

ARTICLE IX.

RELIGION AS A PERSONAL RELATION.

BY PROFESSOR HENRY CHURCHILL KING, D.D.

OUR thinking cannot be without its finally profound reaction on our living. False conceptions of the religious life, then, must injure the life itself; true conceptions, on the other hand, must prove of positive help against mistakes and discouragement. Theology too is only a thoughtful and unified expression of what religion means to us. The conception of religion, therefore, will be of determining significance for theology also. And reasonable agreement in the conception of religion would do more than anything else to bring unity into our theologies. The needs, then, of both our religious living and our religious thinking demand the utmost care in our conception of religion—the closest possible approximation to Christ's thought here—for it is only with the Christian religion that this article is concerned.

All Christians would doubtless agree that the ideal of religion for the individual would be to come into such ethical and spiritual relations to God as those in which Christ stood. Now whatever else was true of this relation, it was, first and foremost, a *personal* relation. And this commonplace—religion, a personal, filial relation to God in Christ—carefully heeded, has consequences of the highest importance for both our Christian life and thought. In truth, the writer believes there is no greater need, in religious living and theological thinking to-day, than a thorough-going and consistent hold on Christ's thought of religion as a personal relation to God. Many practical and theoretical

difficulties, that have grown up in the course of the Christian centuries, yield readily to this simple solvent. More often than otherwise we have originally created our difficulties by substituting, for the actual concrete personal relations, abstract or mechanical conceptions of some sort.

But this conception of the Christian life as a deepening friendship with God is so important and so enlightening when accurately grasped, that it is the more necessary that certain points be made clear, that we may guard against extravagant and misleading statements.

In the first place, the God with whom we come into personal relation is not the God of mere religious fancy or mystical experience, nor the God of philosophical speculation, but the God revealed concretely, unmistakably, in the ethical and spiritual personality of Jesus Christ. He alone is the supreme and religiously adequate revelation of God. There are other partial manifestations of God without and within, but only he who has seen Christ has adequately seen the Father. The Christian seeks personal relation with God *in Christ*. Other notions of God must be adjusted to this clear revelation in Christ, not this to other notions. Where this is not kept clear, some mystical experience of our own may be exalted, out of all due proportion, into an authority that is supposed not only to make us quite independent of our brethren, but even at the height of our raptures to enable us to do without Christ.

Moreover, when we speak of a personal relation to God, we of course do not mean that we can give exactly the same kind of reality to it as to our relations to other persons who are to us compelling sensuous facts. And yet the unreality of which men sometimes complain in their relation to God is probably due, more often than they think, to the simple lack of some sensuous presentation. But even in our relation to other men, we should remember, we are conscious that the spiritual relation in which we

stand to them is more and other than the mere fact that they are presented to us in bodies which affect our senses. And whatever their sense manifestations—gesture, facial expression, glance of eye, or speech—all have to be spiritually interpreted by us, often uncertainly enough, before they can mean anything for our spiritual relation to these other persons. Our relation to God then is not less real and personal, because it is not sensuous.

Nor, in affirming that religion is a present personal relation to God, are we unwarrantedly asserting such a sense of the immediate presence of God in Christ as we suppose belongs to the future life. Even Paul, with all the vividness of his religious experience and language, speaks of "the desire to depart and be with Christ, for it is very far better." The Christian looks for a far more glorious manifestation of God in Christ, in the future life, than here he can attain.

Nor, when we speak of the possibility of real friendship with God, are we asserting a relation of familiar equality with God. Any true human friendship, we shall find, shows itself in marked reverence for the personality of the other. The divine friendship is not less real, then, that it implies devout reverence and godly fear—a clear sense of the moral rebuke of the revelation of God in Christ, as well as of the manifestation of his grace. *Æsthetic* admiration for Christ is no true love to Christ.

Perhaps one might say with Kaftan, that our present personal relation to God in Christ, in the grounds of its certainty, is more like our relation to the moral demands, the certainty and power of which depend on one's own inner life. Here are realities which are no sense-facts, and yet which are among our primal certainties, though the clearness and power of our vision of them are affected by the prevailing tone of our own inner life.

