

THE NATURE OF RELIGION.

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The most familiar and apparently simple things are often the most difficult to explain or clearly define. In regard to the familiar and universal fact of religion this is particularly the case. Most people have a more or less well defined idea of religion; and yet, scarcely any two persons will define it in precisely the same terms. This may be true even of those who are living under the power and experience of true religion. It is not an easy matter for even an earnest Christian to describe what the religion, whose power and hope he experiences, really consists in.

Then, if a wider view be taken, we find a great many different forms of religion extant among men. There are the various forms of pagan polytheism, the great ethnic systems of the Orient, and the faith of Islam. These are all spoken of as religions. Then there is Judaism and Christianity, and among Christians a variety of types, Greek, Roman and Protestant. Is there any common quality possessed by them all, which may enable us to define religion in some general way? And we sometimes speak of one man being a truly religious man, and of another being quite irreligious. Now, we naturally inquire, what it is that one of these men has that the other has not? How are we to conceive of religion amid all these varieties of it, and in this experience of its possession? What is the common quality?

And, further, when we read what various scholars have to say upon the subject, we find great diversity of opinion in regard to what is the essential nature of religion. This diversity expresses itself in the variety of definitions which these scholars give of religion. Cousin makes it mainly a matter of knowledge. Jacobi looked upon it as chiefly a faith exercise. Schleiermacher gave prominence to the feeling of dependence as the root of religion in the soul. Kant gave the chief place to conscience and

moral principles in it. Hegel associated it with the will, as perfect freedom. Amid all this diversity, the question at once arises as to the category under which we should construe religion. Is it cognition, or faith, or feeling, or morality, or does it imply a combination of all of these? It is evidently no easy matter to decide what the essential nature of religion really is, or what the underlying conditions of its experience are.

Nor do the Scriptures help us much towards getting a definite technical idea of religion. They usually take the common, popular conception of religion and simply assume its reality and power, just as they assume the existence of God, and of the spiritual factor in man. The Greek term *θρησκεία* used only a few times in the New Testament, does not aid us very much, for it is a somewhat general term, used to denote the reverent service of God. Paul, in Acts 26:5, uses this term when he speaks of the Jewish religion as *our religion*. Here he evidently has special reference to the ritual and laws of the Mosaic system, in which he had been reared. And James, in his epistle, 1:26, uses this term also, when he describes pure and undefiled *religion* as visiting the fatherless and the widows in their affliction and keeping oneself unspotted from the world. This describes the practical or philanthropic element of religion, as a service of God, through good done to our fellow men. The other Greek word, *κυνέω* which primarily means to fawn at one's feet as the dog at the feet of its master, as used in the New Testament, conveys the idea of humble reverence before God, and exalted regard for him as far above us. But the question of the essence of religion is not clearly expressed in these passages. Nor is much further light shed upon the question from a study of the Latin origin of the term religion itself. If it be taken from *relegere*, to gather up, or go over and carefully consider, or if it be derived from *religare*, to tie up or bind back, the question of the precise nature of religion is not settled clearly, for both of these ideas are implied in it. Religion requires us to carefully reflect on, and consider our relation and duty to God, and it equally implies that we are tied up to God by the bonds of moral obligation.

In addition, the fact that the exercise of religion has

sometimes been associated with some single faculty of man's constitution, has narrowed the view of what religion consists in. It may help to clearness of vision here, if we regard religion, on the subjective side, as the exercise of all the powers of the human soul, with the noblest objects about which they can be engaged. And the further fact that, in some cases, stress has been laid mainly on external truths, beliefs and rites pertaining to religion, and in others, attention has been turned chiefly to the experiences of the human soul in religion, has led to further confusion upon the subject, and has produced either narrow or one-sided views upon the whole question.

In seeking to define religion we may do well to keep in mind the fact that it calls into exercise, in the noblest possible way, all the complex powers of man. It is equally important to remember, also, that the objective and subjective aspects of religion must be carefully balanced in their relations with each other. Only by doing so can clearness and right view-point be secured.

