

*THE PERMANENT ELEMENTS OF RELIGION.*¹

THERE are many human institutions which are known to have existed before their true purpose was ascertained. Having originated instinctively they were carried on long before they attracted attention and became the subject of investigation ; and not in every case was their real purpose obvious or certain till after many theories about it had been demonstrated to be false. Only when the true purpose of the institution is discovered is it possible by improvement to multiply its usefulness.

In this matter the difference between man and the other animals is striking. They have their instincts, leading them to perform a variety of operations, often subtle and complicated ; but experiment has shown that they are performed automatically and mechanically, the performer having no knowledge whatever of the result which his operation produces. The operation is therefore carried on as before when the circumstances are so altered that it frustrates the result which in ordinary cases it tends to realize. The question whether even a series of generations causes the operation to be conducted with greater skill is one on which the truth cannot be easily obtained. What is certain is that improvement is not due to the exercise of thought compassing a particular end, and speculating on the means by which it can be effected.

Man, on the other hand, in these, as in other cases, finds out what nature means, and improves thereon. At some period or other he discovered how the power of articulation could be utilized for the expression of ideas, and he invented language, and improved it from one stage to another, till it could be written, till it could be printed, till it could be telephoned, till it could be typed. The cries of the

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beasts remain where nature left them, or in the course of many generations acquire some trifling differentiation.

Religious ceremonies of one sort or another would appear to have existed long before there was speculation on their purpose and meaning : and the earliest assumption on the subject was that their purpose was to produce for the worshipper what he wanted, and avert from him what he disliked. Tablets innumerable dating from the time when writing began record the services which gods have performed, and for which they were worshipped : the procuring of food, of wealth, of children, of victory : the accomplishing of whatever the worshipper desired to be accomplished. And the belief that worship of the right sort procured these things, whereas worship of a wrong kind kept them away, was possibly the origin, and in any case the justification of religious persecution. If the worship of Baal really caused the failure of rain for three years, Elijah's massacre of the priests of Baal had some obvious justification. If the presence of heretics in England was what caused Queen Mary to be childless, there was some justification for the introduction of the Inquisition. Where the misconduct of individuals was thought to bring misfortunes on the whole community, the community was justified in getting rid of those individuals, and taking steps to deter others from joining their ranks.

In the awakening of mankind we can trace the gradual abandonment of this theory in favour of another. It was discovered that the relation of personal or national prosperity to piety was one that could not be ascertained ; indeed the doctrine that the pious were not prosperous, but were more liable to misfortune than other men gained ground. One way of dealing with this difficulty was to assign things new values : to hold that the goods of this world for which the gods were ordinarily supplicated were bad things, and that poverty, hunger, disease, which most

men abhorred, were really Divine favours ; but more usually the difficulty was evaded by the doctrine of a future life, in which the pious would be compensated for that which they had forfeited here ; and since in that future life comforts would be permanent, whereas here they were transitory, the balance would really come right : for the amount forfeited would bear no proportion to that which would eventually be acquired. Our present afflictions are unworthy of consideration when compared with the glory that is to be revealed hereafter. And this solution has been found more satisfactory and more potent than the other, though the other is rarely quite abandoned.

Of course this theory, like all others, must eventually depend on the knowledge that can be obtained by correct methods concerning man's ultimate destiny. Even now inquiries into that matter are rarely conducted by sober students ; they suppose that there is no means of ascertaining anything about it. It is hard to say whether the elaborate work on the *Survival of Human Personality* that has recently caused so much discussion will be presently forgotten, or be regarded as the beginning of a science, the first step in a study which may enlarge human knowledge, and help man to see clearly where preceding generations were in the dark. It is hard to say ; but of this we may be sure, that the method illustrated in those volumes is the only method by which knowledge, if it is to be obtained at all, will be procured. The evidence of the return to earth of discarnate spirits may be all delusive, every supposed appearance of the sort may be due to mystification or delusion ; but the examination of the supposed occurrences appears to be the only avenue by which there is even a possibility of ascertaining anything about the existence of discarnate spirits and their destiny. If any are genuine, then from them analogous histories in our sacred books can be explained and estimated ; if all are delusive, then we are

scarcely at liberty to assign greater external value to Biblical narratives of the sort. It must be confessed, however, that the results of the book mentioned, estimating them at their highest, give little confirmation of the religious value of the doctrine of the survival of human personality. The discarnate spirit would appear hence to be almost as poor a reminder of the living man as is the corpse of the living body. Contrary to what we should have expected, the earthly passions would not appear to be extinguished at the parting of the spirit from the flesh. Of any connexion between the conduct or the beliefs of the human being in life and the condition of his spirit after the separation there would appear to be little trace. It seems, however, as if the author of this book had got his idea of the spirit world from old Homer, and had read the Homeric doctrine into the confessions which he took such pains to collect and examine. Although, then, it is conceivable that the pursuit of the inquiry in which that book takes the lead may produce some extension of our knowledge of human nature and its destiny, it is hardly likely that such extension will have more effect upon religion than say advanced knowledge of physiology has on morals. Nature here, as elsewhere, will be found to give rough material on which the human artisan must work.

