

RELIGION

BY T. B. STORK

THAT was a suggestive remark of Dean Inge in his essay on St. Paul, that: "the Gospel of Christ is not a religion, but religion itself in its most universal and deepest significance."

That is to say, there are not many religions of many and divers sorts, but there is only one religion and these many and divers sorts are merely different phases of that one and only religion. For they are all attempts more or less perfect to answer those time-old questions of man: What am I? Where am I? What am I doing here? What, in other words, is the meaning of all that I see about me: the earth with its beasts and plants, the stars in the sky of night, the sun of day, the moon of night? All these are mysteries just as I myself am a mystery in my birth, in my life, most of all in my death. Religion of whatever sort is an effort to answer these questions; it might be defined as the purposeful effort of man to find his place, define his relations to this world and the next. It puts a meaning into life that before was meaningless; for as Tolstoi has said, the most terrible thing to man is not the fear of death but the meaninglessness of things. Until a man finds for himself this meaning he is inferior, no matter how great his intelligence, to the poorest peasant woman who believes in the Virgin Mary and that her soul may suffer in purgatory or gain the bliss of Heaven.

It follows therefore since there can be but one rightful place for man in the world, so there can be but one religion; but one answer to his question, no matter how many fantastic shapes he may invent in his effort to find that answer. All religion so-called from the African fetichism, through the highly philosophical Brahminism of India, the cold, practical doctrine of Mahomet, the warm emotional teaching of Roman Catholicism, as well as the

intellectual refinement of Unitarianism, all the various modes of Protestant Christianity are but examples of that one effort to put meaning into life, to solve the mystery of living, to find man's place and purpose in the Universe.

The one characteristic common to all is the deep ineradicable conviction that there is an answer, competent, complete, satisfactory, could it be found, and a righteous discontent until it is found. The man is like a traveller lost in a vast unknown region full of pitfalls, traps for unwary feet, precipices for rash adventurers, he seeks the path that shall show him his place and his way through the apparently trackless wild. Like the traveller he seeks in his religion a knowledge of his whereabouts and he longs for the safety, the sure confidence which the finding of the right path gives the traveller. All his surroundings prompt him to this quest; the material world extending on all sides with its lofty mountains, its vast plains, its boundless seas, its infinite varieties of life, men like himself, animals, birds, fishes, reptiles, all the wonderful phenomena of life in all its manifestations, fill his soul with questioning wonder. What is the meaning of all these? How do I come into it? Where do I stand? Whither do I go? What are my relations to it? Is there any over-seeing power that governs and directs, or is it a mere chaotic go-as-you-please without purpose, without reason, without premeditated cause or calculated end?

These questions insist on some sort of answer; they are self-born, the natural reaction of intelligent mind to its surroundings, which to still its uneasiness must find some answer. And religion is the answer; religion is the attempt to still this uneasiness. Even those rabid enemies of all religion, the Bolsheviki, recognize this when they place in Moscow near one of the great churches in the Kremlin, an inscription declaring: "Religion is the opium of the People"; that is, religion answers these questions, tranquilizes the mind disturbed by the puzzle of the world and its life. This instinct of religion as it might be called is as primitive, as natural as hunger or thirst, and there seems no reason why it should not be accepted as a fact quite as real and credible in the psychological world as they are in the physical.

By his mental constitution, by the laws of his thinking, man is compelled to assume that there is a law, a method, a reasoned plan running through this apparent medley of the world. It is only by this assumption, whether true in reality or not, that he

finds satisfaction for his thinking. That the world is governed by laws, shaped by purpose, is a necessity of his thinking. He may not be able to discover those laws and that purpose, but he feels assured that they exist.

Expressed in the simplest terms this impulse to find his place and the equally strong conviction that there is a place not of chance, but of reason, planned long before his birth, spring from the desire for unity, for harmony with the world, with all things, with God. Separateness, disparateness, is abhorrent to man's soul, to escape it he seeks religion, which by showing him his place, his duties, his rights, his destiny, shall establish some reasoned relation with all that he sees about him and so make him one with it, with the all. To some the world may present no problem; it is all simple, requiring no explanation. They eat, they sleep, observe the daily routine of life, asking no questions, troubled by no doubts. Men are born and die, the world rolls on, all as a matter of course. But to the man who contemplates all this, who thinks, no matter how superficially, awkward doubts, strange questions arise. His regular tasks go on each day endlessly, monotonously, with no final purpose apparent, nothing is accomplished by his daily task beyond getting something to eat, something to put on. The whole race of men no matter how engaged is in the last analysis only marking time, doing things to enable it simply to exist. Finally all die to give place to others, their posterity, who occupy themselves likewise in similar tasks. They work for their living and then die. This has been going on for century after century. What is the meaning of it all? Why should man go on thus, generation after generation? What means this eternal march, this great unceasing procession of human beings from the cradle to the grave?