“So duly, daily, needs provision be
For keeping the soul's prowess possible,
Building new barriers as the old decay,
Saving us from evasion of life's proof,
Putting the question ever, ‘ Does God love,
And will ye hold that truth against the world?’”

“Religion is a deed,” Lotze says; and that would mean that our certainty of God, like our certainty of the ethical realities, would go up and down with our own moral life.

Closely connected with this kind of certainty that we may have of God, is the reason that exists for the needed obscurity of spiritual truth. This reason is like the familiar “advantageous deficiency” in moral insight, as it has been called, according to which, in spite of much experience of the happiness of doing right, it still seems to us, with each recurring temptation, that our happiness lies in the line of the temptation, and that to turn from this temptation is to turn our backs on our happiness. This deficiency in moral insight, as well as the familiar complaint that the wicked prosper, that the righteous are not always rewarded, that the innocent suffer—all this is necessary if life is to be at all an adequate sphere for the development of moral character. If the reward of righteousness followed at once and invariably, and this were always infallibly clear to us, we could not trust our own righteousness; it would seem at best but enlightened selfishness. But now we can “serve God for naught.” Now a similar reason exists why God's relation to us must not be an obtrusive one, but often hidden past our tracing out. As Kant long ago pointed out, if God were always certainly and patently present to us with full sense of the meaning of the fact, there would be such excess of motive as practically to override our freedom. There would be again no proper sphere for the development of real character. We need the invisible, not the visible, God for character. Without developing the thought further, at present, the

point now to be insisted upon is, that, in speaking of religion as a personal relation to God, it is not meant that the relation will be a perfectly obvious one, constantly obtruding itself upon us, with compulsive force; it will rather be distinctly unobtrusive, sometimes quite hidden, a constant divine coöperation, but guarding most sacredly our personal freedom, that our character may be ours in truth.

One more misconception needs to be guarded against in affirming religion to be simply a personal relation to God. The significance of a friendship depends upon the significance of the persons involved. Plainly the personal relation to God must be as unique as he is unique. Can we see clearly in what this uniqueness consists? No personal relation can be absolutely single and isolated. Even men are so closely related to one another that a change in my personal relation to one may vitally affect all my personal relations. But still the relation to God has a universality all its own.

For, in the first place, the conviction of the love of God, of love at the heart of things, ultimately underlies all our reasoning and all our living—all our happiness and all our work. For that any of these should be possible, the world must be a sphere of rational thinking and rational action; and rational, not merely in the narrow sense that it can be construed by our intellects, is barely thinkable, but in the broad sense, that it has worth that can satisfy the whole man. And any whole-hearted work too, as Paulsen has pointed out, must go forward on the religious assumption that we are in relation to God, that there is a great ongoing universal plan embracing our little work, and not suffering it, therefore, to be a worthless fragment. The relation to God, in all these fundamental ways, obviously not only includes relations to all, but alone gives reality and meaning to all other relations.

In the second place, the simple existence of God and of other moral beings constitutes forthwith a moral universe

without any external enactment or arrangement. That there is such a moral world at all, means that there is law expressed in the very constitution of every moral being, a recognition of the eternal distinction of right and wrong; and that requires the law of consequences—that we must reap what we sow. Without this there could be no moral being, and so no moral world. The recognition of law in this sense, therefore, is no denial of the sole reality of personal relations; rather is it true that personal relations necessarily involve law so conceived. It is to be noted, moreover, that this law written in the constitution of man must be regarded as an expression of the personal will of God, and every sin becomes thus a personal sin against God. There is no *abstract* law or government of any kind. The personal relation to God then must have universal moral implications that no other personal relation can have. For when I am approved of God, I am approved by the Being who is himself expressed in the moral constitution of all, and so stand approved in relation to all. Such a personal relation, when adequately conceived, has no need to be supplemented by any other notion, as of government. It contains in itself the whole truth. The fact is not that we are in personal relation to God, and *also* in relation to his government; we are in relation to the government of God because and in that we are in personal relation to God. God himself is in such relation to all his creatures that relation to him cannot be an isolated relation, but puts us at once in touch with all.

