

AN INDIVIDUAL RETROSPECT OF THE RELIGIOUS THOUGHT OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

II.

BUT at intervals glimpses of a faith that was making other faces shine and other voices sing for joy were given ; and though the reason was not the least more satisfied, the heart stood up in even more passionate vindication of its birthright. First and best of all were some few beside me in the College passing from mere carelessness into a true religious life. It was a new world to them, and they sprang up like flames. Why dwell on slow arguments and grudging admissions when miracles on mind are happening close at one's side ? And there were other things too. The Brighton Convention of 1875 gave a moment's sight of an aim so high and pure, that all else seemed beside it like an evil dream, a mesmeric delusion ; twice the beautiful selfless work of healing for mind or body which was going on at Männedorf near Zürich was visited and brought in a sense of the possibilities open to communion with God ; the circle of joyous faces of the Salvation Army, then, in 1880, in its first beauty of sacrifice for the hopeless and helpless, was another good thing ; three or four years later came the first visits to Keswick ; and in the summer of 1887 I read a book that formed indeed an epoch in the life within, and that was *The Memoirs of Port Royal*, written in the beginning of the century. All these various planes of religious life touched after all only a side that had often been touched before ; there was no admixture of the new insight with the old faith, and therefore they could not deal with the central grief hidden deep within ; yet they did some good. It remained impossible to shut one's eyes and go back into the old position, to turn in the tunnel and run back into the old sunshine, since for me that position was a false one, that sunshine did not exist ; and yet, with some show of

right and justice, the sight of such people was a help, for one must give some consistent account of the attraction that produced such unremitting efforts and crowned them with such high ethical success. Through all these years the mystics of the world were a gleam of hope, a refuge, a last resort. They offer no argument, they attempt no solution, but, like the dove before the windy storm and tempest, they would flee away together, and it is almost as though they would say, "Let there be no rational basis for faith; it yet produces these results in the soul, therefore it is true." They escape rather than solve the problem, yet they present so lovely and untroubled a vision that the heart flies after them longing to join itself to their company. The realization of the width of divergence from whence they come gives a sense of stability. Would St. Catherine and Tauler and Zinzendorf and George Fox and William Law all be deluded in the same way at once? It was impossible. Thus to me the thought of the Church Universal, so well learned in younger days, became as true an inspiration as the thought of Christ Himself, and one more tangible, more open to be seen, handled and verified in any way that might seem best. Intellect was no test; it was goodness, beautiful goodness, that was the final criterion, and that undeniably was to be found among the disciples of the Lord. Good sceptics and bad Christians were constantly thrust before the unwilling sight, yet for all that reason held to it firmly that the main stream told another tale. The long procession moved before the eye of the soul—martyrs, missionaries, sufferers, the recluses of Port Royal, the persecuted Huguenots and Covenanters, the Moravians working in Labrador or among the Lepers; yes, and the great tent at Keswick, and Moody's crowded meetings, and hot mission rooms in London, and gatherings in lonely cottages, where a few Methodists met kneeling on the brick floor—there, there is the portion of my inheritance. Are

the best of the race, its flower and crown, all under one illusion? Differing in every other possible point, all are unanimous about two things—the value of the work of Christ for the world, and His present power in the hearts of men. Delusion could not stand such tests; it is not only the method of agreement (I was of course well soaked in Mill's *Logic*), it is the method of concomitant variations, and even the method of difference, for in the same life one may sometimes see this element absent and then suddenly present, and lo! every aspiration and every taste is affected by the change. "His name, through faith in His name, has made this man strong, whom ye see and know; yea, the faith which is by Him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all." That is the secret history of the Church of Christ. Here, even among the poor and simple, was some kind of home of the heart; here were to be found "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance," not the mere names on their lips, but at least indications here and there of the actual virtues themselves wrought out in the human character, often with sharp strain and rebellious struggle as of a material that is almost too hard for the chisel, but still there—there at last inwrought, instinctive, full of glorious suggestion of perfection, the work of a true artist, inimitable. One could recognize these tools, this hand. It was not that which was vaguely and generally Divine; it was the work of God manifest in the flesh, the work of Christ the sacrifice for sin, the Redeemer and Shepherd, the One who, though meek and lowly in heart, can yet subdue all things unto Himself, and the soul bows down before the results produced by the heavenly Designer and says, with Zinzendorf in his youth: "Wenn es auch ein anderer Gott giebt, so bleibe ich bei dem Herrn Jesu." It was like turning from mathematics to art, from the mere effort of the intellect to a region where every response of the heart

and the will is aroused. Thought seemed cold and barren and uninspiring beside the quick intuition that recognized the Divine handiwork, the even momentary approximations to the character of Christ, and month after month the reason was one part satisfied and three parts hastily silenced as the heart fell down before Jesus of Nazareth, the one Saviour the world has ever known, and said : "Thy people shall be my people, and Thy God my God." And it did not end there ; but as the light of the moon is an unerring testimony to the presence of the sun, so the will turned from the servant to the Master and sought Him and Him only. There was the one true home, the one element for which we were created, and it must be sought and found at all costs.

