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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BASIS OF WORSHIP

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Our motive in this discussion is practical. We are met to consider a definite pedagogical problem—how most wisely to provide for worship in the graded Sunday school. I shall aim, therefore, simply to remind you of certain fundamental principles of psychology that seem to me pertinent to any consideration of that problem.

At the outset let me emphasize that these are principles of psychology, not conclusions in metaphysics. It seems all too easy these days for men to discover that psychologically worship is a phenomenon of group life, and religion a process by which social values are conserved; then forthwith, by implication or in explicit statement, to conclude that God is a mere name for an ideal, religion nothing but the conservation of values, and worship a reaction to stimuli wholly material and human.

Such I believe to be loose thinking. Psychology, when it knows and sticks to its business, is as naively realistic as any other science. The psychology of religion should no more question the reality of God than does the psychology of the senses question the reality of things. Neither can it establish the reality of God any more than can the psychology of the senses establish the reality of things. These are problems, not for psychology, but for philosophy.

In this paper I shall frankly assume the real existence of the Christian God concerning whose character we in most important respects agree. And if the Christian God really exists, it follows that a psychological description of worship does not tell the whole truth respecting the situation in which worship finds place and meaning. It is somewhat as though one were to attempt to describe a conversation over the telephone, overhearing only the person at one end of the line. Metaphysically, worship is but one end of an intercourse between persons. It is the human end. In worship we approach to God and express ourselves to Him. But He meanwhile is not impassive and inactive. He expresses Himself to us, in word and deed and sustaining grace, in the thousand and one ways in which His life impinges upon ours and His will for us stands revealed. Worship

has its correlate in revelation. The early Protestants had a true sense of the situation when they distinguished in every service two fundamental elements—the prayer and praise which we address to God, and the Word, as they called it, which He speaks to us.

This much by way of preliminary. We turn now to our task—an attempt to state the psychological basis of worship.

I. WHAT WORSHIP IS

By worship I understand a conscious approach to God. More precisely, it may be defined as the attempt to express to God an attitude that acknowledges and seeks to further social relations with Him. Three characteristics of worship, involved in this statement, should be made explicit:

(1) Worship is conscious of its object. At bottom, like any other human action, worship is a response to a stimulus. It is our reaction to God. But it is more than a mere reflex, more than blind instinct. To some extent at least, the worshipper knows what he is about. He is conscious of God; he assumes an attitude toward God and seeks to express that attitude to Him. No temperamental optimism, no “cosmic” attitude of trust and hope, not even abounding goodness of life and helpfulness of deed, can be called worship unless there is some explicit reference of attitude or life or deed to God and to the demands of His personality upon that of the worshipper.

(2) The attitude expressed in worship is social rather than anti-social or non-social. It is one of approach. The worshipper seeks to use and confirm rather than to break social relations with God. It is possible, of course, for men to deny God or merely to assent to Him, to make affirmations about Him, to neglect or ignore Him, to fear, hate, or flee from Him. But none of these are attitudes of worship. He only worship who draws near to God, seeking acquaintance and help, and endeavoring to fulfill and establish relations with Him.

(3) Worship consists in the attempt at least to express to God one's attitude toward Him. It is not enough simply to feel willing to come into closer relation to God, or dumbly to love Him. We want to tell Him so. Worship involves something at least of movement toward expression of the attitude. It is an expression, moreover, be it clearly stated, addressed to God rather than to other men.

This idea of expressing ourselves to God, however, is by no means a simple one. Just how should one best address Him? We shall be helped to understand it if we think of how we express our-

selves to one another. We turn then to a consideration of the psychological principles of everyday expression.

II. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES OF EXPRESSION

By expression I understand human action in its entirety. The terms are co-extensive. Not only in words, but in gesture and deed, in quickened breath and pallor of feature, we express ourselves. There is no expression except through action; there is no action which is not an expression of the nervous and mental organization of the person who acts. Four principles of expression so understood, are pertinent to our inquiry:

(1) The stimulus to expression lies in the situation confronting one. All actions are in a certain sense reactions. We act because the situation calls for action. We do not express ourselves in general—"*ins Blaue hinein*," as Kant accused the old metaphysicians of doing—but to someone or upon something. Expression is a response—a response to the demands and possibilities of the situation.

(2) The material of expression comes largely from within. What we shall do or say depends upon our instincts, feelings, habits and ideas.

(3) The direction or end of expression depends upon the needs felt in the presence of a situation. The same situation may elicit widely different motives. We may distinguish three fundamental types of needs: (a) adaptive, making for adjustment to the physical environment; (b) imitative, making for conformity to the social environment; (c) social, leading to entrance as a self-active individual into the give and take of social relationships and into the work of the world.

(4) Expression reacts to determine the meaning of situations. Little children define most objects in terms of what they can do with them. It is one trait of childhood which we never quite outgrow; nor should we. Concepts are practical instruments. What we do in response to a given stimulus thus to a large degree determines its meaning and value, both present and future. Expression is a means of impression. James' pragmatism, Eucken's activism, Bergson's insistence that the intellect is the tool of practice, are in this respect psychologically true.

III. WORSHIP AS A FORM OF SELF-EXPRESSION

We are now prepared to see what may rightly be meant by the statement, often made, that worship is a form of self-expression.

