

ARTICLE II.

THE RELIGIOUS LIFE: ITS NATURE AND CLAIMS.

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WHEN we speak of man as a religious being, we refer to elements belonging to his constitution or nature. When we speak of one as a religious man, we mean that he has brought these natural elements into activity, and conforms his life to the facts and principles of religion.

The acceptance of such a life belongs to our personal responsibility. Our nature indicates its propriety and makes it possible. Our own definite purpose and responsible activity give us the religious character and make us partakers of the religious life. The devils who "believe and tremble" are by nature religious beings; but in responsible character and life they are irreligious and apostate. Men are naturally *social* beings. They have impulses and susceptibilities for a social life. They may order their lives in harmony with their social nature, or they may seek the solitude and live the life of a recluse. To have the character as well as the nature of social beings they must accept the responsibilities and adjust themselves to the relations of the social life. As rational beings men have the responsibility of determining for themselves the life which they will live. In the lower creatures the constitution and environment determine the life. They are made what they are to be. To make the brute a utility we mould and modify his natural activities within certain limits to suit our purpose. The man, on the other hand, must add to the

activities which spring from his nature and environment such aims and purposes as belong to a rational being, in order to realize a worthy life—a life that is not a failure. To the brute there can be no such failure, because he is not capable of shaping his life by any aim or purpose of his own. He always is and becomes what he was made to be.

The rational or moral being faces life under entirely different conditions. Sharing with the brute in many conditions and limitations, he moves scarcely a step in the world without encountering the fact of obligation, somewhat that he ought to do or ought not to do. Here comes the necessity of forming moral character. Here all fellowship with the brute must end. He might be willing to live—might even covet for himself the irresponsible life of the brute; but the likeness of a son of God is on him, and he can find no satisfactory life with brutes. He must lift his face upward and accept the principle of duty, the law of his own reason, as his rule of life. This necessity lies in the fact that he is a moral being, and the force of obligation is upon him by virtue of what he is, without reference to his constitution in other respects, and independently of all environment. Meeting another being, he finds a neighbor, whether like himself of the human family or of the family of brutes of less value than himself. Under the law of his nature he must adjust himself to this new relationship, and live the life of a moral being, or he must deny his nature and become a moral outlaw. Thus far, we may assume, he knows no authority to which he is responsible, no one above him that can bring him into judgment. The law of his own rational nature is upon him. Yielding to this he is righteous, worthy of approval—his own, and that of all moral beings. Resisting this, he is a sinner under the condemnation of his own conscience and the condemnation of all moral beings who understand his position.

Taking another step in the experience of life, he encoun-

ters the thought of God, obscurely apprehended, it may be, as the infinite, spiritual personality in whom he lives and moves and has his being. It matters not how the thought originally occurs to him, whether by suggestion from without or from within. It comes to him with authority, and becomes a permanent element in his experience. It appeals to him as having a religious nature, and impels him to enter into personal relations with the unseen and infinite personality, and thus to live a religious life. His own existence is a mystery in its origin and its destiny. The thought of God the eternal Father supplies, as far as necessary, the solution. He can go on his way without misgiving, because

“Awake, asleep, at home, abroad,
He is surrounded still with God.”

No harm can befall the trustful child who thus adjusts himself to the infinite Father. There come times when all his own devisings seem vain, when all his plans and hopes are brought to nought, when all his precious things seem to have perished. To himself he seems like a child lost in the wilderness at midnight. The impulse to pray is as natural as for the child to call upon the father he does not see, but who he hopes may hear. He needs no instruction in the theory of prayer. His *need* is his argument. The dim apprehension of a gracious providence that environs him suggests the promise, “Call upon me in the day of trouble and I will deliver thee.” His *moral* weakness and need lead in the same direction. The idea of duty, of obligation, is an ever-present fact. The conception of a character and life moulded by this high principle, presses upon him with constant authority. He finds himself weak and temptable, groveling in self-indulgence, when he ought to stand erect in the beauty of holiness. The bitter cry is often heard, “O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death!” He needs help from

above, the fellowship of the infinite spirit whose presence brings purity and life. The man may withstand all these aspirations of his religious nature, and go on in the lower plane of the worldly and sensual life. This is his prerogative as a moral being. The choice is presented to every human soul. One path opens to the worldly life, the other to the religious life. One leads to hope and peace and endless good, the other is without hope and without God.