Hence we are driven to seek the permanent elements of religion in the needs which it fulfils in human society: as learned not from any *a priori* assumptions, but from a study of its actual effects. And the main needs which it satisfies are three.

First, the ornamentation of life. Just as it is the practice of civilized nations to conceal all the body but the face and hands, so the sense of what is becoming and beautiful forces them to conceal under ornament the naked facts of human existence, as nature gives them. Science and taste pursue their functions independently, without rivalry, with-

out mutual interference; at times, indeed, there is even co-operation between the two. Penetration into nature's workshop is not forbidden: but the sense of what is comely and decent makes us keep the door ordinarily shut. For the unaesthetic realities connected with the origin and termination of human existence, and the mode whereby it is sustained, religion substitutes an account that suits the aspiration after what is comely and beautiful. "When a man is dead he shall inherit creeping things, beasts, and worms"—that is the natural account. "Father, in Thy gracious keeping leave we now Thy servant sleeping." "Christ the Lord shall guard them well, He who died for their release"—is what religion substitutes for the painful and unaesthetic reality.

The value of religion, therefore, as beautifying human life is entirely independent of the objective value of what it teaches. Art can render valueless materials valuable by what it adds to them; but it does not therefore follow that the materials on which it is exercised are otherwise valueless. Yet many a difference has been occasioned by the failure to recognize the fact that in the concealment of the ugliness of nature religion does something of consequence, independently of the question whether her statements are historically and objectively true. The person into whose life the ceremonies of religion enter has something that is of value apart from the question whether the ceremonies affect anything in nature. The history of religion shows us that many races believed the question of the mode of burial to have a potent effect on the fate of the corpse, or of the spirit who formerly inhabited it; if funeral rites have a place of prime importance in many ancient systems, it is because much was thought to depend on their proper execution. From those superstitions we have been emancipated by science and philosophy: but that emancipation has not rendered the religious ceremonies that attend the

last disposal of the body less desirable or less desired.

The different religions have not always been in precise agreement concerning the portions of life which it was their function to beautify: but on the whole a comparison of different rituals makes it appear that it is in general the functions which man shares with the brutes which religion would cover with its glamour, differentiating him thereby from them. That which is haphazard in their case, their want of individual value, is concealed in his by a system which gives each individual personal importance, and brings him into direct connexion with the power of which nature is the expression or the work. At times doubtless the adornment of life has taken the form not only of differentiating man from the beasts, but still more of differentiating him from his like: of perpetuating castes and peculiar peoples, and those other divisions which have so much arrested human progress. But when the last of these has been abolished and forgotten, there will still be enough in his community with the lower creation to require concealment. And this can only be effected by the doctrine that he has a different beginning and a different destination from them.

To the ornamentation of life belong those feasts and fasts in which it would appear that physiological reasons require that vent should at certain seasons of the year be given to certain human emotions. For their expression some ostensible cause is required, and religious occasions are more suitable than any others, because they can be universal, and permanent, and personal. Were we to make the day of national rejoicing the anniversary of Waterloo, or the day of national mourning the commemoration of some defeat, we should thereby be perpetuating enmities which had better be forgotten than kept alive. But even the commemoration of material benefits or disasters which are unconnected with national animosities would be inade-

quate, since such events are of passing importance, and the memory of each triumph of discovery is speedily obscured by some fresh triumph : whereas of disasters, even the most considerable, the effect passes quickly away. But religion can provide occasions for rejoicing and for mourning which, while they unite the population of whole countries, and even of hostile countries, also appeal to each individual, who as a member of the human race has his share in the benefit or in the disaster. The Christian system in its fasts and feasts, making each person definitely responsible for the disasters which the former commemorate, and personally sharing in the blessings of which the latter celebrate the bestowal, in making both universal in character and permanent in effect, has satisfied the need for occasions of mourning and rejoicing better than any rival system ; but in those other systems we can often trace a tendency towards universalism, when the original occasions were national and particular. To the philosopher of Islam the weird and uncouth ceremonial of the Pilgrimage, of which the origin has long been forgotten, is transformed into a rehearsal of man's final meeting with his Maker, clad in a winding sheet, weaned from all bodily enjoyments, having deposited all earthly excrescences. The celebration of a paschal feast, commemorating the escape from bondage and acquisition of a country by a people who had lost the country and sunk again into bondage might seem a mockery till for each term in the proposition a spiritual equivalent could be substituted ; the Paschal Feast being thus made to commemorate an escape to be followed by no return into captivity ; the acquisition of a country which no invader could seize ; the triumph over the enemy of the human race to whose assaults each member of it is exposed. "It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body," might serve as the description of many an institution which has formed part of a religion. For that deliverance of remote

ancestors from a temporary trouble the clarification of concepts has substituted a cause for rejoicing which each person who enters the spiritual community can appropriate to himself; the ceremonies which were originally commemorative of some event of passing importance, of which they served as the historical record, come to be symbolic of an experience that each individual has undergone, or of a future that he certainly awaits; to be a foretaste or sample of something infinitely greater which is in store for him, and all who are members with him, of a community which is limited by no accidents of birth, by no boundaries of space or time.

