

## RELIGION AND MORALITY

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**R**ELIGIO, the word from which the modern word "religion" comes, means, as is generally known, respect for the gods. The religious man, in the classical sense, was he who showed them respect and reverence.

The word has not greatly changed in passing over into modern speech, in meaning any more than in form. The religious man is still he who respects and loves God, who seeks to please Him and takes pleasure, or, at any rate is scrupulous, in His worship, avoids impiety and profanity, is reverent, and observes carefully all such rules and ceremonies as in whatever form he has adopted them, show his submission to and sense of dependence on Him.

Owing to our changed conception of God, by which He has become a morally and ethically good Being, we expect now other things also from a religious man. We expect him to be ethically good, because we consider the service of God to include this, and we look to see in one who, ceremonially and by formal acts, shows himself religious, conduct which ethically is such as we should consider in accordance with morality, which we have come to consider the will of God.

But this ethical conduct is still not a part of religion, or is so only in a secondary or derivative way. Religion, in itself, is concerned only with pleasing God. He may be pleased by certain ceremonial observances, he may be pleased by right conduct, but from the standpoint of religion both things belong to the same class. With right conduct, as right conduct, religion has nothing to do. It is only when right conduct is considered as an obedience to God's will and as an action taken with a view to pleasing Him, that it comes within the scope of religion at all. Whenever gods have been (as has often been the case) without any particular moral

character, religion has not concerned itself with conduct in an ethical sense. That has been left in the domain of philosophy and morals; a domain, under such circumstances, wholly foreign to that of religion.

Morality on the other hand has no natural relation to God. It involves only the relation between men, and the right conduct of men to each other. Acts in the highest degree reprehensible from the religious point of view may be indifferent, or even laudable, morally, while acts which violate every principle of morality may be indifferent or even meritorious when viewed from the standpoint of religion. Thus atheism or blasphemy, for example, are indifferent morally, though among the worst of religious offences, while such acts as the massacres described in the Book of Joshua, while horrifying to the moral sense are, religiously, highly laudable.

The essence of religion is to please God, whatever be the conduct which will have that result. The essence of morality is to act ethically. If the two principles agree in prescribing or approving certain conduct, the agreement is purely fortuitous. Religion cares nothing for the ethical character of the act, so long as it will be pleasing to God; morality cares nothing for the will of God with respect to it, so long as it is ethically right.

Ethics or morality has always labored under one great difficulty, the lack of a sanction. Admitting that certain conduct is morally right, and admitting, also, that certain other conduct is morally wrong, still why should the former be followed and the latter avoided? Many attempts have been made to answer this question and all have failed. The most generally received answer at the present time is that God commands ethical conduct and will punish unethical conduct. That does, indeed, afford the needed sanction, but it changes the nature of morality and makes it only a subdivision of religion. We are to do right, not because it is right, but because God commands it. Morally right conduct, then, is a phase of respect for God, and stands with attendance at public worship, Sunday observance, or any other like formal acts.

Without any sanction and without any answer to the question stated in the last paragraph, morality has more than held its own. The sense of right and wrong, however arising, and upon whatever it may be based, with or without religious belief and regardless of the particular nature of that religious belief, where any is to be found, has in general been men's guide and tends constantly to become so to a greater degree. Imperfect as it is, has been and

must be, it is nevertheless based upon a feeling of obligation to the rest of mankind, and of distinction between right and wrong conduct which there is a duty to observe. No doubt it is undergoing constant modification as to its classification of certain conduct or its judgment of certain acts. Dependent for its being upon enlightenment and social development, and varying as these vary, it keeps pace, for the mass of the community, with these, and represents at any given time, inevitably, the state of general feeling.