We may reach the same result from another point of view. To come into friendship with God is really to share his life; but the very life of God is love, self-giving, pouring himself out into the life of his creatures. To share his life, therefore, is necessarily to enter into like loving relations to all men. The second commandment thus grows inevitably out of the first. A deepening friendship with

God, therefore, includes right relations with men; the religious life is ethical in its very nature and from the start; and once more it is seen to be impossible to come into right personal relation to God, and not at the same time to come into right relation to all moral beings.

The relation to God, therefore, is unique, because conviction of the love of God underlies all rational living, because God is himself the source of the moral constitution of men, and because God alone is perfect in character. For all these reasons, the relation to God cannot be conceived sentimentally, and is only the more significant, but it is not less personal. In all these basal ways, "we love because he first loved us."

To the philosophical objection, "But is God really a person?" this much may be here briefly said: In affirming the personality of God, no thinker means to assert of God the limitations of man. And it is not true, as is often assumed, that in removing the limitations involved in our human personality, we have thereby denied personality to God. Rather are we coming to see, according to Lotze's suggestion, that it is a part of the finiteness of us men, that we are but incompletely personal; that complete self-consciousness, complete freedom, and perfect personality cannot belong to the part, but only to the whole; that only the Infinite can be completely personal. Moreover, it is misleading to say, God is supra-personal, though not sub-personal, if more is meant by this than simply that we may not think that our thought can wholly fathom God, that we do not know how much more God may be than our best thought can conceive. For, if we suppose that we can go on to define the supra-personal, we can do so only after the analogy of either the personal or the sub-personal, since we know only these. And if now we turn from the personal, we turn from the highest we know to a lower analogy to form our conception of God, and are thus

simply following the analogy of the sub-personal, however we try to conceal the fact from ourselves.

Having guarded thus carefully against misconceptions, we return to our original proposition: Religion is a personal relation of man to God. Because God is a person and we are persons, our relation to him must be a personal relation. Moreover, as personality is complete only in God, our relation to God ought to be even more completely personal than our relation to men, not so subject to human limitations. And again, the more strenuously one insists upon religion as ethical, the more fully must religion be recognized as a personal relation, for ethical relations are everywhere ultimately personal. With clear perception then of the unique significance of the relation to God, we must still unhesitatingly assert that religion is a personal relation to God. But if this is so, it means that all the experiences of the Christian life may best be brought under the phenomena of friendship; that its highest possible attainments may be best considered as a deepening friendship; that the conditions may be best known and best definitely formulated as conditions of a deepening friendship. This conception of the Christian life as friendship is fundamental and thoroughgoing, with wide implications. It has been often used in an illustrative way as an analogy; but, so far as the writer knows, it has never been carried thoroughly through in all the aspects of Christian life and experience and thinking, as the nearest approach man can make to the final realities of religion. It is far more than an analogy; it is a fact; our relation to God *is* a personal relation, and its laws must be those of personal relations. To say so is only to interpret religion by the very highest in ourselves, and this is our best and only adequate key. If we fail to use this conception, we are simply forced to employ a lower and less adequate analogy.

We are coming with increasing clearness to recognize

that there must be law in the spiritual world; that there must be conditions which may be known and fulfilled. We have not seen quite so clearly that there is a guiding principle which will direct us infallibly to these laws and conditions. In the progress of evolution we have reached on the human stage, the stage of personal relation and revelation, and upon principles of evolution itself we should expect on this new stage, new laws which will dominate the lower laws. These new laws correspond to the stage reached and are consequently laws of personal relation. If a man knows then the laws of any true friendship, he may know all the essential laws of the friendship with God. He need not work in the dark, or catch eagerly, now at this great secret of Christian living, now at that; the laws and conditions are certain; they may be known and fulfilled, and one may count on the result; and they are the laws and conditions of a deepening friendship. One's whole life takes on so a marvelous unity. The divine and human relations are no longer at war. Every human relation truly fulfilled throws direct light on the divine relation and is a direct help to it.

