

## RELIGIOUS UNITY.

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**A**T the present time when some of the most trivial distinctions are being magnified to the size of differences and so many false barriers are being raised to no better purpose than the dividing of one group from another, it may prove both sane and refreshing to take a brief glimpse at life from exactly the opposite angle, viewing some of the facts which serve to unite rather than divide individuals and groups.

One of the most fertile sources of discord among human beings is difference in religious belief. This fact seems very strange when we stop to reflect that the fundamental object of all true religion is to harmonize the relations between individual lives and make them more responsive to divine guidance. The fact seems less strange, however, when we remember that, around the core of truth at the heart of every religion, there has sprung up a complex structure of man-made interpretation and formality, which growth has invariably been so luxuriant as to obscure the original truth. Nevertheless, there has been achieved substantial progress in the direction of religious unity.

In the world of today there are about a dozen organized religions. Let us see in what ways these religions resemble one another. Each of them traces its fundamental beliefs to the teachings of an inspired leader. All have experienced additions, subtractions, and alterations of these original teachings, at the hands of persons perhaps less divinely inspired. All of these religions preach the immortality of the spirit and all recognize the striving of the spirit toward an ideal. The ethical standards originally set up as practical manifestations of these ideals, show many points of similarity in all religions. All acknowledge the existence of super-human powers in Nature.

While some of these organized religions present a multiplicity of unseen gods, both benign and malignant, five of them, the Protestant, the Roman Catholic, the Greek Catholic, the Jewish, and the Mohammedan faiths proclaim the existence of the same Supreme God. The adherents of these five large religious organizations total about nine hundred million people. Two other great religions, Confucianism and Taoism, with a combined following of over three hundred million, are essentially monotheistic. Thus we see, out of a present earthly population of about seventeen hundred million, a grand total of twelve hundred million people whose faith has already reached the unity implied by a common understanding of God as the single Supreme Being.

This means that two out of every three people on earth can now say the Lord's Prayer without violence to their fundamental beliefs. In turn, that means that two-thirds of the human race can now face the same future goal, for the Lord's Prayer is our guide to our race future. Let us see what further advances in religious unity we may expect the future to unfold, as the Lord's Prayer grows to ever larger significance in human minds and hearts.

The words "Our Father" will come to represent a spiritual relationship to God, which involves a spiritual brotherhood among human beings far more real and more permanent than any blood relationship. As we learn to know God better we shall find that the word "Father" was well chosen, that his love for us is like the love of the highest type of human father or mother, but so far finer and greater that we have not the capacity to imagine its quality and extent. With this expanding vision of Divine Love will come the knowledge that it can not be bounded by our religious distinctions. We shall come to realize that God loves all people regardless of their religious beliefs. We shall come to treat this love as the most important fact in all religious teaching, in the light of which we can afford to disregard the comparatively minor points around which religious controversies often center. We shall learn that God himself is neither Catholic nor Protestant, neither Jew nor Gentile, neither Christian nor heathen, but is vastly greater and infinitely dearer to us than he has been pictured by any of these or by all combined.

In fact, the religion of the future will become more and more personal and individual, less and less a matter of organization and of formal creed. We shall grow to understand that through

prayer we can gain a quicker, surer, and closer contact with God than can be secured through any priesthood—and all honor to every sincere minister. We shall come to realize that Heaven is not a place but a condition, that true religion is a matter of inner feeling, not of outer conformity to some statement of belief. We shall come to know and to acknowledge that each person's religious ideas and ideals are conditioned by individual experience and capacity and that, instead of a dozen organized religions in the world, in reality there have always been and there always will be as many different religious beliefs as there are human beings able to think.

When we have reached this stage the need for religious organization, as we know it, will have passed and in its stead there will be a new and larger form of organization whose aim is to secure for the individual ever greater religious liberty. The method of this organization will be informal discussion rather than formal instruction, yet this discussion will be far more instructive than all the sermonizing in the world. Perhaps we may call this experimental religion, for in its practice each individual will make his own observations and draw his own conclusions, instead of blindly accepting the statements of others on important religious matters.

Finally, the future religion will disclose to us what none of the past and none of the present organized religions has brought forth, the essential divinity of human life. We shall learn that we came from God, that we are bound toward God, and that this is true, not of some one favored sect, creed, or religion, but of all people. We shall learn these things by closer study of the life and teachings of one who was human as we are human and who was divine as we are divine, one whose perfection we can therefore hope eventually to attain. In the light of this knowledge we shall realize that we cannot serve God by trying to force our neighbor to our religious belief. We shall know that the spark of divinity in each human being is that individual's license to seek and to find God in his or her own way. And when we are able to recognize the divine element in human life, we shall have learned the final and complete reason for permanent religious unity.