What then is religion? What is its inner nature and essential principle? At root religion implies a relation between its object and its subject. The object of religion is Deity, conceived of in some way or other; and its subject is man, viewed in his whole personality. The relation between this subject and object is taken to be the fundamental fact in religion. It unites the subjective and objective factors in the proper way. Without God, as its abiding object, religion could not really be; and without man as its spiritual subject religion, so far as the human race is concerned, would have no reality. In greater or less degree this fundamental relation is common to all forms of religion, and in some sense it is the common quality of them all. The way in which this relation is conceived, and the degree in which it is realized by any company of men, will go far to determine the type of religion which prevails among them.

And not only must the reality of these two facts in their relations be taken into account in understanding the nature of religion, but the further fact that the relation between God, as the object of religion, and man, its subject, is capable of being realized, must be kept in mind. This implies on the part of the object of religion that the way

must be left open for self-communication and self-revelation on the part of that object to the subject, man. And, in turn, it further implies that there must be a capacity on the part of men to receive this revelation, and be affected by this communication on the part of the object to the subject in religion. Only under these conditions can the basal relation between God and man which religion involves be realized in an experience. Thus, as the basis of this relation, religion implies an activity on the part of God, its object, and an experience in the case of man, its subject.

Moreover, the Scriptures always assume this abiding relation. According to their teaching, God and man are so related to each other that as the object and subject of religion they stand in inherent organic relations with each other. And although sin has disrupted this relation it has not absolutely destroyed the fundamental bond between God and man. Hence, redemption, which is provided to restore this disrupted relation, has a real basis on which to effect its results. If the basal relation between man and God had been absolutely destroyed by the ravages of sin, redemption would not be possible.

From this view-point some definite idea of religion may now be obtained, if we keep diligently in mind that religion, as the basis of this relation, implies certain truths or facts concerning its object, and certain activities or experiences on the part of its subject. Four factors at least are apparent in the contents of religion.

First, religion is a mode of *knowing*. It calls into exercise the intellectual powers of men. The object of religion is in cognitive relations with its subject, and its subject has his powers of cognition brought into play thereby. There are certain truths concerning God which are capable of being known, and these, whether apprehended by reason or accepted from revelation, require intellectual activity on the part of man. This is the cognitive factor in religion.

Any view of the relation between God and man which puts them out of cognitive relation with each other is defective. Hence agnosticism, which denies the possibility of the knowledge of God on the part of man, is utterly invalid, and entirely destructive of religion. This does

not mean that the subject does or can fully know all the mysteries of the object of religion, but it does assert very earnestly that religion implies, on the part of the subject of it, a mode of knowing in regard to its object. On the basis of the fundamental relation already insisted on, religion is a mode of knowing by the subject concerning its object.

Secondly, religion is a mode of *believing*. This is the faith factor on which many lay so much stress. This faith factor is closely related to the cognitive element in religion, for they virtually imply each other. Thus the subject not only knows the object in religion, but believes that he is a real fact, and a living reality. The instinctive feeling of dependence is an essential factor in this element in religion. There is a deep-seated conviction in the subject of religion that he has some organic relation with its object, and is necessarily dependent on him for being and well-being.

This faith factor also comes into view in connection with the self-revelations which the object has been pleased to make for the subject in the matter of religion. This implies acceptance of the manifestations of God made in nature, in history, and in man's own constitution; and it relates very specially to the particular revelations, which for men, as apostate and sinful, God has been pleased to make, and place on record in Holy Scripture for them. Religion, on the basis of the fundamental relation between man and God, which it implies, calls faith into lively and constant exercise on the part of its subject. Hence, we conclude that religion is also a mode of believing.

