

Morality and Religion.

THE fact must be faced. The moral teaching of Christianity is no longer taken for granted in the civilized world generally as a code, from which there lies no appeal.

“Tito,” in the finest of George Eliot’s achievements in psychology, exemplifies the repugnance of self-love to accept the Christian precept of self-sacrifice for others. But, conventionally, at least, in theory if not in practice, the old Decalogue of the Hebrews spiritualized by the Christ on the Mount, deepened, heightened, expanded on every side by Him, has ever since the old Paganism died out, been professed in Europe. Even those, who like the Late Professor Goldwin Smith demurred to the supernatural element in the creeds, appreciated, as a rule, the high level of Christian unselfishness, though sometimes caricatured by fanatical excesses. Now this morality is assailed, not merely in this or that detail, but fundamentally, “root and branch,” in that, which is the very heart of the New Life, which came nearly 2,000 years ago into a world, jaded and hopeless in the vain search for happiness in the worship of Self. The self-sacrifice for others which culminated on Calvary, is once more arraigned and set at nought before Pilate, and a fiendish disregard for the welfare of others is unblushingly proclaimed in the lecture rooms of German professors, and by princes, whose selfish vanity has plunged the world back into chaos, on the battle-field. Old duties of man to man, of man to God, which should be restraints on cupidity and cruelty, are torn up, trampled in the mire, like a worthless “scrap of paper.” Perhaps the conflagration of this world-wide war may burn the selfishness out of us.

Religion and Morality are connected very closely. Are we to think that Morality rests on Religion, or is it the other way? Very much depends on the answer to this question.

The old distinction, current a century ago, between Commandments moral and positive is reasonable only so far as it means, that obedience is due to One who has a right to it, even when the reason for the command cannot be discerned. It is inconceivable, because it is incompatible with the attributes, which the conscience of man,

at its¹ best assigns to the Deity, that any commandment from God can be immoral or even non-moral. To suppose this would be to contradict what any one (who stops to think) may find as in his own life, so in the onward trend of civilization, an endeavour, an inspiration, a "tendenz" (too often frustrated by the machinations of an Evil Power, and by the weakness of man's traitorous Will), to rise to a higher life. Man cannot know, what God is *absolutely*. This is beyond the keenest vision of saint or seer. In the fogs and mists of earth : indeed man cannot know anything absolutely. But child or peasant, for God is no "peculium" of the learned, may know God *relatively*. Even the Revealer of heavenly things to man had to express them to men in man's own way of speech and thought. But God's goodness is the keynote of Christ's teaching. The sceptic, unless in a very pessimistic mood, acknowledges, that "God is a Something in the Universe making for righteousness."

Morality owes much to religion. Morality not only gains a sanction, which nothing else could give so effectively, and which is sorely needed by the waverings of human nature, but can be also deepened and refined thereby. For instance, in the career social and political of Islam and still more clearly in the decadence of imperial Rome, as one of the most eloquent of philosophers shows in his *De Civitate Dei* false notions of the Deity deprave² the life of a nation. But to say that religion is the first and last cause of morality, is to invert the pyramid, as if it could start on the apex of itself.

Is it not an axiom in reasoning, that in learning anything one must proceed from what is known already to what has to be acquired? Each rung in the ladder must be as sure as it can be, before the next step is taken. This process, which begins in the cradle, starts like the Giant-killer's Beanstalk from earth, from the cabbages in the kitchen garden, to lose itself in the sky. The schoolmen in the Middle Ages had a logic as acute as had Huxley or Tindall, a dialectic as unerring, for logic is essentially mathematical, but the flaw, which too often vitiated their reasonings was, that these were based on an assumption, not on facts tested and proved

¹ The Verdict of the fittest to judge. Cf. *οἱ φρονίμοι, οἱ σπουδαῖοι οἱ πεπεισμένοι. Eth. Nicom.*

² In his *Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum* the greatest of Roman poets points to the superstitions of the "pagani" of his day.

by experience. The *Novum Organon* revolutionized science by insisting, that what is called technically "the major premiss in the syllogism" (the general principle in question) must itself be made as firm as it can be, before it can be applied by deduction to any particular instance. Bacon in our seventeenth century was echoing what had been whispered centuries ago on the banks of Ilissus by the philosopher, who taught the world as one would teach a little child and by his pupil, most exact of psychologists, "il maestro di tutti, chi sanne." Induction slowly but surely gathering together her samples, must lead the way; and though she can never demonstrate, if demonstration means actual certainty, for at any moment the discovery of facts to the contrary may upset the conclusion hitherto arrived at, a good induction is the nearest approach to certainty possible to man.

