

THE RELIGION OF A NATURALIST.

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“TESTIFYING” plays an important part in the practices of many religions. This is in accord with the psychologically sound maxim that confession and profession are “good for the soul.” I see no reason why the principle should not apply to the religious experiences of the naturalist as well as to other kinds of experiences by other classes of people.

My religious impulse is by nature just about average. I judge, as are my natural endowments generally. It seems to be neither exceptionally strong nor exceptionally weak. Oliver Wendell Holmes once remarked about his own religious needs that there was a little plant in his nature which needed watering once a week; and that he found Sunday morning a convenient watering time. This fits my case very well.

As a boy I knew little indeed of formal religious observance and still less of such discipline. Country churches and Sunday schools and preachers, though not wholly absent, were rare specimens sure enough in the part of the Badger state where I was born and nurtured. I never saw a religious service of any kind until I was more than half grown. My earliest glimpses of the religious life were confined to the little family group. At the very threshold of memory stands the soul-terrifying warnings of the “wrath to come” thrust into my tender mind by a grandmother only a generation removed from New England Presbyterianism at its worst.

As a fairly successful offset to this stands the larger, more continuous influence of a father who could hate pretense more earnestly, love justice more sincerely, walk uprightly more sure-footedly, and make less noise about all, than—well—any other father I ever had at least. So notable was he in these ways that he fell

under condemnation by the one church organization in the neighborhood, of being "worse than the Devil" because a moral man. But his occasional slips toward spiritualism and universalism and his enthusiasm for Ralph Waldo Emerson whose one lecture he heard seemed to have been a red-letter day in his hum-drum life, undoubtedly enhanced the sin of his moral goodness in the eyes of these neighbors.

Then there was the influence of a mother whose watchfulness over her brood and efforts for them always partook, as I now know, more or less of the nature of religious service. A person, was this mother, whose daily life was such that even had I been fully instructed about angels, I could hardly have felt them of much practical importance to me.

The years of my peregrination, corporeal and spiritual, that intervened between the final break-up of the old family group and the establishment of the new, brought the experiences, quite typical, I think, for young men of that period who were touched by the breath of learning.

We all took a few swallows from the Spencerian fountain then flowing with full head, and fewer still from the Darwinian fountain, also at full flood. And there was the intellect-enthraling doctrine of conservation of energy to be reckoned with in any sort of religious adjustment that could be attempted, John Tyndall being for us the major prophet in this realm.

As for coming to close quarters with religion itself—well, about the best we could do was to go to church on an occasional Sunday, and on week days sit on the bleachers and watch with a bewildering mixture of satisfaction and disgust, Colonel Bob Ingersoll while he battered the face of poor Moses for making mistakes now and then.

Through most of this period of varied but in no wise extraordinary outside influences, I remained quite unconvinced as to the significance and value of participation in public religious exercises and identification with religious organizations. But the noonday of life brought me into church fellowship. This I have maintained with varying degrees of value to myself and service to the organizations which have taken me in, and undoubtedly shall maintain to the end. That I have recently felt it necessary to change to a less firmly creed-held society than that to which I originally belonged is significant here only in its bearing on the controversy over evolution which now shows signs of refilling the whole intellectual sky with light and heat. The renewal of this controversy I believe to be much more

important than it seems to be considered by most persons of learning. From a moderately skilled examination of the new controversy as it has so far developed one can forecast a quite different alignment from that which most characterized the old controversy.

Speaking broadly, the line of cleavage in the contest brought on by "The Origin of Species" was between natural science and theology. On one side were the great torch bearers of natural knowledge, while on the other side were those eminent in maintaining the doctrines of traditional Christianity.

The indications are that in the on-coming controversy the cleavage line will run at right angles to its former position, and will cut square across it. The result of this would be that on each side of the line both scientists and religionists would be found, the cleavage being between open-mindedness and liberalism on the one hand, and shut-mindedness and dogmatism on the other. On the one side will be, it seems, liberal religion and liberal science, while on the other side will stand dogmatic science and dogmatic religion. And what ought to contribute largely to quick and decisive victory for those on the open-mind side is the fact that it should be very easy for all those on this side whether scientists or religionists, to work hand in hand so far as this controversy is concerned; while on the other side there can be little or no common ground. It is in the essence of all dogmatism to exclude all other dogmatism. If different dogmatisms can be on mere speaking terms with one another that is all that can be expected of them. They can never work together.

Whatever chance there may be of value to others as well as to myself in this testimony of mine is dependent upon my being personal still further. I shall have to go into a little detail on my solution of the problem of my own public duty toward religion. This will involve a brief look at the groundwork upon which the solution rests.

To me the normal, the naturalistic, starting-point for the solution is the question: What is the place, what the function, of religion in human life? And this, asked naturalistically, must be understood to refer to religion not merely in its developed or actualized form, but quite as much in its incipient or germinal form. It must really concern the impulse to religion more than the *patent manifestation* of it.

Now, the mode by which the naturalist must seek to answer this as all questions is well known: He must seek the evidence.

The evidence in this case is from three sources; from the *historic* or racial source; from *contemporaneous* life—the side of objective individual experience. And finally from the side of the “inner life.” Here the seeker must dive deep and swim hard if he would know the vast ocean of reality into which he is plunged.

On the historic side the evidence is now so vast and so easily accessible that very little time devoted to it will carry us far.

I quote: “The fact is that there has not been a single tribe, no matter how rude, known in history or visited by travelers, which has been shown to be destitute of religion, under some form. . . .

“Religion, therefore, is and has been as far as history informs us, universal in the human race.”