Thirdly, religion is a mode of *feeling*. This in a sense is the emotional aspect of religion. It brings into play the highest affections and noblest sentiments of the subject of religion. In a measure this feeling is a movement of the sensibility which grows out of the knowledge and faith already described. As the mode of knowing and of believing implied in religion come into play, they necessarily stir the feelings with varied emotions. This feeling alone would have no religious significance, and might be pure superstition, but when coupled with knowledge and faith it has deep religious meaning. Here, again, the sense of dependence, the feeling of reverence and

the sentiment of devotion, all emerge. As the subject knows the object of religion, suitable sentiments are evoked, and as faith lays hold of the abiding realities of religion, kindred feelings are stirred into active exercise. Assuming the reality of knowledge and faith, feeling is a very important factor in religion. It takes very different forms in different religions, but it is always a component factor in religion. In Christianity feeling has its proper place. The heart as well as the head, the sensibility as well as the intellect, are called into play.

Fourthly, religion implies a mode of *acting*. It calls into play the active powers of its subject in their relation to the object of religion. The sphere of this action is that of conduct, and of regard for the will of God. This activity on the part of the subject of religion takes two forms, each of which plays a large part in the external aspects of religion.

This activity appears in certain acts of worship and forms of devotion, which express themselves in various religious rites and ceremonies. Praise, prayer and sacrifice are the main elements in this aspect of the active side of religion. Temples may be built, shrines made and altars erected in connection with these rites and ceremonies, or they may be quite simple in their nature. Here much of what makes up the external aspect of religion comes into view and many of those features which distinguish one religion from another, externally, are found in this aspect of religion. These rites and outward acts of devotion are evidences of the instinct of worship in the human soul, and they vary from the homage which the poor, untutored pagan gives to his fetich, up to the worship of the Christian, who worships a God who is a spirit in spirit and in truth. The instinct of worship, as expressed in these outward rites and forms, makes a very important element in the active side of religion. These religious acts on the part of the subject of religion are services rendered to its object. And they all imply the basal relation between the subject and object in religion on which it is important repeatedly to insist.

The other form in which this activity is impressed consists in the observance of moral duties which the subject feels bound to render to the object of religion. This con-

stitutes the ethical factor in religion, and it is a definite mode of acting. This factor necessarily has a large place in religion, though those who would make it the sum total of religion certainly go too far. Religion includes morality, but morality is not the whole of religion. The basis of this, again, is the organic relation between God and man, which constitutes the very condition of the possibility of religion.

The difference between natural morality and religious ethics here appears. Natural morality views our duties only in regard to ourselves and our fellow men. Ethics in the sphere of religion, and specially Christian ethics, regards our duties also in their relation to God. But into this inquiry we cannot further proceed. We mainly wish to bring out the fact that the ethical element is one phase of religion, as a mode of acting, in which all we ought to do is done as unto the Lord.

Thus religion implies an inner or organic relation between God and man. This bond is formed by virtue of God's creative act, in making man what he is, as a religious and moral being, and in setting him in the relations which he sustains to God. On this basis, and in the light of the discussion had, religion may now be defined. *Religion is a mode of knowing, of believing, of feeling, and of acting, which grows out of, and implies, an inherent and organic relation between God, its object, and man, its subject.*

But it is only in the Christian system that this fundamental relation is correctly expressed. And it is this system alone that gives the right interpretation of the perversion of this relation which sin has produced. The true mode of knowing, believing, feeling and acting on the part of the subject in relation to the object in religion is expressed only in the revelation which the Christian religion involves. And the way in which man's activity has been affected, and his relation modified by sin is correctly expressed only in the great pre-suppositions which the Gospel makes. The Holy Scriptures give the necessary knowledge concerning all these things. Hence, the Christian religion may be defined as a mode of knowing, believing, feeling and acting on the part of its subject in relation to its object, which is determined by the contents

of the revelation found in the Holy Scriptures, mediated by Jesus Christ, and vitalized by the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel is the divine remedy for the disruption of the relation between God and man. It restores this relation when it is accepted and acted on. This Gospel is mediated by Jesus Christ, rendered effective by the Holy Spirit, and is expressed in the Holy Scriptures. Hence, the Gospel conditions true religion in the case of sinful men. It becomes the power of God to every one that believeth. It is only when he comes under its potent sway, and into its precious experience that he finds it to be a divine power, and comes to know what true religion really is. Such a man is a really religious man for he is first of all in right relations with God, and, consequently, is right in his own heart, and right in relation to his fellow men.