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## "The Religion of a Gentleman."<sup>1</sup>

BY THE REV. I. GREGORY SMITH, LL.D.

THIS quaint title, "The Religion of a Gentleman," reminds one of the saying of Charles II. that the Roman Catholic is the religion for a gentleman. But the book itself has nothing in common with the flippant epigram; indeed, so far as it touches the controversy with Rome, it is distinctly anti-papal. It was intended, the author (a high dignitary of the Church of England and Ireland just after the Revolution of 1689) tells us, to be, like Leslie's "Short Method with a Deist," "a short and easy draught [*sic*] of Christianity and of the reasons of it, as every man may read without tediousness and understand without difficulty." It is an appeal to common sense—such an appeal as an able lawyer makes, a clear, concise statement—in fact, "a draft." Nowadays it would be "The Religion of the Man in the Street." Though "many things have happened," to borrow Disraeli's phrase, since 1697, a little attention to its pages will not be thrown away.

It is curious the fascination which the eighteenth century has for some readers. Just as there are ardent lovers of travel who prefer a stroll through Warwickshire lanes to climbing snow-peaks far away, so some persons are more interested in a period not long ago past than in days more glaringly contrasted with our own. Is it laziness, naturally averse to what requires more effort of the imagination? Is it the sympathy of a nearer kinship?

Dull and prosaic the eighteenth century seems if one thinks of the stormy sunset which closed the day. The progress which it can boast in the acquisition of knowledge seems slow if measured against the gigantic strides, almost as swift as thought, which mark the triumphal march of physical science since then;

<sup>1</sup> By the Most Rev. Edward Synge, D.D., Archbishop of Tuam. At the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1800. The book was first published in 1697. A fifth edition in 1726 was reprinted 1830.

very slow, though sure, the gradual amelioration, so far as material comfort goes, in the lives of the poor. Yet all the time the seed sleeping under the sod was ripening for the harvest. The English character, in spite of limitations not few nor inconsiderable, was consolidating silently and secretly the sturdy energies needed for the practical duties of life. It was—

"The torrent's smoothness, ere it dash below."

Some of the characteristics of the time are well expressed in Mr. Whittuck's "The Good Man of the Eighteenth Century."<sup>1</sup> Taking Addison, Fielding, etc., in England, Voltaire and Rousseau—the sneerer and the idealist—with others, on the Continent, to show the sort of goodness aimed at, he analyzes his subject with philosophic discernment.

"The Religion of a Gentleman" illustrates the same thing from a contemporary standpoint. Though on a lower level devotionally than Taylor's "Holy Living," or "The Whole Duty of Man," it is a fair sample of serious thought in England during the Georgian period. Perhaps the phlegmatic temperament which the earliest representatives of the Hanoverian dynasty brought with them to England set the fashion. Tone of thought often percolates into the national life through the influences of the Court.

The bane of the literature, the art, the religion of the time was the dread of enthusiasm. "Pas trop de zèle!" It was not a mere lack of enthusiasm; it was a positive aversion to anything that looked like it, a distrust of everything except hard "common sense." Pope's exquisite versification lent a charm to shallow platitudes; Addison's easy, graceful way of enunciating commonplace truths made what is commonplace delightful. But even in their loftiest flights they and their imitators skimmed the surface; they did not try to probe the heights, the depths of life and character. Gray is, perhaps, the best of our poets in the interval between Pope and Byron. But Gray is painfully conventional. Matthew Arnold, in Ward's "English Poets," is

<sup>1</sup> G. Allen and Sons.

far too lenient to him. The naturalness of Goldsmith is exceptional after Johnson's pomposity and the magniloquence of Gibbon.

And yet, though enthusiasm was the *bête noire* of the age, an emotional sensitiveness was rated highly—in women. The ideal woman overflowed with "sensibility." It is the old story of the swing of the pendulum—

"Naturam expellas furcâ, tamen usque recurrit."

