

II. INSUFFICIENCY OF REASON IN MATTERS OF RELIGION.

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SYNOPSIS. I. Free-thinkers reject revelation, deny need of any, appeal to natural religion as the only religion, which, they claim, reason suffices to teach us.

II. We admit natural religion, basis of supernatural religion. It lies within the province of reason. This does not exclude possibility of a more perfect religion. That depends on sufficiency of reason to teach it.

III. In its present condition, human race can not live up to natural religion without more light than reason.

IV. It is too vague. It does not afford sufficient enthusiasm. History shows that in fact men have made a failure without revelation. Revelation no detriment to dignity of reason, but supplements and perfects it.

One of the most common and most fatal errors about religion current in the society in which our lot is cast is the error of free-thinkers.

People of their mind are against all Churches and church-going. They are too wise in their own conceit to need any instruction in religious matters. They are the self-appointed liberators of human thought from the tyranny of creeds and dogmas. Human understanding alone, they say, is able to find out the truth. They abjure all authority, all prescribed forms of religion. No outside help, no special light from above is possible or necessary; so-called revelation is an imposture debasing the dignity of human reason. Christianity is necessary neither for the guidance of the individual nor of society. "Believe in God and follow your common sense" is the only dogma of this naturalism. They point triumphantly to individuals of known integrity, so far as natural virtue goes, who profess no religious faith, and say, "Here are men who reject your religious teaching and who live better lives than many of you church-goers." They appeal to a universal natural religion, the religion of reason, and claim that reason tells a man all he needs to know about religion, that man is sufficient for himself. It is a doctrine attractive to superficial minds because so flattering to human vanity. It is the legitimate progeny of Protestantism which began by rejecting the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, and now has come to rejecting Jesus Christ Himself.

There is some grain of truth in every error. Every false doctrine is a perversion, a deformity, an exaggeration of some truth. Let us see first what truth may be at bottom of this falsehood.

In the first place free-thinkers are the pretentious guardians of "natural religion." Is there such a thing as natural religion?

When we speak of religion we mean that tie, that bond of duty, which binds us to God. It may be called the sum of those moral obligations of man toward God. That God is our Creator, Supreme Master, Benefactor and Judge obliges us to pay Him the homage of adoration, obedience, gratitude, love, fear, etc. Now when we speak of religion we mean this body of relations between ourselves and almighty God.

Natural religion is distinguished from supernatural religion. The natural is the ordinary, the original; the supernatural is that which is added to the original and ordinary and is above it. The religion which is natural is the bond of duty man owes to God by the original constitution of things, viz., creation. That God is man's maker and owner requires a certain behavior of man toward God. A supernatural religion would mean something

more, something added to the original arrangement, some improvement on the natural, ordinary relations with God. By nature, by the fact of creation simply we are creatures; our place is in the servants' hall, we are bound to serve Him who made us and owns us. By super-natural grace, by a new and gratuitous gift of God, by a favor we had no right to expect, God, through His only begotten Son, has given us adoption, so that we are no longer merely servants, but friends, sons, and if sons heirs also, coheirs of Jesus Christ. We are called up from the servants' hall to enjoy the intimacy of the family circle. This was not to be expected. This was a free and most gracious condescension, this is not the ordinary, natural thing, but beyond it—supernatural. Our behavior now must be correspondingly improved. There are new ties binding us to God our Father. There are new and more delicate relations between us. The old allegiance is not dissolved. We owe him all that we did in the natural, original order of things and much more. This new order of things, this new attitude toward God, this new bond of obligation to God, is supernatural religion. There is, therefore, a religion, a bond, a compact between God and man which is natural, which is prior to and which underlies supernatural religion. It is the groundwork, the foundation of all religion. Supernatural religion is in no way at variance with it. It does not destroy it or dispense with it, but perfects it and builds upon it a nobler mansion. Christ, the messenger of this new covenant, said of the natural law, "I come not to destroy the law, but to fulfil it; not one jot or tittle of the law shall pass away till all be fulfilled." The first effect of grace is to restore and strengthen natural virtue, just as a man who comes to build a house upon a foundation does not destroy that foundation but strengthens the parts that have decayed.