A useful subordinate analogy (not wholly adequate) may serve as an introduction to the fuller statement of the laws of a deepening friendship. The laws which hold in growing appreciation of any sphere of value, hold also in personal relations, and have there their highest exemplification, for in persons is finally concentrated all value. How then do we come into a growing appreciation of any sphere of value—of beauty in nature, of music, of art, or of literature?

In the first place, we are commonly *introduced* into the new sphere of value, through the witness of some other. Our attention is directed to the new value because of what it seems to mean to some one else. A man who should depend wholly on his own original discoveries of

the valuable, would live inevitably a very narrow life. The artist, the genius, the true critic, is a man who has seen; he calls our attention to a value we are missing. But if this witness of another is to be of any worth, it must be absolutely honest, a true statement of what the other has found.

The second condition for a growing appreciation of the best things is absolute *honesty* on our own part. Merely to repeat another's witness as our own is not only misleading to others, but dishonest and damaging to our own further vision and growth. Few things are more damaging to growing appreciation in any sphere, than pretense. To begin with pretense is to vitiate any genuine appreciation from the start. But there is need of caution here. In our desire to be absolutely honest, we are not forthwith to identify all the real with what now seems real to us. It is true that we are not to pretend at any point, but we are not thereby to deny the value and reality of all, which is either, in our present mood, unreal to us, or has not yet been at all reached by us.

A third condition, therefore, of growth into the thing of value is *modesty*—teachableness, no dishonest repetition of the witness of another who has larger experience in this sphere, certainly, but no denial either of his witness; rather the confident hope of much yet to come for ourselves, to which we too, therefore, may in time bear honest witness.

But the greatest of all conditions for growing appreciation of the valuable, and the condition that in a way involves all others, is simply *staying in the presence of the best* in any given sphere of value. Read persistently the best books, hear persistently the best music, see persistently the best art, and unconsciously your taste will improve and grow certain. This is the highest and surest counsel that can be given for growth into the valuable. You need

not pretend. The best will in time justify and verify itself,—make its own appeal to you. But the very statement of this last and greatest condition for growing appreciation implies that one may know beforehand that he cannot get the whole value at once. The greater the value, the more certainly will it take long time for full appreciation; and the highest test of the truly classical is that it not only bears acquaintance, but perpetually grows on one with acquaintance.

These conditions, then, of our dependence on the witness of another, of honesty, of modesty, and of staying in the presence of the best, hold in all spheres of value, and not less in a deepening friendship. It is worth while to state them, and to see their truth, and to discern the close analogy which holds between the value of persons and other values; for the very reason that we feel less intensely concerning these other values because they are not personal and moral, and hence we can sometimes see more dispassionately and clearly just what the conditions are, and so carry their light over into the final interpretation of the personal.

Passing then even from the helpful analogy of growing appreciation of the beautiful, directly to our problem, what are the laws of a deepening friendship? The friendship with God must have essentially the same basis and the same conditions, as any deepening friendship worthy the name. What is that basis, and what are those conditions? The limits of this article permit but the briefest statement; but the writer believes that the more carefully the comparison is wrought out and studied, the more complete will be its justification.

The basis of any true friendship is threefold: mutual self-revelation and answering trust, mutual self-surrender, and some deep community of interests.