This sense of right and wrong is the most valuable social asset of the community. It can be satisfied, in each individual, only by conduct which is in accord with the standards of the time. It may be said, in a sense, to need no sanction, for it imposes itself upon the individual and its elevation and force increase with his enlightenment. Well-founded or not, subject to a theoretically adequate sanction or not, it is powerful and effective and is the only efficient means by which social conditions are maintained in a tolerable state or are improved. Upon it all teachers of higher morality must rest, and by and through it alone can progress in the direction of a better life be made. Without minute examinations as to its source or validity, it must be taken into account as the one vital force upon which we can rely for the advancement of the race.

That we may utilize this force to the utmost we must strengthen it as far as possible. We must make it felt by men's consciences to the fullest extent. We must do all that in us lies to make it the sole criterion of conduct, to enlighten it by the highest moral ideas, and to set every possible obstacle in the way of those evasions of the obligations which it imposes to which men are so prone. Its power is already so great that few men run openly counter to it. As a rule men will not do what they acknowledge to themselves to be wrong. They must find some way of justifying to themselves their intentional act before they can do it. Enlightenment makes the justification of a wrong act more difficult, but on the other hand there is a more dangerous and more subtle influence which undermines the whole structure of the rule of conduct established by the sense of right. This influence comes from religion.

As has been said before, religion, by setting up for morality a sanction in the will of God, instead of strengthening it as might, *a priori*, have been supposed, has changed its nature and reduced its importance. Morally right conduct, since it has been based upon the will of God, becomes important only as an act which will please Him. While no doubt it is taken that God desires right conduct,

yet if He could conceivably desire wrong conduct, then the obligation which exists to do right would become, with equal force, an obligation to do wrong. That is, the quality of the act has ceased to be important, but only the attitude of God toward it has importance.

So, too, the value and force of the sense of right and wrong is thus destroyed, and morally right conduct falls into the same class with acts morally indifferent, but which are supposed to please God. This is one of the most serious and harmful effects of the religious view. What conduct is in accord with the moral standards of the time is a matter comparatively easy of determination. Every man carries in himself the touchstone of his action, nor is there usually any considerable divergence of views upon this subject in the community. But what conduct will please God is a very different matter, and one far more difficult to decide. Without revelation it would be impossible and with revelation the door is opened so wide, the interpretations of texts and the claims of those who assert their authority to speak in His name afford so much room for dispute and uncertainty, that no satisfactory conclusion acceptable to all, or capable of anything resembling a demonstration, is possible. When once the principle that God requires or is pleased with any acts other than those which morality dictates has been admitted, all standards of conduct are gone.

The notion that God is pleased with or requires acts as to which morality is silent, or which it condemns, is of course far more ancient than any association of morality with His will or service. So long as early anthropomorphism lasted, and the gods were only greater or more powerful lords or kings, capable of love or hate, having likes and dislikes similar to those of men, exacting tribute, obedience and respect exactly as the local earthly ruler did, no such association was possible. Of course, as the king, in general, punished, and repressed crime, enforced order and protected ordinary legal rights, God would probably do the same, but regard to all these things were not matters of service to Him. By refraining from crime, disorder and wronging others a man would escape punishment, but would commend himself to God only negatively. To win His favor, to be "a man after God's own heart" (in the phrase of the Old Testament) he must be assiduous in His worship, liberal in his sacrifices, punctual in all of the ceremonial observances which marked his respect and reverence for Him. To one who sedulously did all this, much would be pardoned which otherwise would have

brought punishment. Upon one who neglected any one of them, no matter how moral his conduct, punishment was sure to fall.

A striking and familiar instance which illustrates this is to be seen in the cases of David and Uzzah. The former's life was certainly marked by a course of conduct in which morality had no part. There are few offences which he did not commit, but he was devoted in his service of his God, and was beloved and blessed by Him accordingly. Even when he had committed an offence so great as to make some punishment unavoidable, Nathan announced that punishment to be only that he would not be permitted to build the temple for his God which he had intended. Uzzah committed (and that quite unintentionally) an act which the same God construed into one of disrespect. He was punished at once with death. Of course, profane history is full of such instances, but no parallel could illustrate better than that of David and Uzzah the wholly unimportant character attributed to moral conduct, and the vast importance given to religious conduct in early times.