If the danger is great, of arguing from the unknown or the less known, in discovering the secrets of the material universe, it is greater far in the wide domain of mental and moral science. In a little child the first beginnings of religion, whence come they and how? Surely through the affections and the intelligence (as yet undisciplined nor fully developed) being daily, hourly exercised on the persons who stand nearest and are in closest touch with the small personality, as the tendrils of a plant catch hold of whatever support is at hand. Our sensations are the first steps always. Abstract notions follow in time. Whatever can be seen or handled takes precedence.

Segnius irritant animos demissa per aures
 Quan quel sant scalis subjecta fidelibus, etque
 Ipsi sibi tradit spectator.

It is not so much by hearing about God, as by realizing continually, how the father's strong arm is a protection, how a mother's tender bosom cherishes, that a child learns to look up gratefully to an Unseen Beneficence. Gratitude is, or should be, the diapason of all that the soul wants to say to God. The mutual love of brother and sister, and all the other duties and amenities of home, open out a vista of things yet more beautiful. So the soul is prepared not only for the altruistic precept "Love your fellow creatures," but also for that other precept "Love your Creator," which is the foundation of what religion means. Morality is the bedrock of

religion. If a man "love not his brother, whom he hath seen, how can he love God, whom he hath not seen."

And there is indeed a practical, a "working" consent generally as to what is right and wrong ethically. Even those, whose habitual standard of morality is eccentric, pay homage to the real thing, when they come face to face with it. Truth, fortitude, temperance, kindness—about these there is consent generally; some races excelling in this, some in that, just as some climates favour one sort of vegetation, some another. The Hindu may have inherited the habit of thinking it a fine thing to deceive, but he bows down before the probity of the Englishman. Of course there are everywhere abnormal monstrosities, which need not be taken into account. So in considering various modes of cookery, cannibals and savages, who are said to eat dung, need not be counted. The things which sever man from man are almost infinite in number, too often *infinitesimal in value*.

Morality binds men together. In art tastes and fashions shift with the wind, in science theories displace one another continually. Even religion, which should cement mankind together, too often estranges; the jarring watchwords of theologians bewilder the seeker after God. But the deeper you probe the mysteries of man's microcosm, the more surely you hear the whisper, Thou shalt, thou shalt not. Kant,¹ sanest of philosophers, was right. Even the whisper is "imperative." It may be stifled, misheard, misunderstood. Conscience may be drugged, hypnotized, but there it is, deepest of all the deep things in man. It needs no demonstration. It is an ultimate fact in psychology.

Herbert Spencer wished that a good *raison d'être* could be found for the distinction, generally recognized by those who are fittest to judge, between virtue and vice.

The explanation offered by the utilitarians Mill, Bentham, etc., confuses motive and result. The old adage is true. "Honesty is the best policy, but the man who acts honestly from this motive is a rogue." What to our imperfect vision looks, for the moment, like success may be failure in the end. It is only to omniscience, that virtue and the final triumph are one.² The essential difference

¹ Kant, like our Bishop Butler, knew where to stop. Hegel and Fichte lost themselves in the clouds.

² To the moral philosophy of the eighteenth century virtue instead of being self-sacrifice for others, duly regulated by prudence, was too often a

between Right and Wrong lies deeper down. Perhaps it is not very far to seek.

Of all the friends who make up so largely the happiness of Life, who are those who stand first and foremost? Not always the cleverest, nor the most agreeable, but invariably those who are most unselfish, who have no *arrière-pensée* for themselves, in what they do for others, whose self-sacrifice is least tainted by the alloy of self-love. Of all the saints and heroes, pedestalled in history, this is the hall-mark: they have trodden self under foot, they have counted self but "as a pawn" to be staked in defence of others. Patriotism is a noble thing. It is the defence of hearths and homes; but it does not ring true, it is a false coin, if selfishness creeps into it. In all codes of morality framed by wise law-givers each of the precepts enforced resolves itself into the vital question.¹ Who shall have the first place in my aims and endeavours, my self or my fellows? So it is in the old Hebrew Decalogue, the high-water mark of morality, till Christ came. So it is far more emphatically in the teaching and most of all in the life of the Sinless Sufferer, His Self-sacrifice on Calvary sums it all up. And as He brought into the world the real meaning of a word too often profaned, so that word is the surest of all His credentials and the surest test of all who claim to follow Him.

But, it has been said, if the principles of self-effacement for others' sake were adopted generally, the result would be suicide all round. Not so. The instinct of self-preservation is too deeply rooted in man's nature. Indeed, self-preservation and self-culture are indispensable to self-sacrifice; for without due regard to self, there could be nothing worth offering when the occasion demands it.

Is not the ubiquitous agony of this world-wide ordeal as by fire an object lesson against the madness of ambition?

"I demens et soevas curre per Alpes, Ut pueris placeas et declamaticæ fias!"

I. GREGORY SMITH.

prudential calculation of advantages to Self, tempered by so much regard for others, as would not interfere with this.

¹ Thus St. Paul calls adultery a form of *πλεονεξία*.