There is a careless impression somewhat prevalent in the world that one may live the moral life and not choose to adopt the religious life. We often speak of one as moral, but not religious. A more thoughtful view will reveal the fact that these two lives are practically inseparable: that the same principle of action is the controlling feature in both, and constitutes the characteristic element. This principle is the subjection to duty or obligation—the settled purpose to do what one ought to do rather than what he may desire to do. There is a formal morality which consists in the performance of various outward duties without the true principle of duty-doing in the heart. Genuine morality is inward righteousness—a state of heart conformed to obligation—a commitment of soul in a regard for the well-being of all—a standing-ready to promote all good whenever and wherever it may be apprehended. The scripture word to express that attitude of the heart is love; a convenient philosophical name is benevolence. It is at bottom a controlling voluntary attitude which leads to outward activity in the promotion of well-being according as the way shall open and the mind shall be enlightened. In that attitude of the soul is found essential, genuine righteousness, and only there. In this attitude the man is worthy of moral approbation, however imperfect his judgment, and however unsuccessful his effort. No more can properly be required of him by God or men. In character and spirit he is a child of God, and wherever God gathers his

children there he will be found. But can we call him a religious man until he has added to his virtue, knowledge—the knowledge of God, and is thus able to enter into relations with him and extend to him his love? Must the good man, the righteous man, take a step further in order to become essentially religious? Can one who has not yet apprehended God be regarded as religious, provided he has yielded his soul to the principle of duty? He has essentially the religious spirit. He is ready for any service to which God may call him. Bishop Butler speaks of the religious spirit as shown as truly in seeking after God as in worshiping him when he has been found. The apostle perhaps has the same idea in mind when he speaks of feeling after God. When such a soul finds God, no new moral attitude is called for. He is already obedient, and is ready for the new experience in earth or heaven, as God may appoint. If he is not properly called religious, the difficulty is ignorance, not wickedness. I do not affirm that men in this way actually enter upon the religious life with no knowledge or thought of God; but we cannot question the possibility. It is entirely conceivable that a child may so adjust himself to father and mother or other members of the household as to form an obedient and loving character, with all the graces of the Christian life in embryo. When he shall attain to a knowledge of the heavenly Father, he must embrace him in his benevolent love, by virtue of the character already formed. The question of loving and serving God does not come to him as an unsettled question. This has been already practically settled in the attitude already taken and maintained. It is only an extension of the same principle of loving faithfulness to God which is already exercised for his father and mother and others. Loving those whom he has seen, he will readily embrace in his love the Father unseen.

It is a new experience thus to embrace the Father of

spirits, but not a new principle of action or of character. The true character is already established, and can take in the new object of regard without any conscious struggle. That conscious adjustment to obligation which in theological terms we call conversion, has already been made; and the revelation of God to the expanding soul is but the presentation of another object or person to be loved and honored. The old classic word piety which expressed only genuine filial regard and obedience, has come in our Christian usage to indicate the true religious attitude required toward God. The piety of Æneas was his fidelity to his human father; the piety of a Christian saint is his fidelity to God. Possibly it was only by analogy that the use of the word was thus extended. But if the human piety was genuine—not a mere sentiment or instinct, but the principle of benevolent regard which meets the obligation expressed in the fifth commandment, then the piety due to God is essentially the same thing, and the truly dutiful child grows into the pious man without essential change of character. That change was involved in passing from the irresponsible, non-moral condition of the animal to the positive and purposeful activity of an obedient child. When we train our children to the faithful and conscientious performance of their duties in the household, we are “training them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

Those who have observed the opening of the religious life of children in Christian families often find that the life began farther back than memory reaches. The child cannot recall the time when he did not love the Lord, and try in his childish way to do his will. Indeed, the religious life in his consciousness has not been separated from his every-day life and duty in the family. No one can tell whether the positively righteous character began with duty to parents or duty toward God, and the question is not essential. If the child grows up into positively worldly or

sinful character, as occurs with sad frequency, it is altogether probable that the first duty that can control his conscience will be his duty toward God. He takes on righteous character in a religious experience, and this principle of duty-doing then works out in all his earthly relationships.