To perceive these natural relations with God, to understand our duties toward Him in the natural order is within the province of human understanding. Reason is a light put into man by the author of nature to show it to him and to enable him to live by it. There is nothing in natural religion strictly above pure reason to grasp. There is nothing in its demands which are not heartily in accord with the sentiments of sane reason.

We go this far with free-thinkers therefore, that there is a universal natural religion which appeals to reason. To live up to it is our reasonable service. It is the most natural, the most reasonable, thing in the world. It is absolutely essential to human dignity and self-respect to pay to God the homage we owe Him as our Creator, our sovereign master, our constant benefactor. In other words, for a man to be religious is most natural; not to be religious is most unnatural.

This, however, is not to deny the possibility or the need of a supernatural religion. Because there is a natural order of behavior toward God arising from creation does not make it impossible for God to bestow another gift upon us requiring more perfect behavior on our part. The necessity of satisfying the demands of natural religion does not exclude the possibility or the necessity of a revealed religion. It may be that man is unable with his natural powers to fulfil it, in which case he would need help. In that case he would be most unreasonable and most negligent of natural justice did he neglect to search for a light from God to help him. He would be guilty of contempt of natural religious duties if he did not seek the necessary aid to fulfil them.

Where we separate from our adversaries is not on the question of the existence of natural religion, but on this question: Is man able to know it, is it within his reach to know what it requires of him so clearly and firmly as to enable him to be faithful to it?

We are ready to admit that a few rare specimens of mankind, in whom nature was more happily compounded, have been able without the teachings of faith to reach remarkable perfection in natural virtue. The "good emperor," Marcus Aurelius, a truly noble-minded man, is pointed out as a pagan saint because of his self-mastery, his love of wisdom and his zeal for virtue; Epictetus, the patient blind slave, by his spirit of resignation to the ills of life, and Seneca, the philosopher, tutor of the Emperor Nero, who in the midst of corruption and licentiousness lived an abstemious and frugal life devoted to search of true wisdom. Such men, though uncertain of many of the most fundamental truths and failing in many natural virtues, bear yet splendid testimony that reason highly developed is a light which can discover many things relative to the mystery of human life.

We admit, too, that reason gives some light, however poor, to everybody. St. Paul reproaches the men of his time for not knowing the Creator: "The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead, so that they are inexcusable. . . ."

Admitting that a small minority of men under specially favorable circumstances may attain a fair knowledge of natural religion, admitting that the rank and file of men can know faintly the most elementary truths, we maintain against rationalists and free-thinkers this—that the common run of men, or better, that the human race in its present condition, cannot without revelation or some extra help know the truths of natural religion, cannot know how to live rightly, that men can not know these things easily enough or with sufficient certitude to be able to live up to them. That is, that, taking human nature at its real worth, not exaggerating its sufficiency, it can not get along without external help. That it is not sufficient unto itself. That without more light than human understanding can furnish it can not fulfil vows to God or regulate human life rightly. That it will make a failure of life, and will fail to rise to the natural dignity of human nature, will fail to accomplish the natural end of existence.

Nor does this stultify the Creator, as implying that He left man without adequate means to attain the end assigned him. "When God made man he made him right." His reason was sufficient once, but He is not now in his original integrity. "There both passed away a glory from the earth." Man has gone down from the holy city of Jerusalem to the Jericho of ungodliness; he has fallen among robbers; he has been stripped of his goods and left wounded and half dead by the wayside. And while we have said that natural religion lies within the reach of reason, that does not mean that every man, however poorly developed his intellect, however rebellious his passions, is able with steady eye to perceive it. It does not mean that the most of men are actually capable of reading in things the natural moral law. It means simply that reason at its best is not unequal to the task of discovering the truths of natural religion. To say that a certain feat of strength is not beyond human power is not to say that every human being is equal to it, or that the most of men are, but that the best efforts of man can accomplish it.