The fish drowns not in the mighty sea,  
The bird sinks not in the air,  
The gold in the furnace fire may be  
And is yet more radiant there.  
For God to each of His creatures gave  
The place to its nature known,  
And shall it not be that my heart should crave  
For that which is mine own ?

In spite of long silence and of apparent rebuff, the words of so long ago were taken up in their most intimate and personal application : "Entreat me not to leave Thee, or to return from following after Thee ; for whither Thou goest I will go, and where Thou lodgest I will lodge ; where Thou diest I will die, and there will I be buried."

"The lesson of life," says Emerson, "is to believe what the years and the centuries say against the hours." And so it was here. The hours seemed to bring nothing but a blank, but the testimony of the years and the centuries could not be overlooked. The whole process was slow, very slow. As the work of disintegration had been slowly and reluctantly accomplished, so naturally more slowly and cautiously was the work of rebuilding carried on. Some

minds are soon thrown down, and then soon again comforted; but others are tenacious in their hold either for good or ill, and cling long to what has once approved itself as true, even when strong arguments commend themselves upon the further side. They must move wholly if they are to move at all. Hesitation is necessarily the paralysis of action, and all the inner life resolves itself into a dumb, doubtful lingering at the crossroads, the insistent voice of reason presenting its claims and delaying the ardent choice of the heart. Human nature is no simple thing easily to be summed up, and sorrows from wholly another region brought in their added complication, yet in the main it is described by these outlines. Nothing is more uninteresting than prolonged doubt and grief treading the same circle a hundred times, longing to fly swift as an arrow down one chosen path, yet a hundred times prevented, and turning back to make the weary round once more, outwardly calm, but within overshadowed by a hope that does indeed make the heart sick; and even this record would not be worth the effort it costs were it not that it is but an indication and a sample of the religious thought of the time. It seemed to me then to be an utter solitude, an anomaly, a peculiar thing set apart by its waste of vain endeavour; but during the last four or five years it has been made plain that the century was with me, and that these efforts and endurances were as a cupful of water borne along in the sweep of its stream. The wishes of early youth were granted indeed, but in a form that left almost no likeness between the anticipating dreams and their fulfilment, so that it appeared as if the hopes were all baffled and the aspirations thwarted. That some other souls were worse off yet was clear, and the sad suggestion would come: "Lists of safe arrivals in port are published, but where is the list of the shipwrecks?" We are told that Ruskin gave up for the time being the whole of orthodox Christianity on the

comparatively small point of keeping the Sunday as if it were the Jewish Sabbath. He felt he had been thoroughly deceived on this matter; and if on this, so surely also on others, and the crystal clearness of his mind could break, but it could not bend. Others have had a far worse reaction, and our coasts are strewn with the wrecks of ships that once appeared to be seaworthy—stranded, bare and forsaken, pathetic in their silence. But it is of happier auspices that we now speak. Girdled by prayer, fortified by some true understanding of history, well placed for seeing the life of the Church of Christ, ever studying the Bible—even when the life seemed to have gone out of it—ever trying to learn from those whose spiritual life had in it any element of victory, and ever endeavouring secretly to help those still further astray or still more despairing, such a soul comes through the darkness and comes out at last. It is like a long tunnel, where the passenger may first see light doubly and trebly reflected from the black walls, and then singly reflected, and then a far, dim vision of the light itself, and at last he comes out, still perhaps between high banks of earth that preclude the view, but with free air round him and a long line of steady daylight above. It is not the unreasoning happiness of early days, but a solemn yet clear light, like that of the grey dawn before the sunrise. The Inferno, with its haunting sense of hopelessness even in the more placid regions, is left behind, and the air of the Purgatorio is gentle and still, and humble reeds and rushes grow in the clear water. It has its own regrets and sorrows and self accusations, but the line of hope runs through them all, and now and then the mount trembles with a shout of victory as some single soul climbs higher yet.

A painter may easily be too near his subject to be able to sketch it. It is not too little but too much that he sees. Not only does the subject overtop the canvas and hopelessly crowd its small area, but the perspective is false, the pro-

portion misleading, and the whole drawing may be worse than useless. With this fear before me very little more can be added, saving only one or two points which, having been previously touched on, seem in conclusion to demand a few words.