Yet in the lives of many, as they pass on to maturity and responsibility, there occur crises in which they come to face some new and pressing responsibility. The young man becomes the head of a family; a young woman receives to her arms an infant child that calls her mother. Under the new sense of duty they are driven to prayer; and they become religious in their adjustment to the new duty. Thus the earthly life becomes "a heavenly discipline." Thirty years and more ago, the call of the country to a service full of self-sacrifice and danger broke in upon many careless and self-indulgent and worldly lives. Many responded who had never given an earnest hour to the question what end they should pursue or what life they should live. Some rallied to the flag as a thing fit for a young man to do, or as an adventure which might yield some entertainment or advantage. Others in responding to the call made the first surrender of themselves to the claims of duty, and went on their way of danger in the service of God and of mankind. Their surrender to duty was a genuine consecration, a taking up of the cross to follow the Master. It was to such the beginning of a religious life. Probably as the worldly character becomes settled and confirmed, the normal experience will be that nothing but the mighty truths pertaining to God, his character and claims, will move the heart; and the hardened sinner will yield to obligation only as he becomes religious. In the truths and claims of religion motives exist which are always available in the work of winning men to righteousness; and the great work of the preacher is to absorb these truths

into his own understanding and experience, until he shall be able to marshal them for the persuasion of men. He stands as the exponent of the religious life in his living and his teaching, and his work is successful in proportion as he is able to induce others to enter upon such a life for themselves, and pursue it to the end. This is his divine calling. Every line of thought and study which will aid him in impressing men with the beauty of holiness and the sinfulness of sin, calls for his attention. The greatest good that can be secured to any human soul is his establishment in this life. Every other good is enhanced in its nature by this antecedent condition. When all human lives have become conformed to this principle, then all essential conditions for the progress of society and of the world are provided for. We are sometimes encouraged to labor for and to expect the conversion of the community, the Christianization of society as a whole. We should never forget that there is just so much religion and righteousness in the world as there is in individual souls; and there is no room for any more. If by the conversion of institutions and of societies be meant that righteousness in individual lives will tend to mould and modify the outward conduct even of many whose hearts are not controlled by it, this can be understood and accepted. When Christian men shall become prominent as employers of labor, they will set the fashion for just and righteous dealing with laborers, and even the worldly and selfish employer must come up to the standard in order to live successfully and comfortably in a world where righteousness prevails. We have observed the growing tendency for men dying in the possession of wealth, to provide in their wills for the donation of large portions of this wealth to the public welfare. It is not probable that the idea is growing in the world that such gifts at death will insure the future welfare of the donor; but the idea is extending that the rich man is a debtor to

the world, and it is unseemly that he should die without some recognition of the obligation. Men approve of the principles of righteousness even when of themselves they have not the grace to practice them. They will yield to a righteous fashion, the vital principle of which is found in other hearts rather than their own. We have done our best to bring institutions and communities under the control of righteousness when we have done what we can to secure its control in the hearts and lives of individual men. It is safe to assume that the faithful preacher of the gospel is doing his part for the welfare of mankind. If he should not find time or strength for direct service in social or civil life, he is still in the way of his duty, and must be reckoned among the world's philanthropists. The human race owes as much to Paul as to Howard.

