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WHAT IS THE ESSENCE OF REAL RELIGION ?¹

I

THE actual Christian's God is the God of Sovereign Grace, Infinite, Omnipotent, Omnipresent, Eternal, not limited by past or future in the merely human sense, The Sovereign God, Redeemer of His people by Grace. The question, therefore, is this: What in the sight of that God, the Creator of all men, is that religion which links a man inseparably to that God? What is that something which gains that God's approval in a man and what is that something in a man because of the absence of which that man is refused by that Sovereign God and is not given everlasting life in this world or the world to come?

Or, more simply still, what is that something that is within a human being actual religious experience? What is that something which in a man distinguishes the real from the merely imaginary in religion?

In order to get at the ultimate answer to this supremely important question it is necessary first to ask another question, i.e. "*What is Sin?*" True religion must be that something that in a soul takes away sin. True religion for that reason must begin with the realization of the guilt of sin. It is sin that separates a man from God. If a physician is consulted as to an ailment the first question he will ask will be, "What is the matter with the patient?" So in the matter of religion the foremost question is, "What really is the matter with the sinner whose sin has cut him off from God?" Now the medical advisor will judge first by the outward manifestation of the mischief from which the patient suffers, and secondly from the inward root which has brought about that manifestation. Now a man judges of sin similarly, but as a rule by its outward manifestation only, forgetting that there is an inner mischief that lies behind it. In judging a drunkard, for instance, he puts him at once amongst vile and reprehensible transgressors and brands him without reserve, as a sinner because of the manifestly self-evident outward demonstration of the transgression, but a man who avoids outward manifestation of certain

¹ 1 Cor. xiii. 13 etc.

types of evil is as often as not, by human judgment, mistaken as a saint. However, God passes a very different judgment, He deals with the inward and real which lies behind the outward and seeming. God would say, for example, to the drunkard, "Why did you get drunk when you knew the great injury it would do you?" The drunkard will reply, "Because I have nothing better to live for than to please myself." God says to the outwardly very respectable man, "How is it that you avoid the tap-room, gambling, and nearly all else that would bring you into public condemnation, and you are regular in your attendance at church, careful in worship apparently, as also generous in contribution? And yet how is it that God is not in all your thoughts, and how is it that in all your supposed well-doing it is not really to please Me or for My glory, but your own commendation that is sought, or your own self-interests that are served?" The answer again will be, "Because I have nothing better to live for than to please myself." Self is served, not God. Now that is by nature the natural sinful condition of every man. However good the service is in itself it is a mere service of self after all, and by that everything is turned to sin. That is a form of religion in the absence of real religion. That is not religion in its reality. Every soul's action is rendered either in the service of God to God as such, or in the service of self to self. Now the essence of sin is this:

Self starts nothing but what tends apace,
Home to the goal whence it began the race,
If self employ us, whatso'er is wrought,
We glorify that self, not Him we ought.

II

A remarkable indication of the possibility of this great truth is contained in a piece of teaching by Our Lord Himself recorded in the twenty-fourth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, verses forty to forty-two, as follows: (v. 40) "Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left." (v. 41) "Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left." (v. 42) "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come." The inner teaching of these words is clearly that the same outward actions in the same place and also so far as outward appearances are

concerned outwardly of the same character, yet may be evidently different in essential spirit brought about by the difference in that inner spirit which renders them acceptable to God or brings about entire rejection. The outstanding teaching on this particular point is evidently that there may be something inward, which renders identical human actions to all outward appearance, the same, accepted or rejected by God, and so renders what are to human judgment identical actions acceptable to Him or the opposite. What is that something ?

What that something is between God and man, not merely imaginary but real and finally determining man's fate, is further made clear in a chapter in the New Testament, amongst other passages of Scripture, which is found in the thirteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians and frequently quoted without its precise drift being apprehended. 1 Cor. xiii. 13 : " But now abideth faith, hope, love, these three, and the greatest of these is love " (Revised Version).

In this chapter we have what appear to be outstanding religious duties and privileges, yet inwardly so entirely mistaken in nature as to be destitute of the very soul and value of religion in God's sight. Unfortunately the Authorised Version of 1611 which held and largely does still hold sway of Biblical teaching in the English language for a long period translated the word *ἀγαπή* which used in the original of this chapter had been translated by Tyndale, Cranmer and Luther in the English and German languages, correctly by the word " Love ", by the much obscuring English word " Charity ". The word " Charity ", should, of course, be " Love ", as it has now been made use of in the Revised Version. It serves to express not merely the relation of Christians to one another, but, in the higher and more direct sense, the relation of the Christians to their God, as such Christians in their state of salvation, thus embodying necessarily the great essential truth that the New Testament, like the Old, makes the first and great Commandment, " Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," and that this is the " First and Great Commandment ".

