Shall we complete the moral attitude by taking as our final reality and our final good the Kingdom of God?

These three are not so much components of the religious attitude as directions in which the religious spirit moves. Different individuals lean in different directions. One seeks spiritual life, but cannot quite believe in God and immortality; another believes in God and immortality without doubting, but has yet to learn the social meaning of the Kingdom of God. We need not stop to estimate the shortcomings of either. It is sufficient to note that the completely developed religious attitude will include all three tendencies.

For the purposes of our association, then, I would define morality as socialized conduct, and religion as devotion to a spiritual ideal that includes both God and men in one social whole, the Kingdom of God.

WASHINGTON, D. C.

FEBRUARY

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1908

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Plan to attend this convention, whether a member of the Association or not.

Further particulars in this issue.

If you expect to attend, be sure to drop a card to the office of the Association, 153 La Salle St., Chicago, telling them of your intention, in order that you may be kept informed as to arrangements.