His efforts to examine into the great riddle only plunge him deeper in its mysteries. He discovers traces in the earth of past centuries of human and animal life, men scarcely recognizable as such; beasts of a size and shape now unknown, marks of glaciers, of fires, of earthquakes that wrought destruction centuries ago. All these proclaim the existence of the world possibly for thousands of years during which strange happenings are indicated but not revealed. So with the starry heavens where we behold extinct planets, stars so distant that the light that makes them known to us must have set out on its journey before we have any historic records of man's existence on the earth.

Religion is thus born of man's awe and wonder and of his irresistible impulse to orientate himself, to place himself in the world, and so to in some way understand the world and himself. It is the fashion of those who attack religion to ignore this vital and essential view of religion and to devote much unfavorable attention to the widely different answers which men have found in their various religions. Like men observing sailors struggling in the tempestuous sea, these critics devote more attention to the kind of vessels employed than to the vital issue whether the mariners can safely make the land. They argue that all religions must be false because so divergent and often apparently antagonistic to each other. They neglect the great fundamental identity of them all, namely, the endeavor to find satisfaction of soul.

This satisfaction of soul is the very heart of all religion, the content that comes with a sense that the individual is in harmony with this world, with all things about him, with God. For the individual by himself and for himself alone is an error whose correction is the Universal, the whole, which God is. This is the truth of religion, content, happiness of soul that comes from the consciousness that the individual has found his place, is in the path assigned him. The truth of religion is, therefore, not to be tried by physical external facts, by its correspondence or want of correspondence with scientific or historical truth, they are entirely beside the matter. The truth of religion is a spiritual truth and can only be tested spiritually. A religion which satisfies the soul of its place and destiny is always true for that soul. Souls are not all alike, are not all equally endowed. To one soul that may be the highest truth which to another may be grievous error. To each according to his capacity the answer of religion comes. An Eskimo cannot know or enter into ideas that seem simple and self-evident to your highly-trained Unitarian believer any more than he could appreciate the poetry of Tennyson or the higher flights of eloquence of St. Paul. To some the warm emotional religion of Roman Catholicism seems entirely unsatisfactory, while to the Romanist the cold logical dogmas of the Presbyterian appear banal and lifeless. If it be objected that this view of religion is purely and simply Solipsism, that thus every man is judge and final arbiter of his own religion, it must be conceded that it is so and necessarily and unavoidably so, if we believe that the state of the soul is the vital and only significant thing in religion. This has often been declared by inspired

writers and by others. "As a man thinketh so is he." But the logical inferences from this declaration never seem to have been fully grasped; namely, that there is no test or standard by which one man can try the truth or falsehood of another man's religion, for there is no test or standard save the man's own soul and that we have no means of judging. It is true we are told by Christ that by their fruits ye shall know them and that the fruits of the spirit are "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance."¹ But these tests apply to the soul, enable us to draw inferences which we are given to understand are trustworthy for the soul, they do not test the falsehood or truth of any particular religion, but rather seem to refer that to the state of the soul so that if the soul produces legitimate fruits its religion will be judged by that. False and true are terms which when applied to religion ought rather to be changed to perfect and imperfect, implying by those two terms that religion like education is a thing of degrees, of steps, in a spiritual progress. The various ceremonies, the beliefs intellectual, the dogmas ecclesiastical of the divers forms of religion are merely aids to the state of soul, steps in its education; to some they are helps, to others hindrances. The Friend or Quaker attains this state of soul by the avoiding of all ceremonies, all outward signs of inward grace; the Roman Catholic finds in his elaborate ritual, his gorgeous colors, his splendid music, the enunciation of highly artificial dogmas, the inspiration for that same state of soul which the Friend attains without them. For in the course of the spiritual growth of men through the ages—a growth which has necessarily been closely associated with their intellectual growth and their material progress in the arts and industries of life—many original beliefs and ceremonies have become obsolescent, many new ceremonies and dogmas have been invented, not deliberately but have sprung into existence naturally as better expressing their advancement in spiritual life.

A religion that causes rightful fruits of soul in conduct must never be held false, however imperfect, when compared with another more advanced since it must be inferred from external acts that the soul's state is one of content and satisfaction of harmony with the world and with God according to its capacity for content, satisfaction and harmony.

¹ Galatians v.22-23.

How else can religion be tested; have the Schopenhauers and Nietzsches and the host of smaller critics any standard by which they can measure religions, distinguish the true and the false? Do they expect by some intellectual examination to detect falsehood, religion eludes all such; for it concerns the soul and its state can be tested by no such process. The character of false or true cannot attach to such a test: it is a matter of immediate apprehension by each man for himself. He is harmonious honestly contented and satisfied in soul and that is the end of it.