So long, however, as morality stood by itself, it could hold its own. To be moral was never displeasing to the gods (except in certain rare cases where they wanted a man to act wrongfully, to give an excuse for punishing him) and so morality occupied a field by itself where it developed fully under the care of philosophers and moral teachers, who did not seek to meddle with religious affairs.

But when the time came when God was regarded as primarily a moral being, when morally right conduct was supposed to be as necessary, or almost as necessary to please Him as religious conduct, and when the basis of morality was placed in the will of God, the downfall of morality came. No longer something by itself, of eternal and independent validity and obligation, but only a means of pleasing God, like the offering of sacrifices, the building of a temple or a church or attendance at public worship, it became uncertain, shifting, and of doubtful obligation.

So long as it stood by itself the answer to the question why a man should do or refrain from a given act was simple; it was because he felt it to be right or wrong. When the answer was because God willed it or forbade it, no man could decide for himself. It might be morally right, but if God forbade it it must not be done; it might be morally wrong, but if God commanded it it must be done. Had not God commanded the sacrifice of Isaac, even though he stayed it finally as a reward for Abraham's obedience? Had He not accepted the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter? Had He not com-

manded the slaughter of the Canaanites, approved the murder of Sisera, and in innumerable other cases commanded or blessed acts revolting to the moral sense? It might be, in a given case, His will that the prescriptions of morality should be disregarded and until His will was known the conduct which the inner sense of right and wrong most strongly approved might be precisely that which must not be followed. If that will could be known it must be followed, and however repugnant to man's natural sense of right and wrong it might be, it was the infallible declaration of what he must do.

Thus, in making morality spring from and be dependent upon the will of God, any true criterion became impossible. There was no longer any right or wrong. The will of God had swallowed them up. Ordinarily, no doubt, men might take their inner feeling as itself an indication of God's will, but it was a feeble and faulty indication, always subject to be over-ridden by a more authoritative declaration. The conflict between religion and morality was thus established.

For many centuries there was no doubt as to the victor in that conflict. Religion won. Prophets, priests, and even at a later time, ministers, drove unwilling sovereigns and people to acts repugnant to every feeling of morality and humanity by proclaiming such acts to be the will of God. Through all the long and dreadful series of religious persecutions, from the slaughter of the priests of Baal to the hanging of the Quakers in New England, the supposed will of God overrode the moral law.

Pagan nations were less subject to the evil. Their gods were not necessarily perfect, nor did morality, in their view, depend solely upon the will of the gods. The gods might force their will on men, whether right or wrong, but they could not change the quality of their acts, and men might sometimes be laudable for braving the anger of the gods rather than do wrong. For a Christian such a thing was unthinkable. Right, in their view, was what God commanded, wrong was what he forbade, and he who acted contrary to God's will necessarily, by that fact, did wrong.

Indeed it has been, and even now is, common to hear morality condemned by the clergy. Men who lead moral lives without having any religious belief are denounced because a morality which has not its source in a desire to obey God is considered of no value in itself, and of a nature to lead men astray. No doubt this attitude is due, in part, to the doctrine of justification by faith, which makes

morally right conduct, in itself, unimportant. This attitude towards morally right conduct is less prevalent than it was once. In the eighteenth century the deists and sceptics were almost as much denounced for their moral lives as for their doctrines. We have passed that stage but, in some places the remains of the old attitude are to be found.

In general, at the present day however, morality has regained much of its ascendancy. The clergy are not now regarded as oracles of God, and their utterances do not rank as revelations of His will. While, therefore, the old vicious theory still persists, it has lost in this respect the power to do harm.

Only when some misled fanatic succeeds in persuading a relatively small band of followers that God speaks through his mouth do we see morality succumb to religion. Mankind in general, while still considering right and wrong as consisting solely in obedience or disobedience to the will of God, have come to regard their moral sense as the only declaration of that will, and so to act, in general, as if no such doctrine had been adopted.