The term self-expression is ambiguous. From one point of

view, (a) all expression is self-expression in that its character is determined by the inward organization of the self, its instincts, feelings, habits and ideas. More specifically, however, we may understand by self-expression (b) such expression only as is socially motivated, in contrast with that which is merely adaptive or imitative. We express ourselves, then, in so far as we enter creatively into the world of persons and things, helping to mold its relations as well as being molded by them, determining as well as being determined by its conditions and products. Self-expression is the expression of a person who feels himself, in some respects at least, counting as one in a sort of democracy of interest and effort. So conceived, self-expression does not replace but rather includes adaptive and imitative expression and raises them to a higher level. This is not, moreover, be it carefully noted, to identify self-expression with sheer self-assertion, as is sometimes wrongly done.

Worship is a form of self-expression, not simply in the general sense in which all action may be so called, but in the more specific sense. It is distinctly social in motive. It is the expression appropriate to a self that stands at the one end of a personal relation at the other end of which is God. What that relation shall be and what its products, depend upon the selves involved, and upon the human self as really as upon the divine. Christian worship is not mere resignation to a Fate revealed in the heedless pressure of circumstances, nor conformity to the dictates of an arbitrary Will; it is fellowship with a Father to whom we can in fullness express ourselves because we know that He can understand and does really care.

IV. THE RELATION OF WORSHIP TO OTHER FORMS OF SELF-EXPRESSION

Worship is like other forms of self-expression in that it shares with them the principles above set down.

(1) Worship, like other forms of self-expression, is a response to a situation. And the point particularly to be emphasized is that the total situation enters into the stimulus. As we talk to our friend, we indeed single him out from the multitude of impressions that constitute for the time our total situation, make him the object of attention and address ourselves to him; yet even so what we say and do has its relation, not solely to his presence, but to the whole. It is even more true of worship, just because the God whom we address is not so readily singled out or so easily held before the focus of attention as is the face of our friend. The practical counsel is obvious.

In any provision for worship, we must see to it that in so far as possible every element of the situation stimulates to reverence and reinforces the sense of God's presence. The "externals" of worship do not remain externals; they are apt to enter into its very spirit.

(2) Worship, like other forms of self-expression, depends for its material upon the instincts, feelings, habits and ideas of the person whose expression it is. The very fact that we are here met to consider the problem of the adaptation of forms of worship to the developing life of the child, is evidence of our recognition of this principle.

(3) Worship may, like other forms of self-expression, issue from varying types of need. We have said that worship is essentially social in its motive. Yet it may be adaptive merely, as when one seeks to use God only when caught in a tight place. The town of my boyhood had its "infidel" who was said to have been found praying when his hired men dug him out from under a load of hay that had fallen on him. It may be imitative merely, and never rise to the level of the experience of one who stands on his own feet before God. The practical counsel is that if we would lead others in worship we must know something of their individual and group experience, their problems and aspirations. No amount of wise ritual provision can render unnecessary the personal touch of the teacher upon the individual and group life of the pupils whom he is trying to lead to spiritual maturity.

(4) Worship, like other forms of self-expression, reacts to determine the meaning of the situations out of which it proceeds. The sort of worship we render to God is not only an expression of the ideas we hold of Him; it helps to determine what ideas we shall hold. However spontaneous the worship, then, or however immature the worshipper, it ought to be worthy of the God to whom it is rendered. Things trivial, flippant, or sentimental have no rightful place in any grade of the Sunday school. I feel very strongly, too, that any graded system of worship that would provide only for the expression of the child's present ideas and feelings, without looking forward at the same time to his future and seeking to lead him to higher and truer conceptions of God, would be fundamentally wrong. It is conceivable that we might permit children so to worship God that their very worship would help to keep them spiritually immature.

On the other hand, worship is wholly unlike other forms of self-expression in two important respects, both issuing from the unique character of the object of worship—God.

(1) God does not present himself to the senses. The stimulus

to worship is in that respect weaker than the stimulus to other forms of self-expression. We are faced by the problem of making real the presence of God.

(2) God does not need to have us express to Him our attitude, as we must express ourselves to our fellows. He is conscious of what we are conscious. He is "quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart." We might well raise the question, then, whether it is not enough after all simply to be willing to receive Him and to feel an affection that yet remains inarticulate. Must not a certain sense of unreality attend any effort to tell to God what He already knows?

We here touch upon the heart of our pedagogical problem. How shall we so present God to children that He will be so real to them as actually to enlist their love and worship? How shall we stimulate an expression of such love and worship without introducing something of artificiality?

Without entering upon the pedagogical considerations involved in any answer to these questions, let me say simply that I believe that we must rely in the main upon group worship and upon social suggestion. I believe that we must worship with our children, wholeheartedly and sincerely. That is a different thing, mark you, from worshipping before them or worshipping at them, both of which well-meaning parents and teachers often enough do. We must share their worship and let them share ours, till they come to feel God's reality because He is so real to us, and the naturalness of the expressions of love and praise in which God's children unite just because they ring so true upon our lips.

SOME SUGGESTIONS ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WORSHIP

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In this paper, worship is discussed from the educational point of view; that is, it is considered only in relation to its effect upon the worshipper as an aid in the shaping of character. Possibly its brevity lends to its statements an air of dogmatism which the spirit of the writer does not warrant.

In attempting a psychological analysis of what is involved in