Does this seem a strange conclusion for those who believe in Christianity to reach? Is not Christianity and the belief in its doctrines the only true religion? The answer must be not that it is the only, but that it is the highest and most perfect form of religion which we know. A little consideration will make evident that any other conclusion would lead us into a perfect bramble bush of difficulties, moral and intellectual. The *reductio ad absurdum* within its limitations is an effective weapon of argument. If it were contended that Christianity were the only true religion and that as a natural and logical sequence all other religions were false and the professors of them mistaken and so lost for all eternity, it would follow that we must condemn Abraham and Moses as wanting true religion because they knew not Christ, had no knowledge of the Trinity, for the simple reason that they had never heard of them. Or going a step farther we must condemn every man however good to eternal punishment if he has lived in ignorance of Christian doctrines and precepts.

Thus considered we may gather some faint light on the place and function of doctrines and ceremonials in the spiritual life of the soul. For it is that life which alone is of real consequence. Thus we see how the belief in Christ's sufferings and death drew the souls of men into a sympathy and love for God such as no belief in a stern all-just Jehovah could or would. So the belief of the Jews was superseded; became obsolescent in the higher belief in a Christ who was both God and man. The Jewish religion was not false, it did not fail in its work and place but the idea of a God favoring an exclusive people was less moving to the soul than a God who came to all men. Their Jehovah guided and delivered his people from their oppressors; the memory of it was perpetuated by the ceremonial of the passover. His majesty and glory were symbolized in the Ark of the Covenant, visible and present as a physical reality to all, so awe-inspiring

that to touch it without authority meant death. How different was the picture of God as man healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, sharing the common life of all men and finally giving his life on the cross. That earlier conception of God served its purpose, was suited to the people and the period, but this later and higher conception, now that it had in the ripeness of time become possible for men to receive it, superseded the first and the veil of the temple was rent in twain when Christ died.

To each according to his capacity, to the Jew the Almighty and in some aspects terrible Jehovah, to the Christian the human love-inspiring Christ. To the Jew the just doctrine of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, to the Christian the turning of the other cheek. These represent the spiritual growth of man's soul, the progress toward that unity of the individual with the Universal which is the goal of religion in whatever form it takes.

Miracles which in Oriental countries and according to Oriental ideas were part of the accepted credentials of Divinity, the authentication of Divine teaching, have become to many an intellectual stumbling block, a hindrance to higher spiritual life. To the early Christian the belief in them was an inspiring, sustaining power, helping his soul in the heavenward way, just as a belief in the wonders portrayed in the Apocalyptic book of Revelations fired his imagination with pictures of an earth-depicted Heaven with golden crowns and harps with the great white throne and the multitude of the redeemed in serried ranks of white.

To a man more highly developed intellectually and spiritually these vivid pictures make little appeal. His conception of Heaven is that portrayed by St. Paul when he expressed his feeling as "having a desire to depart and be with Christ which is far better."² In the gradual evolution of man physically into his present bodily form we must not refuse an equally great evolution spiritually. His body now requires for its well being what it did not need in the past, and so his soul in like manner asks a different sustenance, a nourishment more spiritual than golden harps and crowns. These spiritual helps of the past are not therefore to be pronounced false or mistaken; for their time and place and for those who required them they were true and right, but unnecessary, if not harmful, for those who, passing beyond this childish age with its miracles, its golden harps and crowns,

² Phil. i. 23.

all its gorgeous oriental imagery, the paraphernalia of the vivid Eastern imagination, have risen to Paul's great conception of Heaven that is to the being with Christ in close communion and love. It must always be borne in mind that spiritual teachings by miracles, by the recital of the wonders of the next world portrayed by a vivid imagination or by dogmas the product of ingenious intellects, all come to us very largely through the imaginations and the minds of human beings like ourselves, colored by their individual feelings and obsessions, that is the feelings and obsessions of their particular time and their particular limitations intellectual and moral.