We have therefore again reached a satisfactory condition, so far as our moral judgments are concerned. We are not now in any great danger of thinking conduct right which our moral sense tells us to be wrong because we believe that we have some revelation of God's will to the contrary. But while, on this part of the field, morality has been victorious over religion, in another quarter the case is not the same.

As has been said, the essence of morality is to do right, while the essence of religion is to please God. If we have largely escaped from the danger of thinking that morally wrong conduct can ever please God, we have not escaped from the worse, because more prevalent and far-reaching evil, of thinking that God can be pleased by other things as well. While morality has pretty well freed itself from the deadly clutch in which religion held it, it must still face it as an antagonist conducting the battle in another way.

Religion primarily consisted in worship, sacrifice, the paying of honor to God by external acts, the public and private observance of the formal prescriptions of that particular form of faith which the particular person professed. In this form it still persists, not in its pristine vigor, not holding such a sway as once it did over so large a portion of mankind, but nevertheless still of a very considerable importance.

That "no man liveth and sinneth not" is so obvious as to be axiomatic, and hence he who would please God must frequently fail. Accepting morality as the will of God, in the form in which man's consciousness declares it, yet no one can perfectly comply with that will by leading a morally perfect life. All must, to a greater or less degree, fail to comply with the highest moral standards, and thus fail to comply fully with the will of God. If that were all, man could only bend his efforts to approaching as near as possible to that ideal moral perfection which he cannot actually attain. Only so could he hope effectually to please God. As his whole fate and fortune in this world and the next depend upon his pleasing God (leaving aside, for the present, the doctrine of justification by faith) he would have the strongest possible incentive to a right life. God may be expected to recognize that human weakness cannot attain perfection, and to accept an earnest, sincere and constant effort as the best offering which can be made. Were right living the only way of pleasing God, this would be the strongest of motives for right living, and the most powerful support of morality.

But unfortunately religion appears to destroy, in great measure, all the beneficial effects of such a belief. Religion presents to man another method of pleasing God, far easier and less repugnant to his tendencies. It assures him that right living is only one of the ways in which God may be pleased, and perhaps not the most effectual. Indeed, religion depends for its very existence upon the position that right living, of itself, cannot suffice; that worship, the observance of Sunday, taking part in organized religious observances contributing to the support of organized religion, study of the Bible, and the intellectual acceptance of a great number of statements with reference to the nature of God, the origin, nature and destiny of man, and a host of historical occurrences are the truly vital things, without which mere morality is wholly unavailing. Even when, as is sometimes the case, morality is given an equal place with these other things, it is set no higher, and the utmost that religion will concede is that all these things are equally important.

It could not be otherwise. If morally right living were sufficient in itself, it would not matter whether the reason for its sufficiency were that this alone would please God, or something inherent in morality itself. In either case religion would have no reason for existing. Observances and acts of worship and homage which cannot have an effect become unimportant. Whatever a man's purpose or motive, if an earnest effort to lead a morally right life will suf-

fice for his salvation, morality is all that he needs. This host of morally indifferent acts and beliefs cannot aid him, nor matter to him. These things, however, are of the very substance of religion, and if they were surrendered, or their unimportance admitted, religion would have no reason to exist.

But the maintenance of the importance of these religious matters is harmful in the highest degree to morality. To lead a morally right life is hard, however easy it may be to discuss what is necessary to that end. It requires the subduing or restraining of natural passions and tendencies, the surrender of desires, the curbing of appetites, renunciation, self-abnegation, self-sacrifice. It is needless to point out what self-subjugation and self-control demands. We are all conscious of it.

To attend public worship, however, to join a church, to repeat a creed, to pay out money for pew-rent or as a contribution, to accept dogmas, to observe Sunday to comply with any and all ordinances of religion, is easy. It requires little thought and little self-denial, and it imposes no other burden than the performance of the physical act.