As for individuals being able to guide themselves—how many of the great mass of men actually do any thinking for themselves on the great truths of existence? "With most people imitation, tradition and education are everything. Our beliefs are for the most part caused and determined by the community in which we happen to be born and bred, but are not based on any reasoning of ours either implicit or explicit" (Tyrrell). It is authority that moves us to believe. We believe what we are taught; we reason very little for

ourselves. Nearly all our religious beliefs and moral truths come to us from others; very few have the leisure, the inclination or the industry to study out for themselves the truths of religion. To say that every man is a law unto himself, that he has only to follow what his own reason spells out for him and needs no guidance, no authority to teach him, is childish ignorance of men.

Nor could the collective wisdom of the race, the sum of knowledge which the whole race is able to accumulate as the findings of human reason suffice to guide men in the great art of living rightly.

Human reason alone is able to delineate only the dim outlines of religion. Its light is too dim. It gives twilight glimpses of the Creator too fugitive and indefinite to light the way. It gives the broad principles of duty, but its light is not strong enough to discover the detailed application of these. It makes us feel in a general way the necessity of doing God's will, but it does not declare what that will is and how to do it. "The choices of life are definite things, and the rule to guide our choice must also be definite. It can tell us that all vice is to be shunned, but it does not tell us whether this or that particular thing is a vice. Natural religion is a religion of dreams, its doctrines are vague as dreams; like dreams their features are forever changing. It can never rule men; it has never ruled them. It excites more longings in men than it can satisfy. It ever cries for more. It is an alluring voice heard far off through the fog calling to them, 'Follow me,' but it leaves them in the fog to pick their own way out toward it over rocks and streams and pitfalls which they can but half distinguish, among which they may be killed or crippled and are almost certain to grow bewildered" (Mallock).

This vagueness strips religion of all enthusiasm. It is too uncertain to be urgent. Religion is sacrifice—"not my will but thine be done." But men are not going to make sacrifices for shadows or specters. God is the spring of action. The cold call of duty is weak against the selfishness of our nature. The personality of God is too remote. The Incarnation by bringing God close to us has transformed duty into the pleadings of infinite love and warmed men's hearts with love and enthusiasm. Reason leaves men in a darkness, a coldness, a lassitude, a lethargy rightly described by the author of Revelation, "the darkness of the shadow of the valley of death."

The right way to find out how well men can shift for themselves in matters of the soul without external help is to see how they actually have behaved without it. If we can find a people for a long time without the light of true revelation, the success that was theirs is an indication of the possibilities of natural guidance.

Our adversaries point out to us good virtuous men all around us who do not believe in revealed truth, and they say, These are as enlightened and more virtuous than many Christian believers. They are as just, as temperate, as kind and as benevolent. It is true there are such people among us, whose lives are a reproach to many a Catholic in many ways; but this proves nothing against the usefulness or need of revelation. These people are actually, though perhaps unconsciously, molded in their beliefs by truths revealed. There is a whole body of beliefs and doctrines the common stock of society which one might think to be these findings of natural reason, but which in reality are but the traditions of a society that has been for centuries in the main a Christian society. Every man's thought is colored by the environments in which he lives. No man living in Christian society, unless his mind has been debauched by immoral living, can strip himself of the legacy of truth which is his by heredity, of the customs and general tone of

the society in which he lives. It is not fair, then, to take an unbeliever from the midst of Christian influences as an example of what man would be without the aid of a revealed religion, for such a one is not without its aid, and though he may not be conscious of it, many of the principles of life which he possesses are his, thanks to a Christian social influence, and he would never have attained to them by his own individual powers of discernment. "Noble-minded disciples of naturalism are parasites of a believing society and would die without it" (Balfour).

Let us go back to the pagan world before the time when paganism began to be influenced by contact with the Gospel. Let us take the very best of these peoples, the Greeks and Romans, who were most highly cultured and boasted the wisdom of their philosophers. Indeed, even here we are not sure we are eliminating all revelation. The Jews, scattered as they were throughout the world, doubtless acted in some degree as a corrective to the perverted notions of the pagans. And we are not sure but God may have vouchsafed some kind of light to these children of darkness, which was authenticated.