Reason takes up a position neither wholly satisfied nor wholly crushed down into silence, but stands aside as though she would say, "There are provinces where I may not enter. I have led you as far as I can, and you have been obedient. It is not irrational that you should now go further"; and the heart and the will run forward like children glad of emancipation from an authoritative companion, while returning to her again and again. The creed is shortened, but it is real. Some of the old certainties are left open questions, but those that remain are more certain, and will bear a strain. It was perhaps the position of the Bible that brought me the acutest personal pain, as, stripped and exposed, turned over and criticized, and even by some mocked and scourged, it lay there like the dead body of a friend. Loved so long and so well, trusted in every word of it, it could not be forsaken; but it was a useless kind of friendship to sit beside it stricken through with grief, while year after year went by, longing that it might regain by any means its old vitality and power. A nameless something had happened to it that rendered it dumb and helpless, but whether it was paralysis or death it was hard to tell. Many of the Psalms still had a voice; those that spoke of being thirsty and weary, desolate and like unto them that go down into the pit, forsaken by God and man, those had so piercing and true a note that it was not David or Asaph who wrote those Psalms—it was I. But all the dogmatic parts were dumb, and all the comforting parts were a heart's longing, a sweet dream that, seek where you would and wait as long as you might, touched you with no corresponding reality. All the while thought was at work,

grasping here and there, gathering and storing all it could from every source to gain some tenable and consistent view of inspiration. An obstinate endurance made me hold to the Bible through its time of dumbness and sorrow, and then life slowly returned to it—a life not manifested in the same bright and fragmentary way as before, but something more steadily diffused, and that could speak once again to the inmost heart. All came back to life again. The second and third of Genesis had been a difficulty for a while, but now they glowed and shone, appearing more definitely inspired than ever they had done in the old literal days. That out of all the overwhelming events of the prehistoric world, the wars and feuds and catastrophes, the founding of kingdoms on mere force, and the confusions of violence, the writer should have selected to relate in full the awakening of the human conscience, and the first sense of responsibility of man to his Maker, this is a wonderful thing. That out of the dimness of the very early dawn this one event, so silent, so hidden, so utterly unnoticed by the course of the world's history, should have been thus singled out, told us in full detail, with complete fidelity to psychological truth in every step, and put forward in the clearest and most attractive light as an all-important thing for us to know, and as the very deepest laid and strongest foundation stone of our redemption, here surely was not the work of man but of God, here was a true inspiration, the very in-breathing of the Most High. So it was also with other parts, and life flushed again through the well-loved pages, and even further possible discoveries of future critics became a matter of intellectual interest merely, having no spiritual weight of distress connected with them.

In practical life mystery remained so closely surrounding the path, that one seemed to walk along walled about with impervious mist, but the circle of light on the stones immediately before one's feet was unmistakable. It was not born

of the enclosing gloom, it was not a lantern in one's own hand, it was something steady and real, and that was enough. Even the hardest point of all, the over balance of sin and evil and pain in the world, even this could be endured with patience when one caught a glimpse of the end God had in view, and the perils He undertook when He created a being with freedom of choice between good and evil.

Though all, after the manner I have endeavoured to relate, became chastened, careful, and moderate in expression, there are comforts and even joys to be found on this the further side of the tunnel that only those can know who have tasted them. The young untried heart can perhaps hardly believe that so quiet a place can be truly happy. Accustomed to a sky of perfect blue, the sight of a cloud of doubt attracts the eyes and keeps them fastened; for it looks real and solid and menacing, and it is new. That is the important thing, that is the intruder, that is the inexplicable presence; and it forms a focus of restless questioning, while all the beauty and steady serenity of the surrounding heaven go for nothing. But if once one has seen the face of the sky all clouds, it is the rift of blue that attracts attention. See there, a hole in my dismal covering, a look through into infinite space, how wonderful, how glorious! The clouds are really quite close to me, a part of the earth and of my present condition, and they are small and transitory, though they necessarily affect me so greatly; but that open gap is a real thing and a great one—it is wholly unconnected with me and with my dwelling-place, a glimpse of Permanence and Eternity, a link with that which is Divine. With my feet held down to this solid and dark earth, who am I that such a heavenly companion as this open window should be given me, this possibility of purity and stainless perfection? The clouds are forgotten now, for something far, far beyond them

attracts my eyes, a region where they can never enter, and which would endure unaltered were the earth and its attendant clouds all swept away.

But there are many details of practice that are passed over in silence, as, though of profound importance to the individual life, they do not bear upon the religious thought of our age and nation. One thread of the vast complex web of our century has been traced through, worthy of attention only because it lies parallel with hundreds and even perhaps thousands more, and it ends not in darkness but in light. When once the scale had turned, help after help came in of the best things in all the world—love, friendship, and the power of giving sympathy and counsel to those who were still in bewilderment. The loneliness was over, and life began again to be thronged with interests and irradiated with beauty. Even guidance from Heaven itself was not unknown. The deep voice of the years and the centuries spoke first, and drowned the insistent wail of the disappointed hours; but even the hours now and then had a voice at last, and the single-worded whisper close at hand is apt to be more convincing to the individual mind than the thunder up in the air.

Yes, God is faithful, and my lot is cast;  
 Oh, not myself to serve, my own to be;  
 Light of my life, the darkness now is past,  
 And I, beneath the Cross, can work for Thee.

## SCIENTIFIC LIGHTS ON RELIGIOUS PROBLEMS.

### VIII.

#### "IS GOD A PRESENT GUIDE?"

THE question has often been asked, What is the common element in the religious life of all nations? There is the vastest possible diversity in creed, there is infinite variety in the rites of worship, there are impassable differences in the