When, therefore, religion offers these two ways of pleasing God, and puts them on a parity if it does not set a higher value upon the morally indifferent acts, it deals a deadly blow at morality. That man should choose the more difficult of two courses equally open to him would be impossible. It would not be even rational. When he is told that to follow the more difficult course will be of no avail unless he also follows the other, there can be no question of what he will do.

It is true that, with the return to morality which has been noted above, it has also been put on a parity, generally speaking, with the dogmas and observances of religion, but this point is largely illusory. In some part of his duties a man must fail. He cannot wholly comply with the will of God. But he can easily comply with those things announced by his religion as God's will which have no moral character, and the tendency is irresistible to make formal observances atone for moral delinquencies. It is and always has been a refuge for anyone who is unwilling to comply with the moral law that he can please God by these formal matters, and to make his strictness in that respect offset his looseness in the other.

In fact, this result has followed, and it has often been a source of regret to persons interested in the churches, as well as a ground of criticism to those not so interested, that many persons who are

strict in the observance of what are called, and properly called, their "religious duties," live lives which by no means show a high regard for morality, using the word in its broad sense. It has been a frequent source of criticism also by Protestants of the Catholic Church, that the lower classes in Catholic countries, while very devout, do not show a high morality (and sometimes show hardly any at all) in their lives. Accusations of hypocrisy, too, are often made against men who, while religious, are in their daily life unscrupulous if not dishonest, and loose if not dissolute.

But the fact is that these criticisms and accusations are unfounded, in the sense in which they are meant, as much as the charges of "Formalism" lavished upon the Church of England in the seventeenth century. No particular church is open to criticism more than another. The evil is inherent. Once let a man think that by any performance, no matter what, of any morally indifferent act, no matter what, he can please or propitiate God, or to any degree whatever make up for moral delinquencies, and he will avail himself of the opportunity. That is the fundamental principle upon which all churches are agreed; that acts of piety or religion are pleasing to God in the same way that a morally right life is pleasing, and while they differ as to the particular acts which they consider pleasing to God, those differences are not essential. The only important thing is that some such acts are meritorious in the sight of God.

Nor are those people hypocrites whose life is not ethical, but who are strict in their religious observances. That a libertine should be honest, or that a dishonest man should be continent, shows no hypocrisy. As little does it show hypocrisy that an unscrupulous man should be religious, unless it is clear that he is so only for the sake of deceiving the public. A man may be honestly pious, honestly religious, whose life is far from what a high moral sense would require. He may, and religion encourages him to do so, truly believe that by his sincere devotion he is atoning for his moral lapses. Indeed, if he accept the doctrine of justification by faith and reason logically, he could reach no other conclusion than that questions of morality were wholly unimportant, if only he accept sincerely that belief. But without proceeding in so severely logical a way, there is no reason why he should not, and in many cases he undoubtedly does, believe that his strictness in religion makes up for his lack of strictness in his moral duties.

Thus we see that religion is the foe of morality, and this hostility is inevitable and irremediable. They are at war in their principles.

Morality only seeks morally right conduct. Religion only seeks respect, reverence, and obedience to God. While religion makes a morally right life one form of obedience to God, it also defines and enforces other forms, which it makes of equal, if not greater, importance. It offers him who finds obedience in one form too difficult, a choice of other ways, far easier and equally efficient. It condemns the good man who does not believe, quite as much as the bad man who does sincerely believe and is faithful to his religious duties. Therefore it depresses the value of morality and offers a more easily earned salvation. Morality can offer nothing to offset this. Salvation is not her business, and of God she knows nothing. She only knows that one thing is right and another is wrong, that the one should be followed and the other shunned. Had she the field to herself she would, no doubt, overcome the world; but if she did, religion must perish and, while losing ground, that religion cannot yet accept.

So the contest must go on. Man wants an easier way than that of right living, and does not easily give up religion which offers it, but we must all hope for a time when he will rise above such things. Religion weakens his moral fibre, but we have made progress since the time of Louis XI, and it may be that to recognize the antagonism will be an aid in escaping from its consequences.