Yet in spite of these possible helps, in what a deplorable muddle do we find men concerning the truths of natural religion!

To begin with, they had most deformed notions about the nature of God. Polytheism, dualism and idolatry flourished universally; stars, plants, animals, wooden and metal idols were adored as gods, as is still the case among barbarous tribes. Sanctity or purity was not an attribute of these gods. The most revolting vices and crimes were attributed to them—pride, envy, jealousy, murder, incest, rape. Every human passion was deified and served as a patron to those addicted to such a vice.

Such being the notions concerning the being of the Deity, naturally the notions of the worship pleasing to it were equally distorted. Human sacrifices were offered to placate the gods and most obscene orgies were perpetrated in their honor, the gods not being worthy of pure love, but hideous beings to be placated. No one ever thought of loving them. "Who ever thought of giving thanks to the gods that he was a good man?" said Cicero. "It were absurd," said Aristotle, "for any one to say he loved Jupiter."

Likewise distorted and debased was the idea of the dignity of man. Charity was little known in the sense in which we know it. The reason for this was that the cornerstone truth that gives value to dignity in man was ignored, viz., the immortality of the soul.

The Stoic school taught that souls, being substantially an evaporation of blood, continued to exist a certain time after death in a separate state of being, especially in the case of wise men, but could only exist till the next general conflagration of the world.

Cicero hesitated. After writing a book on the immortality of the soul he writes: "I have evolved this book, but I know not while I read it how to assent to it. When I put down the book and begin to think on the immortality of souls, all this assent falls to the ground."

Virgil, Ovid and Horace sought protection against the comfortless thought of an inevitable descent into the gloomy night of the nether world and into an eternal sleep, in the enjoyment of the present moment.

"There is nothing after death, and death is nothing; you will then be with the unborn," was the common saying.

The tombstones over the dead frequently referred to the transitoriness of everything human, but always for the sole purpose of enforcing the moral that as much enjoyment as possible should be won and, as it were, pressed out of the fleeting moments.

"What I have eaten and drunk, that I take with me," says one of them; "what I have left behind me, that have I forfeited."

From such false principles concerning God and man, it is not difficult to conjecture what depraved rules of morals were deduced. The myths of all kinds of immoral escapades on the part of the gods were made the excuse for similar crimes in men. The baseness and degradation of pagans is depicted in the Epistle to the Romans, in these words: "They changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man and to birds and fourfooted beasts and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies. They changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator . . . for this cause also God gave them up unto vile affections. . . . Even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things that are not convenient, being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud boasters, inventors of evil things, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful."

Such was the revolting condition of the pagan world under the sole guidance of what free-thinkers proclaim the only guide—natural reason. Without the light of revelation to guide them these are the follies men fell into. They changed the likeness of God into the image of a creature; they lost the dignity of man and floundered in the filth of immorality. The various forms of religion—whose number was legion—were all the devices of man. But the fact that the world so universally believed them to be revealed shows that men felt the need of a light from above. They consulted oracles, they examined the entrails of victims to know the will of the gods. They in many ways attested what their philosophers taught, that the great enigmas of life can only be solved by the aid of a special light from heaven; that a light superior to that of reason is necessary to answer its own demands. If the cults he practised did not actually give the help needed they show that man realizes how insufficient he is for himself, and it was but reasonable to lift his eyes to heaven for help.

These free-thinkers would lead us back into the degradation of paganism. They would take away from us the "excellent light of the Gospel," which shows us the way and the truth, following which we shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. They would extinguish that fire of divine love, of zeal, for the commands of God our Creator, which Jesus Christ came to kindle upon earth. They would reopen the graves of the horrid lusts of paganism and let them loose upon men.

Is their motive true zeal for the right use of reason, true love for the real dignity of man, or are these free-thinkers not rather of a piece with those pagans of whom the Epistle to the Romans speaks?

"Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness . . . unto vile affections . . . to that which is against nature. . . . And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not becoming."