The second of the main purposes of religion is that of education and reform. And the reason for the need of it in education seems to lie mainly in two facts. One is that man leads a double life—an inner and an outer, the second being the expression of the first; and for the moralizing of the human being it is of the highest importance that the inner life should be moralized, and not only its outer expression made to conform to certain rules. Now over the inner man the parent and schoolmaster have in no case complete, in many cases most imperfect control. Their power of punishing and keeping in order is confined to external acts. But the religious education teaches the pupil of the existence of a being whose power is not thus bounded, and within whose ken all the internal processes of the mind and heart are as completely as are the external and visible acts; and who therefore can both know and punish where the ordinary human governor cannot take cognizance. With the religious education then both parts of human life and action are under surveillance; and motives are given leading to the moralizing of the interior as well as the exterior man.

The highest system of morality have all urged the need of having the inside of the vessel clean; not condemning

secrecy, but urging that the secrets should be of a sort which if known would raise a man's estimation instead of lowering it. But this can scarcely be enforced without the doctrine of one who seeth in secret, whether the promise that for secret merits there will be open reward be added or not. To that form of morality which consists in acting rightly independently of reputation, and without regard to any consequences here or hereafter, the road seems invariably to lie through the belief that secret acts and secret intentions are known and rightly appraised by God, whether man know anything of them or nothing. Through that discipline there is introduced the possibility of advancing beyond the morality of the time, a man being thus accustomed to rely on a weightier approval for his conduct than that which the opinion of his fellows furnishes. But though this power of advance is given to but few, the belief in the unseen witness in any case prevents good conduct from being merely conterminous with external behaviour. The desire to shun disapproval, if not to avoid punishment, can be made to dominate the whole process of thinking and acting.

The second fact is the need for an authority, to which reference can be made when the reason for an order is demanded. The actual course of reasoning whereby the necessity for a rule has been arrived at, can often from its nature only be communicated to mature intelligences, and the need for its observance comes long before maturity is attained, not only in the individual, but often even in the community. The ascription of a series of orders to a superhuman authority provides an immediate and for a time satisfactory answer to any questions that may arise as to the reason for a prescription. The effectiveness of authority at certain stages of the progress of both individuals and communities need not be dwelt on; and indeed the possession of a sacred book containing authoritative

rules for life and conduct has in several instances caused a religion to triumph over others, that had no such provision. The assumption that the rule is authoritative, and the possibility of indicating without hesitation its source, are valuable aids for dealing with minds at the stage when simple expedients are required, and when certainty and simplicity are thought to be characteristic of truth. The metaphysical difficulties which attend on such expedients are in neither case appreciated before a certain degree of maturity renders the mind more capable of understanding the relation of morals to the requirements of human society.

For the purpose of reformation the need of religion seems to vary somewhat in character according as the offence committed is one which society can or cannot punish. Whole series of offences are left unpunished by almost any code, and there is reason for believing that of those which the law does punish, only a certain number ever come to light in such a way as to bring the culprit within the reach of the law. But in these cases the religious teacher can assure the criminal that his misdeeds neither remain unnoticed, nor will eventually escape punishment. Those who have to deal as missionaries with persons suspected of such misconduct, can as a rule ill spare the weapon which is furnished by the doctrine of another life; but the doctrine that Divine vengeance is to be exacted in this life, is not altogether contradicted by experience, and the terrors of the future only render this threat more potent. Only without religious teaching, without the possibility of preaching the doctrine that the world is morally governed, that an unseen power potent, where the ordinary government is weak or helpless, is interested in human conduct, and in setting right the balance when it is disturbed, the reform of persons in whom the moral sense is weak, is probably impracticable.

Appearance in such cases suggests that there is impunity for wrong-doing, when it can either escape notice, or is of a sort which the law does not undertake to punish; the religious teacher can give the most positive assurance that there is nothing of the sort. The same terror, then, which deters men from crimes of which the punishment is obvious and certain, is thus employed to deter them from those of which the punishment is not apparent.

But where offences are actually punished by society, it would seem that the need for religion is different. For society does not forgive. The constant raising of the standard of conduct that is characteristic of progressive communities renders it inevitable that where they take cognizance of misdeeds, that cognizance should leave an indelible stigma, which no length of time can efface. Hence the moral progress of a community leads to a diminution of the motive for reformation in those who have sinned, whereas the interest of the community demands that the motives for reform should be strong. In these cases, then, the importance of religious teaching is not in what it threatens, but in what it promises. Sins that cannot be forgiven or forgotten by man are forgiven by God. Complete reinstatement into the society of the innocent and stainless which cannot be effected in the world of men, is promised in another world to those who repent. Operating in the former case by the agency of fear, in this case religion inspires men with hope.

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(To be continued.)