In the gradual evolution of religious thought, the Oriental imagery, the wonders and miracles of the earlier forms of religion make way for the dogmas and doctrines which are more consistent with the severer and colder intellectual imagination of the modern man. Both serve their time and do their work as props and aids to that state of the soul toward God and the world which is the goal of all religion. But again like their predecessors in the spiritual progress of the world dogmas and doctrines have no virtue in and by themselves, it is only as they contribute to the spiritual state of the soul that they have meaning or value. There is no life in a dogma or creed any more than in the loaf of bread on the baker's shelf. Both are dead until taken up, assimilated by the living organism for which they were made. Their saving grace lies not in the truth or falsity of some physical material fact with which they deal, but in their effective influence on the soul. The great doctrines of the Church, the Trinity, the atoning sacrifice of Christ, its most sacred rites, baptism, the sacrament, have their value only as they enter into and fructify the soul of the believer; only then do they work salvation in him. By what secret process these various agents, rites, ceremonies, beliefs, dogmas, do their work is one of the mysteries of the human soul. How a belief and faith in Christ engenders a love for Him and a devotion which drives his martyrs to death with a smiling face, we cannot fathom or explain any more than we can explain the apparently simpler process by which the dead loaf of bread of our daily sustenance is transformed into life, energy, thought, all the activities of the human being who consumes it.

But this we know, that beliefs and dogmas and rites of the Church may so transform the man that we can observe in external

signs the tremendous change wrought by them. Observe how the mystics of religion are carried away into visions and ecstasies; how their souls are so wrought upon that their very physical bodies suffer change and we behold in the stigmata of saints the outward evidence of the great internal change.

Perhaps by considering the somewhat analogous processes of our human affections, we may gather some notion of the spiritual process by which love to God and to Christ become vital parts of the man's soul. Our affections for our father and mother, our friends, are not external intellectual ideas by which the man says I love my father or I love my child, but this love is the gradual development of his feelings; the why and wherefore of which he cannot explain: the fact or belief that such a person is his father or his child undoubtedly has its part in the matter just as the fact of Christ's life and death and the belief of the Christian has its part, but these must be followed by much more than this. His meditation upon it, his interest in it, and his bringing it home to himself in this way must in some way culminate in personal feeling before that belief can have its proper effect on his soul.

When this belief has thus fructified in the soul, made itself part of the man, at once it enriches and fills out his spiritual life; he lives on a higher plane of life. See, for example, how so simple a belief as that in God's protecting care helps and raises to a new key the man's thought of life so that the Psalmist could say in the abundance of his belief: "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty." Psalm 91:1.

What a charm for the fearful and the apprehensive soul to bear within it such an assurance of tranquility, of safety, amid all the perils of life. David undoubtedly spoke out of the wealth of his own confidence and trust in God the fruit of his belief in God's over-seeing goodness to his servants. Here was the belief made vital and life-giving by being taken into and made part of the soul's own substance. The transformation thus effected in the intellectual belief which first brings the thought to the man's soul is profound; it is the alchemist touch that turns the base metal to gold. The difference between the two aspects of belief may be realized by a little incident of recent occurrence in which a man sought to prove the lawfulness of strong drink by instancing the turning of water into wine by Christ at the marriage in

Cana. He treated the miracle and the story of it as a logical proposition, capable of having inferences drawn and arguments made upon it; to him it was simply a positive fact with all the consequences that ought to be inferred from a fact; to the man to whom it became a live and vital thing, it was an illustration of Christ's humanity, the manifestation of human interest in the humble life of men on earth and so it brought to his soul a realizing sense of Christ's nearness to men; it bred in him feeling; it was transformed from a cold statement of fact to a life-giving inspiration. It is manifestly absurd to suppose that the merely intellectual acceptance or rejection of a rite or a dogma of religion can have any spiritual effect. It is only when that rite or dogma comes into the spiritual life of the soul that we can attribute moral and spiritual value to it. It is equally absurd to suppose that ignorance or even a refusal of some rite or dogma proclaimed by some human authority can have any damning effect spiritually. There are many dogmas of the Church utterly unknown to Abraham, to Moses, to David; they are not condemned to outer darkness by reason thereof. That ignorance is their spiritual loss but not their spiritual condemnation: they never had that realization of the love and nearness of God to his people which in later days came to the Christian Church in its belief and faith in Christ and his sacrifice for them. This does not stamp the earlier religion as false, but simply as less vital, less rich in its spiritual power. May it not be said of those who now perhaps have no belief in miracles, who may even doubt the material facts of Christ's life and death, that this is their terrible spiritual loss, that thus their souls miss that tenderness of soul which a belief in Christ's life and death would give them; that thus deprived they will be more distant from God, will have a colder less fruitful spiritual life, that they will be far back in the spiritual progress and growth of their souls toward unity with God. That it should condemn them to eternal punishment, it would be trespassing on forbidden ground to even think; that again is one of the mysteries of our life. We do not know, we cannot even presume to guess, the answer to that question, what will become of those who reject all spiritual teachings. If it be suggested that a continual rejection, resulting in a continual spiritual loss to the soul, either by a refusal or an ignorance of these helps to its spiritual life might eventually end, if persisted in, with the spiritual death of the soul, there would seem little to be said to the contrary.