In the first place, in order to any genuine friendship

there must be *mutual self-revelation and answering trust*. Trust implies some personal self-revelation, and there must be trust in both the character and the love of the other. As long as two people are still "on probation" with each other, there can be no real friendship. "Perfect love casteth out fear." In a high and genuine friendship, the friends feel no need to "make terms" with each other; and they can trust each other out of sight. "Do you really think that I could doubt her?" the hero of a modern novel replies to an attempt to break down his faith in his friend. We have sometimes strangely wondered why faith is so prominent in religion, and at times it has even seemed that revelation and faith belonged only in religion; while in fact they are the basis of every real friendship—a mutual self-revelation that makes possible real trust in the character and love of the other. Our relation to God, especially, we have already seen, cannot be an obtrusive one, and there must be, therefore, the more call for faith in the invisible God; but every friendship is a sphere of revelation and a call for faith, and cannot go on without them. And the Christian's God has made such a revelation of himself in Christ as calls out the most absolute childlike trust. Herrmann puts the whole matter incisively: "The childlike spirit can only arise within us, when our experience is the same as a child's; in other words, when we meet with a personal life which compels us to trust it without reserve. Only the Person of Jesus can arouse such a trust in a man who has awakened to moral self-consciousness." But Christ not only calls out trust, he trusts us, in that he relies not upon rules, but upon the one great principle of loyal love to himself; and in that he has committed into our care the great interests of his kingdom.

Every real friendship also implies *mutual self-surrender*. Perhaps the best definition we can make of love is the giving of self. What we ask from our friends is not things

finally nor some kind of treatment, but themselves. It is evident that real self-surrender to another presupposes trust. We cannot absolutely submit without absolute trust, and the trust depends on a preceding revelation. In any personal relation too, it is plain that the depth of the friendship depends upon the completeness with which the selves are given, and the significance of the friendship depends upon the richness of the selves given. On the one hand, we may almost make a graduated scale of our friendships according to the degree in which we give ourselves in them; in the closest friendships there is the completest surrender. On the other hand, if the friendship is to have large significance, the selves given must be of large worth. It is just here that love itself demands the duty of growth, of self-improvement, and checks the false self-sacrifice that makes one unable to meet the later needs of his friends. At the same time in our highest human friendships, we are perfectly conscious that the self-surrender demanded, though real enough, is "not a weakening denial of self, but a strengthening affirmation of self." We know that every great friendship, though it calls imperatively for self-surrender, is still an enlargement of life, that here in very truth we find ourselves as we lose ourselves.

Now when we come to apply this condition of self-surrender to our relation to God, plainly we must say, this is no demand peculiar to God. In the proportion in which the friendship is complete, *we* make exactly the same demand and must. There is no friendship without mutual self-surrender. Just as clearly also must we say this is no arbitrary demand on the part of God. As in every friendship, God can give himself to us only in that measure in which we give ourselves to him. He asks for complete self-surrender of ourselves to him, only that he may be able to give himself completely to us. It is passing strange that the terms, which we use without misgiving and even with

joy in our human relations, have so different and hard a sound in relation to God,—self-surrender, self-giving, self-denial, complete devotement; but they are the one way to the largest and richest life, in the one relation as in the other.

Two opposite instincts exist in men—self-devotion and the insatiate thirst for love; and there is only one relation in which both may be absolutely unchecked. There are necessary limitations in every human relationship—limits in our self-revelation, limits in our submission, limits in our devotion, limits in satisfying response. “I would rather be broken by you than caressed by another,” a modern heroine is made to say to the hero; but we may not say that to any human being. In much we are and must be alone. There is only one relation in which we can give ourselves unstintedly, only one relation capable of wholly satisfying. “Only God can satisfy the longings of an immortal soul, that as the heart was made for him, so he only can fill it.”

The third element in the basis of any true friendship is *some deep community of interests*. If there has been full revelation and self-surrender, the community of interest in essentials follows, as of course. Otherwise there could not be real mutual understanding. No friendship can come to its highest, where there is not agreement as to the great aims, ideals, and purposes of life. That is a poverty-stricken friendship, indeed, in which there is no sympathy in the highest moments, in which at your best you must leave the other out. Paul’s “Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers” thus is intended as no limiting counsel. He would only say: Do not provide for yourselves the intensest pain of finding in all your highest moments those shut out who stand in the closest life relation to you. The truest friends must be able to say: The interests which are supreme for you are supreme for me.

And just such deep community of interests must there

be in our relation to God. Our mastering interests must be the same as Christ's. We must really share God's life of self-giving love. And in the joy of the absolute trust called out by the perfect revelation in Christ, and of complete self-surrender, say: The interests which are supreme for Thee shall be supreme for me. "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done."