Since the essential work of the preacher is to promote the religious life, he will need a clear conception of its nature and its place in human character,—the varied activities it involves. He will find that the religious life is not an unnatural one, not constrained and artificial. The human soul was made for it and can never be complete in its development without it. Life is possible without religion, but always unsatisfactory, and in the end a failure. It can never be worth living. In commending this higher life to men, we are not proposing the suppression of any human faculty or of any natural activity. The result will be to remove the hindrances to the fullest and freest action, and to give to life its widest scope and highest vitality. I am often asked by students in Theology or Ethics if it is not natural to sin—if a life of impulse and passion and self-indulgence is not instinctive and natural. Is not the drift of the human soul in that direction? No, it is easy to sin; and if one chooses to count himself a brute, and live by mere animal instinct and impulse, he can do so. But he does violence to the higher principles of his nature in such

a course. It is natural to the brute, but unnatural to man. His higher intelligence is given him, his reason and conscience, to regulate his life. This is his higher nature, and living according to this he is living according to nature. Disregarding these regulative principles of his own constitution, he does violence to his own nature, and sins against his own soul. The brute lives according to his impulses, and finds satisfaction in the life. The man living by his impulses lives a life of conflict and bondage. Only the truth can set him free. He must accept the life which belongs to the moral being—the life of duty, the religious life, or fall forever under his own condemnation and contempt.

It is no part of the preacher's work to speak disparagingly of human nature. The human soul is most like God—the only work of his hand that bears his image. The irreligious character degrades that nature, and brings the sense of unworthiness and shame. We may lament our heredity, and attempt to excuse our misdoing by the degradation which is supposed to come from the fall; but the only thing for which the man has occasion to be ashamed is the conduct and character involved in his own responsible action. He is unworthy and irreligious, not because Adam fell, or because of the misdoing of ancestors less remote, but because he has refused to listen to the guiding voice within. In urging the acceptance of the religious life, then, the preacher is asking his fellow-man to reënthrone his reason and conscience and do honor to the nature which God has given him.

The religious life is natural even in a higher sense than the social or domestic life. The social life involves certain of the elements of human nature, but may leave others unengaged. The religious life, properly conceived, has a scope as wide as human nature itself, and provides for all its activities. We ask no man to deny his nature, but to

give to every susceptibility and impulse the consideration that belongs to it. I do not forget the Saviour's word, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself"; and we regard self-denial as one of the cardinal virtues. But this self-denial is simply the subjection of impulse to reason, accepting every personal pleasure under the guidance of conscience, the limitations of duty. It is not a doctrine of Scripture or of common-sense that there is virtue or goodness in robbing ourselves of any satisfaction or enjoyment without an adequate reason. Paul expresses contempt for such self-denial. "Though I give all my goods to feed the poor, and my body to be burned, and have not love, I am become as a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal." The Buddha who fed his body to a starved tigress and her whelps was a bewildered ascetic, not a Christian hero. The history of religion affords us many examples of religious life based on the ascetic principle. Although Christianity gives us a "Captain of salvation made perfect through suffering," yet its history has been less marred by the blunders of asceticism than that of any other religion, and the tendency in its later progress is to rid itself entirely of these blemishes. The one demand which true religion makes upon every man is righteousness—rightness of character. Whatever self-denial this involves, is involved in the religious life. This righteousness consists in the right attitude of the voluntary powers, the commitment of the soul to the right end of life, such an end as the reason approves. This standard of righteousness as religion presents it is found in the immediate perceptions and affirmations of the soul itself. It is not primarily a requirement which comes from without, imposed by some high authority. It rests upon the authority of the soul itself. When the revealed command reaches a man, requiring love as the fulfilling of the law, it finds the law already written upon the heart, originating in the man's rational ideas and per-

ceptions. Hence this law reaches the man and not the brute. It can have no authority with any being who does not discern it by his own faculties. He may not be able to state the principle of righteousness; but he instinctively applies it, enforcing it upon himself and others. It may require years to bring him to the acceptance of the idea that the righteousness required, this love which fulfills the law, is fidelity to every interest, regard for all well-being. He may even go to heaven without being able to put the law of obligation in this form; but if he responds to the calls of duty before him, with the purpose to render to every interest its due, he is obedient to the will of God, and is reckoned with his children. This is genuine morality—true righteousness—the only righteousness possible to a finite being. His apprehensions of the value of the interests around him may be very imperfect, his judgment of the best means to promote them and the effort he puts forth very inadequate; yet his purpose is seen and approved of God, who looketh on the heart.