III

But what is that Love, because of the absence of which, such a seemingly Holy religious function as the speaking with

“the tongue of men and of angels” is said to be of no more value than “sounding brass or the tinkling cymbal”, and further through the absence of which “even though a man give his body to be burnt” in the sense of something like a martyr, he is yet “*as nothing*”, or again what is that same inner value the absence of which though apparently there is a “gift of prophecy”, and all mysteries are understood and all religious knowledge mastered and though there is even faith that goes so far as the possibility of the performance of miracles, yet because this something is absent leaves a man as “nothing”, i.e. yielding no acceptance to God and which though there be so wonderful a self-sacrifice that all a man’s goods are given to the poor yet there is nothing in the way of religion (1 Cor. xiii. 3). What is this particular something which must be the inner reality and essence of religion? True religion according to these descriptions must be in the soul that something which actually confronts in that soul selfishness of the heart with reference to God and is really God-dependent, not upon self, nor upon the sinner’s own merits. The secret of a really spiritual religion then is that which in its motives is absolutely unselfish and this motive must be, as the Apostle declares, and as is demonstrated also in other passages, and as is implied throughout the New Testament, the Love of God for His own sake, the Love of God for what He is and has already been, and has already done for the soul. Seen in this light the last verse of the chapter (1 Cor. xiii. 13) gains a most wonderful significance an outstanding keynote of New Testament teaching: “But now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” Faith when the sinner first comes to the Cross of Christ, the Hope which that Cross inspires by reason of its complete atonement on behalf of that sinner, and the Love which becomes the future essence of his life. No wonder Trench calls the word *ἀγάπη* “A word born on the bosom of revelation.” It is the Love of God born and confirmed in the soul of man at the Cross, the Cross of Jesus Christ as the sinner’s substitute. If Jesus Christ had been anything else than a substitute for the sinner, if for instance, He had been only a representative example for the sinner’s imitation and nothing more, His Cross would only have been the means of stirring up a sinner in the selfishness of achieving his own salvation, His Cross would have left the sinner engaged on a hopeless task with which the Love of God would have been

mocked instead of promoted. The Love of God shed abroad in the hearts of men because of what Jesus Christ has done and for His sake is the grace divinely bestowed by the Cross by which alone and as bestowed we learn to love God for His own sake and then all else for that sake. It is a gift that God Himself could but give as has been done. He provided it in the only way in which He only could do, viz. by sending Jesus Christ as the all-sufficient substitute for the sinner Who thus became the sinner's ground of acceptance with God, and Whose wondrous work excludes once for all the very thought and idea of his doing anything for his own salvation or the possibility of his pleading anything else that he could do for his own acceptance. Jesus Christ lived on earth the very life that every Christian should live, a life absolutely unselfish, the one truly religious life in the human sphere ever lived, the one life in which self had no part. Eternal Life is sometimes spoken of as something that a man begins to enjoy after death, but that this is quite wrong is shown by the glorious example of the Son of God which terminated in the Glorious Resurrection here on earth itself.

IV

If this were more clearly understood and if Christians were more practically devoted in following Christ there would not be said of them, as it was said of one outstanding Christian not so very long ago : " He is a good man, but somehow or other he does not remind me of Christ." His life was a human affair at any rate very largely. He would remind of Buddha, Socrates, or even Isaiah or Daniel, but, somehow or other, not of the Redeemer. Every true Christian will have Christ born in him, and he will hate sin as Christ did. " Many of those who worship in church ", a Bishop recently declared, " have never been converted, they have no conception of the heinousness of sin and are undisturbed by it." It has also been said, " One is sorrowfully forced to admit that the low spiritual temperature of organized Christianity to-day is caused by a defective sense of sin." What is sin ? It is only God Himself Who can tell us at the Cross of Christ where by the Atonement made on that Cross it is demonstrated that and how human sin is absolutely hostile to the Love of God.

It was there Saul of Tarsus learnt, "I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." And again, "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is Eternal Life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom. vi. 23.)

For this reason it is true, as stated in Article 13 of the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, "Works done before the grace of Christ, and the Inspiration of his Spirit are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ, neither do they make men meet to receive grace, or deserve grace of congruity: yea rather, for that they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not but they have the nature of sin."

So also the same Book in the Collect for Quinquagesima Sunday enforces the same great truth: "O Lord, who hast taught us (have we learned it?) that all our doings without charity (or love of God for His own sake) are nothing worth; Send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity (or love), the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee: Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake."

How beautifully the prayer for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity enshrines this central truth, "O God, who hast prepared for them that love Thee such good things as pass man's understanding; Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord."

I am a poor sinner and nothing at all,
Jesus Christ is my all in all.

That is the keynote of true religion which summed up briefly is belief in the absolute sufficiency of Holy Scripture, the total depravity of man, unconditional election, particular redemption, effectual calling, justification by faith only, imputed and imparted righteousness, final perseverance, eternity with God.

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