The author of "The Religion of a Gentleman" is carefully orthodox; but he seems, like Milton, to diverge on the mystery of the Trinity (p. 102), and fails to grasp the reality of the Incarnation (p. 106). As a rule he avoids abstruse questions (p. 47), and is tolerant of difference in opinion when the mistake is free from fault morally (p. 671). It is noticeable that he speaks (p. 170) of prayer addressed to the Holy Spirit as a practice that has need to be justified. The authority of Holy Scripture, the older (p. 51) Testament included, is paramount, provided always that it is in accord "with reason." He takes Holy Scripture literally, but he admits that the early chapters of Genesis (p. 115) may be an allegory. Anticipating the very words of an Oxford Professor in "Essays and Reviews," he says that "the New Testament is to be interpreted in the same way as any other book." "The end and design of the Gospel," he declares emphatically, "is virtue" (p. 156); but with him, as with the men of his day generally, "virtue" is not self-sacrifice. "To love others," he writes (p. 196) "as much as we do ourselves is impossible and unreasonable." This is not the spirit of the "Imitatio"—"Though he slay me, yet will I love him"; it is the demand of the disciples of the Christ in their novitiate: "What shall *we* have?"

The Archbishop's practical sense shows itself in what he says on questions of casuistry—for instance, on the plea of conscience as an excuse for law-breaking (p. 63), on oaths (p. 164), against Sabbatarianism (p. 225). It is characteristic of the eighteenth century that he appreciates the excellence of

virtuous heathen. He maintains the traditional distinction between "positive" and "moral" precepts. He seems, in his psychology, to confuse "soul" and "spirit" (p. 113), a confusion not peculiar to him nor to his contemporaries.

Religious thought was chilled and cramped by dread of enthusiasm. People seemed to forget that the original meaning of the word points to something divine. Our insular reserve and reticence drew back instinctively from any sort of display, and sheltered themselves in conventionality. What is called "natural religion" was easier to understand and to practise than the glimpses which Revelation gives of a world supernatural. The mind accustomed to explain everything to itself could not breathe in a rarer atmosphere. Cowper complained that, though Paul gave the text, Plato, Epictetus, and Tully were the staple of the sermon. It was obvious for Butler, contending with Deists, to lay stress on the principles which they acknowledged. But "natural religion" by itself is merely guesswork; it cannot reveal God except very partially. Only when illuminated by the rays which dawned on the mystery of pain in Christianity has Nature a tale to tell of Divine power and love; without that she is the Sphinx of the desert. The warning cry of Wesley and Whitfield was wanted to awaken a sense of something higher than a refined Paganism, and to lead men to a personal Saviour. Of course, there were exceptions—what rule has them not?—but, speaking generally, the tone of English religion in the eighteenth century was beyond question secular.

This fear of trying to soar too high dragged down the ethical aspirations of the eighteenth century. Like the philosophers of ancient Hellas, the moralist made self the beginning and the end of being virtuous. In "Sandford and Merton," a book typical in its way of the didactic tone then prevalent, Mr. Barlow proses away on the advantages of being good, of the harms sure to come sooner or later from vice. What you can get for yourself by being good, and how much you will lose by behaving badly, is the burden of the song. Self is the centre of gravitation, the goal as well as the starting-point. If the root of the tree is selfishness, what must the fruit be?

True, vice is folly, or, as Plato would say, downright insanity. To calculate the harmful consequences of wrongdoing is a subsidiary motive for resisting the temptation. But the tendency of eighteenth-century morality was to make this lower motive unduly prominent. Instead of being a self-sacrifice regulated by prudence, virtue was a balancing of loss and gain, a calculation of self-interest. This may save a man from doing what is wrong; but, as Aristotle taught long ago, to do virtuous actions is not the same thing as to be virtuous. To love what is right for its own sake, come what may, is virtue. Even if the advantage to be gained is far off in the remote future, though this may call for a greater exercise of patience and self-control, the motive is mercenary, the prompter is self. "Other-worldliness," as Coleridge called it, is in its essence very near to what is called worldliness. The teachers of the eighteenth century used both freely in their exhortations. "We can procure no considerable benefit or [*sic*] advantage from it"—*i.e.*, from pride (*Spectator*, No. 257).

A great deal is taken for granted in "The Religion of a Gentleman"—more, far more, than would be taken for granted nowadays. It starts with a large assumption on the very first page—"All men have agreed that there is a God, and that religion shall reward with future happiness." Later on the author says: "Reason demonstrates"—a very strong word—"the being of a God." Mysticism, as was to be expected, there is none; for instance, in what is said about the Holy Communion.

One thought there is—it runs through the book from end to end—sufficient by itself to commend "The Religion of a Gentleman," whatever else may be wanting—there to seekers after the truth. For it reminds them that the message of Christianity is practice, not theory—that while much shall remain obscure, uncertain to the end, thus far at least the message is clear and unmistakable.<sup>1</sup> They shall know who do.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dr. Johnson's prayer: "In this world, where is much to be done, little to be known."