Let us understand, however, that this inward righteousness is not a passing experience, which one recalls in memory; it is a living, working attitude of the soul, controlling the activities and shaping the life. Thus it is the determining element of character, and constitutes the constant fulfillment of obligation. The morality of which the self-righteous boast, the dead works of which Paul speaks, makes the outward and formal righteousness, the body without the soul, which neither God nor man approves. True morality is not a thought nor a feeling, but a life, permeating and controlling the thought and the feeling, and the entire man. The beginning of such obedience to obligation, whether recognized in consciousness and held in memory or not, is the beginning of the religious life. The theologian calls it conversion, and the establishment of the life by "patient continuance in well-doing" is sanctifica-

tion. This is the duty and idea of religion—all that is obligatory, all that is required, the beginning and the end of man's responsibility. "What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God." This inspired utterance sets forth both the inside and the outside of the righteousness of religion. Thus religion is first a duty—somewhat to be rendered by man himself, something to be done rather than experienced.

I am aware that there is in many minds a repugnance to such words as obligation and duty in connection with religion. To them they seem to imply constraint—the absence of free and spontaneous affection which is supposed to characterize the religious life. There is no proper force in this conception. In social life the conscientious devotion to duty is the ground and guarantee of all the affectional experiences which constitute the charm of our social relations. The young wife wishes the kindly attention and offices of her husband to spring from love and not from duty. When years have brought their changes, with a more mature experience, she finds that the solid ground of her peace and satisfaction is in the conscientious fidelity to duty which has grown to be her dependence. The love which is "the greatest thing in the world" has a duty side to it as well as an emotional one. It means first of all faithfulness. This is the voluntary element of love, and thus we can pledge our love to one another. Let no one speak disparagingly of duty as a principle of action for God or man. The difference between a true and a false religion is in this ethical element. False religion may furnish a zeal for God which is not according to knowledge or duty. It may make a fanatic like Saul, not a lover of men like Paul.

It is a matter of great significance that the claims of religion as duty come to men free from any bewilderment of doubt. It asks of every one simply rightness of purpose or

intention—not outward righteousness, involving action guided by the highest intelligence and reason, but righteousness of heart—the purpose to be and to do what he knows he ought to be and to do. Trying to meet obligation is to meet it, and that a man should try to be what he knows he ought to be admits of no shadow of doubt. The certainty lies below all question or skepticism. The claims of religion as the simple duty of righteousness within, of honesty, come to the infidel and the believer alike. The certainty to each is absolute. Thus the first step in the religious life lies open to every human soul. All beyond may seem like the darkness of Egypt—a darkness that can be felt. But let him take that first step, it may bring him to the light. He may experience the truth of the divine assurance, “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine.” But if no ray from “the Light of the world” ever penetrates the darkness, let him take this step. It is right and reasonable and honest—fundamental in character and righteousness. If he dies without any further light, he dies a righteous man, on the way to heaven, if heaven opens to every faithful soul.

But light will come to such a soul. He will be at peace with himself, approved of men and approved of God. He will walk carefully in the midst of the responsibilities of life. If there is good to be done he stands ready to do it. If there is truth to be learned he is ready to learn it. Such a life as this is the religious life. It is characteristic of all the good on earth or in heaven. As God sees the man who has taken this step, he is fit for the society of the faithful. All that we can reasonably ask of any man to admit him to the church is evidence of this honesty of heart—a willingness to know and do the truth.