With this basis assumed, what in briefest summary are the conditions for deepening a friendship? Just these are the conditions for a continually deepening Christian life. From the beginning one needs to remember that no natural friendship is a work of conscious arrangement, but rather an unconscious growth. In no personal relation is it wholesome to seek experiences as such. The highest enjoyments and most valuable gifts of friendship come incidentally, rather than as consciously sought.

First of all then, in every personal relation, upon the basis of a well-grounded trust, let one assure himself of the meaning of the friendship, but *not expect continuous emotion*. Neither our physical nor our mental constitutions admit it. And no acquaintance will stand constant introspection. We are simply to fulfil the conditions of a growing friendship and count upon the results.

The second great condition is *association*. This is fundamental, and may be taken as almost summing up all. Friendship is not the product of certain rules, but of much association. You wake up after a time with a kind of surprise to find how much the friendship means. And this is the one great essential for a deepening friendship with God. We are to stay in the presence of Christ, to give him a chance at us, by attention, by thought, by taking his point of view and studying his thought, by getting into touch with his feeling and his purpose—living in his atmosphere. We can be sure of the effects in character and friendship. "To me to live is Christ."

The third condition is *time*, and is really involved in association. Time is necessary to grow into any great thing. No acquaintance can become deep without time; any friendship will grow cold to which no time is given. This giving of time is the practical giving of self, as observation of the way in which friends drift apart will show. The emphasis laid on the daily use of the Bible and prayer ought to be regarded as really only a rational recognition of the need that some real place must be given to the divine friendship, if it is to grow. Here too belongs the recognition of the great significance of occasional longer times together in deepening a friendship.

Another condition of any deepening friendship is *expression*. The psychological law is unmistakable. Consciousness is naturally impulsive; every idea tends to pass into act. Only through expression does any psychical state get its full significance. And on the other hand, that which is not expressed dies. If then any friendship is to grow, it must get expression by word, especially by seeking to please in little things, by manifestation of gratitude, by sharing of sorrow and sacrifice—not only in willingness to share the sorrows of your friend, but in sharing yours with him. It is mistaken kindness to shut your friend out of your deepest experiences, even when those experiences are painful. These are the great times of the revelation of our friends and of God. In any true human friendship, we are glad to show by sacrifice the reality of our love. And Christ honors us by calling us to these varied expressions, and by sharing with us his own cup and his own baptism. That expression is most perfect that enters most fully into God's own redeeming activity.

A further and most important condition of any deepening friendship is a *sacred respect for the personality* of the other. One's sense of the sacredness of a person is a pretty accurate measure of his highest growth. A true friend

never demands; he never overrides: he asks only. There are limitations to all intimacies. Every soul must in much be alone, and ought to be. One only degrades his friendships, when he measures them by the number of liberties he takes, the number of privacies he rides over rough-shod. Any deep self-revelation can be made only to the reverent. And God marvelously respects our freedom. He knocks only; he does not force the door. He never overrides our freedom in an obtrusive relation. And for the same reason, he does not step in continually to set things right. This is no play world, and our characters are our own. And upon our part, there may be no approach to dictation to God, as to the time or manner or method of his revelation. His best revelation too can be made only to the deeply reverent. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him."

In every deepening friendship, too, one must be *real*. The condition is imperative. We are to be real only, always; there are to be no false assertions, no forced feelings. We are not to start or to continue on a false basis. There is to be no pretense anywhere, for it saps all reality in the relation with God or man. Our prayers are to be, first of all, honest, our confessions honest, our witness honest, our profession honest. We are to be real.

Breaking off our comparison in the midst, and leaving almost untouched the explicit treatment of one of the most important and interesting of its applications—that of the effect of sin upon personal relations, let us raise, in closing, the question of the beginning: Have we given anything like due weight to Christ's thought of religion as a personal relation to God? Have we recognized the constantly growing light that this conception, simple as it seems, has to shed on all our Christian living and thinking?