This statement taken from Daniel G. Brinton’s “Religion of Primitive Peoples,” epitomizes a generalization than which no other, I believe, concerning the psychic life of mankind rests on a solid foundation.

From the side of individual experience, we must, it seems to me, accept such works as William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as confirming our own impressions that the germ of religion is present in every normal man, woman and child. But if the religious impulse is thus inherent in human nature, as a naturalist I see no way to avoid recognizing certain consequences of the utmost importance for human welfare, but which are rarely and imperfectly recognized.

For one thing, it would follow, that the old notion of becoming “converted” and of “getting religion” is almost sure to be, indeed usually has been, disastrously misunderstood. A person may be said to “get religion” only in much the sense that a lad may be said to get a man’s voice at a certain time in his life. Undoubtedly the state of latency or part-latency of religion in one’s constitution is much more subject to external conditions for being brought to actuality than is the heaviness of the male voice in the young boy. But if the generalization above indicated is correct, religion is no less potentially present everywhere than is the manly voice in the boy, however unrecognizable it may be.

Now this means, stated in the naturalist’s language, that the religious impulse is hereditary. It is instinctive. The germ of religion is in the germ plasm of the human species. This truth carries with it another of great practical importance. It is this: In accordance with a fundamental principle of biological development, if the egg, or germ, develops properly, it develops *as a whole*. That

is if any of its potentialities become actualities they *all* must and will preserve due balance. Otherwise the outcome is an abnormality. Now such faulty developments are well known especially to embryologists. When the incompletenesses are striking they make what are called monstrosities.

But such incomplete development may pertain to the mental or spiritual potentialities of the human organism quite as well as to its physical potentialities. Consequently, abnormalities and monstrosities occur in mental or spiritual life as well as in physical life. Innate mental defectives of many kinds and degrees are illustrations of this too familiar to us all. The psychopathic clinics are where science learns most about them.

Here still another principle must be called in. I refer to that principle in the mental life of human beings according to which impulses and emotions become detached more or less completely from their original objects and attached to others alien to them in some degree. This appears to be the essential thing in the idea of "transference" rightly taken much account of by the Freudian school of psychopathology. Familiar illustration, falling short of real disease, is seen in the abnormal affection which childless women and men sometimes bestow upon dogs and other animal pets.

Now for my main point: Since the religious impulse is bound to develop in some way, i. e., to express itself in some sort of response, if it does not go in its original or normal direction it will go in some other or abnormal direction. And this means, when stated in a nutshell, that if any normal person supposes himself or herself without religion and not needing any, that person is probably "making a religion" as we say, of some lesser object or interest than that to which the religious impulse naturally pertains. And so we see politicians making a religion of their party; business men scantifying some business project; scientists deifying some pet theory; artists idolizing their peculiar creative powers; social reformers worshipping in the temple of Socialism or social service; and so on and on. In no domain, probably, has man been more wont to make religion than in that of effort for relief from bodily pain and disease. The seeds of idolatry whatever its form or name is right here, I am quite sure. Magic, animism, ancestor worship, etc., are rooted in this same soil almost certainly.

Now, do not, I pray, fail to catch the real point of what I am saying here.

The idea implied in what was said a moment ago that if the

religious impulse does not go in the right direction it will go in the wrong direction, will almost certainly raise in some minds the question: But what *is* the *right* direction? In other words, they would inquire: What else are you presenting us than the ancient problem over which so much bad temper and good blood have been shed, that of what the *True* religion is.

If, however, my words be closely scrutinized it will be found that the issue they raise is very different from this very old and very bloody issue. The question I raise is that of religion or no religion as compared with the old question of which among two or more religions is the right one. And the difference is far reaching.

These statements bring me to the culminating point of my personal attitude and action with reference to religion. I think it will readily be seen that, holding such a conception of religion as that indicated, I could not consistently avoid, even if I so desired, a clear, open religious profession of some sort.

Stating the case more specifically it is this: My professional life interest is science—the sciences of living nature. This being so my nominal renunciation of religion would probably result in the actual transfer of my religious impulse to my science or some segment thereof, even though I were quite unconscious of the fact. At any rate so great are my claims, especially latterly, for the importance of this group of sciences to human welfare that I would be open to the charge of trying to substitute my science or some phase of it, for religion.

I may sum up in this way: *So profound is my conviction of the importance of both biological science and religion, each in its own way and right, for human life, that I cannot run the risk of supposing or being charged with supposing that either may supplant the other without incalculable harm to mankind.*

Let me illustrate what is implied by this: Imagine me to have espoused the eugenic faith in the extreme form in which it is held by a considerable number of well known biologists and sociologists. Imagine me also convinced, as several Americans seem to be, that human excellence reached its apogee in Nordic germplasm. See then what could easily happen in accordance with the principle of conceptual transference noted above were I irreligious by proclamation. My family name, my stature, complexion, known geneology, etc., being what they are, it is probably that I should use my science to convince myself of my Nordic lineage, and then allow my religious impulse to make me a sort of Eugenic Shintoist, my household shrine being dedicated to my Nordic ancestors.

It is incompatible with man's highest good to "make a religion" out of some one or a few interests, as for example eugenics in opposition to education, since this would be to divert to the service of *one*, energy which of right belongs to both.

Such diversion would be like using all the water in the reservoir for irrigation and none for drinking and other domestic purposes.

Viewed psycho-biologically religion is seen not to be science, and science not to be religion, but each a complement and fulfillment of the other.

Religion is the common magma of all emotional life, as science is of all rational life. Religion is the individual's one great reservoir of spiritual energy and as such must be freely available for each and every one of his special interests and activities. True religion sensitizes all man's powers of perceiving, energizes all his powers of action, and expands and deepens all his powers of imagination.