Simple and self-evident as this principle is, this elementary principle of honesty and duty known to every man, it is the only requirement in the religious life at which men

ever hesitate, or which they resist. At this point all the opposition of the worldly or self-indulgent life is concentrated. This surrendered, the man lives upon a new principle. He lives to do what he ought to do instead of what he wants to do. It is a new life. Old things have passed away and all things have become new.

But the point of emphasis here is that the obligation of the religious life stands face to face with every man, and always, without the possibility of doubt or question; and so it must forever stand. There never was, and never can be, a valid reason to any man why he should not accept it. Every fancied reason is only an excuse. If religion had nothing more to offer or require but this self-evident duty, it would still be more important than any other idea of human life which experience or philosophy has given to the world. But religion is real and cannot be a merely human fact, an outgrowth or development of mere human thought. The most elementary conception of religion includes God as well as man; and the religious life is a life ordered by what we know, or can learn of him. It is this knowledge of God, more or less satisfactory, which has originated religious thought and given it the vitality it has. By some revelation of himself God has laid the foundation for a belief in him, and for all the relations which the religious life involves. An outgoing of the human soul which we call the religious impulse could have no reality without the apprehension of a personal being toward whom it is directed. Rousseau in some of his speculations represents religious thought and contemplation as a purely subjective exercise, like that of a philosopher or a poet looking abroad upon the beauties of nature from a mountain top at sunrise. No such conception can meet the case. Human life is a constant succession of crises and emergencies, such that only the thought of a heavenly Father who pities his children can make them tolerable to us. Thus sustained we

gather from them the peaceable fruits of righteousness, and account life under what seem hard conditions, still worth living.

But the simple idea of righteousness and character which comes to us with the first thought of religion might be a doubtful blessing. The ideal of life thus obtained is beautiful and naturally elevating; but the sense of weakness in ourselves, the inability to attain, and the sense of unworthiness which comes with failure, make a burden too grievous to be borne. The invitation, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," supplies the divine element in the religious life. It is the voice of him who "came into the world to save sinners." Thus we have not simply the ideal of the life of righteousness, but the mighty Helper through whom we become the sons of God, changed into the same image from glory to glory.

Thus the religious life becomes a life of experience as well as of duty, and the expression, "to experience religion," has found a place in the thought and teaching of the Christian church. The thought connected with it has often been confused and the teaching bewildering. The tendency has often been to divert attention from the duty of religion which faces every man from the beginning of his moral life, the responsibility of which is solely his, and lead to the thought and expectation of some dream or vision to come from without—an experience which shall prove the beginning of the religious life. From this conception has sprung the custom in various branches of the church with which we are familiar, of receiving to membership upon the relation of an experience. The error suggested is that the religious life must begin with an experience. It doubtless often begins thus; but to wait for an experience before entering upon the duty, is an utter transposition of facts. We have no such gospel to preach to men. Every-

where the duty comes before the experience. "Come unto me and I will give you rest." "Ask and ye shall receive, seek and ye shall find." "As many as received him to them gave he power to become the sons of God." "If any man is willing to do his will he shall know of the doctrine." "To them who by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life." And thus we always find it: first the duty, then the blessing. "Because thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things." Duty performed is the condition of the blessing, and the blessing helps in the further duty. The first side of the religious life we are likely to encounter is the duty side; and we shall find God responsive to us according as we meet our responsibility to him. It may well be that the divine gift shall utterly transcend our faith; but it can come only where there is the receptive heart.

It should be further observed that the experiences of religion gather about the great truths pertaining to God, his nature and character. This is their source and their support. It is not in general profitable to pursue religious experience as a desirable attainment in itself. Such a pursuit leads to the introspective habit of gauging our own feelings, endeavoring to produce a satisfactory religious life in the effervescing phases of our own consciousness. These are false ideas and false religions that send their votaries to grope about in the darkness of their own souls for light and help. The true religion says, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." "Then shall we know if we follow on to know the Lord. His going forth is prepared as the morning, and he shall come to us as the rain, as the latter rain, and as the former rain upon the earth."