

## A MINISTER'S SON RUMINATES ON RELIGION

BY JOHN GUY FOWLKES

## BY WAY OF GETTING STARTED

EDUCATION, politics, and religion are three of the social agencies that influence human life most. Consequently, it is but natural that these three institutions should be under the spotlight of public interest and discussion. Logically, it would also follow that constant and diligent effort would be made in analyzing, evaluating, and reconstructing these powerful determiners of society. Education as a profession has enjoyed more scientific progress in the past twenty-five years than during any preceding century. The work of professional organizations such as the National Education Association, The National Society for the Study of Education, and the National Research Association bear telling evidence of this progress. Likewise, some concerted effort is being made through such agencies as the National Municipal Research Bureau to place political structures on a scientific basis. However, curiously enough, in most quarters this attitude of challenging inquiry has not been directed toward religion and its operating agencies. Individuals as a whole seem either to be complacently satisfied with existing religious tenets, or simply entirely indifferent to the fundamental experiences encountered in the realm of spiritual exploration. The following discussion is an attempt to point out some of the most urgent problems in the field of religion at present. In no sense has the writer attempted to pronounce a benign benediction, or to offer an inflexible solution to the baffling questions that arise. If the following observations are provocative of thought, the author will feel fully repaid.

## SOME FALLACIOUS NOTIONS OF RELIGION

*Church Attachment and Religion.* In the minds of many regular church-goers, religion, denominationalism, and God represent one and the same thing. Church membership, even though such affiliation be no stronger than having one's name on the roll, immediately furnishes the fortunate individual with the joys, rewards, and immunities of the blessedly chosen few. Credal politics as evidenced by malicious slander and insinuating gossip become the inspired tools of the elected sect or faction. And so I might go on calling attention to the undeniable fact that religion in the consciences of many has never meant more than a mere title to a world unknown. May such believers soon disappear.

*Religious Goodness.* "Damned by faint praise," could never be better illustrated than by the statement, "He is such a good man." Passive goodness is the complete fulfillment of a religious life to many people. Such naivete is as stupid as it is lamentable. Carl VanDoren said some two or three years ago that, "Goodness by itself is a drug on the market," and that professional workers, particularly teachers, need intelligence as badly as virtue. Certainly unwise piety can be no better than misdirected intelligence. Negative goodness is a questionable virtue. May the plea of VanDoren soon be answered.

*Evolution or "Devilution."* It seems incredible that so many fine people in the United States should be guilty of the perpetuation of spreading scientific untruth. And yet with a radical hysteria that would have done credit to the Crusaders on their rampages, thousands of our citizens are doing everything in their power to prolong a state of scientific ignorance among as large a portion of the population as is possible. "Silver Dollars" and "Crosses of Gold" were even deserted by the Great Commoner when a "Monkey Trial" held forth, and emotion rather than reason was the basis of the court decision when a Tennessee school teacher was tried for teaching the truth. Not content with banishing those miscreants who object and rebel against a literal interpretation of "Genesis," the devotees of the biblical story of mankind are attempting to enact statutory provisions that will prevent the alleged pollution of school textbooks by the findings of reputable scientists. Such bigoted and pernicious attempts to tamper with the curriculum of public schools should be

stamped out in their infancy, since the only hope for even the partial attainment of our national educational objectives is a course of study abundantly rich in the gripping accounts of modern science and its applications. Legislative interference with the details of classroom teaching is nothing short of "Devilution" and should be treated accordingly.

*The Identity of God and Religion.* Many human beings "have religion" only in the matter of attempting to identify the divine "Being" and pronouncing such convictions on their contemporaries. It seems to be perfectly sufficient for some people to be able to shriek from the housetops that God "The Father," "The Son," and "The Holy Ghost" as revealed in these mere words alone represents the apex of religious values in life. Weird imaginings of the appearance of the Supreme Ruler with just as far fetched guesses as to his abode and mode of life are strangely comforting to these called disciples. And thus we see these negative conceptions of religion interpreted in curious and devious ways, such interpretations seething with incongruities and contradictions as hollow as they are unsound. Well might one cry, "How long, Oh Lord! How long!" but such an exclamation without any effort at clarification is probably the besetting sin of the majority of people.

As a matter of fact, the weird and fantastical illusions are decidedly less harmful than the apathy of that large group of highly decent, and at the same time unthinking folk, who "can't be bothered" to expend any mental energy in an attempt to analyze and identify the principles of religious thought and action.

#### SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF REAL RELIGION

*Religion as an Interpretative Power.* Regardless of how much or how little factual knowledge is possessed by an individual, if such knowledge is to be completely used, it must be interpreted in terms of pulsating humanity in which the individual lives. This power of interpretation should include the ability of sympathetic appreciation. Such qualities of appreciation and interpretation involve the ability of discriminating analysis on the one hand and the force of unifying synthesis on the other. These processes of recognizing, indentifying, and translating the component elements of life must be acquired and cultivated in respect to all human activities and projects. The spiritual power by which this full

interpretation can be accomplished is religion. Religion is a categorical term because it is the storage battery of all the traits, personal characteristics, and qualities which become the agencies or devices through which life is interpreted. In other words, religion is the clearing house chamber through which the "I" in a human being must constantly be charged in order that one's real self may reach its richest fulfillment in wearing the story of human life. In brief, then, religion is that spiritual force or power because of which individuals acknowledge the existence of and pay homage to a divinity trying to interpret human life in terms of personality and personal relations.

*A Spiritual Matter.* In the first place, it must be realized and freely admitted that religion is a spiritual matter. By this I wish in no way to refer to anything of a visionary, ethereal nature. But rather it is my purpose to drive home the undeniable and irrefutable fact that each of us has a distinctive spiritual side. True it is that human beings never penetrate farther than the periphery of this realm, but nevertheless, this spiritual side is there latent or active as the case may be. Indeed, it becomes more and more apparent to me that this spiritual side is the background of human lives, absorbing crudities, till such flaws become traits, or embracing and developing strength till such become the cardinal virtues of the individual involved. Religion, therefore, must and does pertain to a distinctly spiritual side, and it is my belief that it is only by the frank and open recognition of this that religion can survive. Truly, "Man does not live by bread alone," and the other items of his subsistence are just as real as is the staff of life.

*Religion a Reality.* Just because religion is a spiritual matter, and, therefore, subjective, it is no way less real. There is grave danger of passing through life and failing "to see" that which is by its nature intangible. Just because a quality or element cannot be reported in terms of the meter stick or the apothecaries scale in no way justifies a declaration of its non-existence. The charm of a rose can be separated into such elements as color, size, petal formation, fragrance, etc., and yet there is something about the ensemble of that bud, which, while none the less real, at the same time cannot be identified in terms comparable to those just used in analyzing the flower. The compelling fascination of a lovely woman, beautiful both in body and character, can be isolated by such words as com-

plexion, wit, vivaciousness, spontaneity, and what not. And yet there is something else—something that makes her “She,” which while tantalizing in its elusiveness, is none the less real. And so it is with religion, whether a soul has acknowledged it or not. It is with us. It is around us and will operate on us to some extent at least whether we will or no.

*A Personal Affair.* Naturally, in the light of the preceding paragraphs, religion is a personal thing. It is as intimately entwined with one's mental and spiritual adventures as is the husband with his wife. Because of this, there must perforce be some experiences in connection with this phenomenon that are related or revealed if only by a transitory glance to a few precious companions as evidence that kindred souls have struck. But just as it is imperative for the enhancement of marital conditions that there be a proper exchange of fundamental explorations, so for the crystalization and capitalization of religious exploits must there be much more honest and open discussion. This suggestion in no way tends to cheapen or vulgarize either the sacred annals of wedlock or the gripping excursions of religion, but it does propose to perpetuate those things that are satisfying and perchance reveal realms unknown to the majority of human beings.

*Of Individual Concern.* Certainly anything as directly related to personality as religion must be of great individual concern. True this is, especially in regard to the single human being finding himself. How many people repeat,

“Out of the night that covers me,  
     Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
 I thank whatever gods there be  
     For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
     I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
 Under the bludgeonings of chance  
     My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this space of wrath and tears  
     Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
 And yet the menace of the years  
     Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
 How charged with punishment the scroll  
 I am the master of my fate:  
 I am the captain of my soul."<sup>1</sup>

But how few people have ever glimpsed the real meaning of "I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul?" Unless such a spirit be sublimated with the desire of helpful interpretation, it is likely to be a menace and liability, rather than a blessing and an asset.

*Of Social Significance.* At the same time that religion is a personal affair and an individual matter, it is also of momentous concern to the group. Indeed, unless there be frequent communion among congenial and kindred groups, religion is likely to dwindle and perchance be lost to the individual, and therefore to society. The recognition of the pertinence of religion to the group is essential for the full development of spiritual power in individuals. Just as the personality of men and women is the agency through which religion functions in the individual, so the group is the channel through which this spiritual power flows into the sea of human endeavor. In order that the flow may ever strike a high tide mark, it behooves the component members of society to make definite provision for group cultivation and expression of religion.

*Religion and a Changing World.* That the earth was flat was accepted with serene calm for ages. For an equally long period of time, it was implicitly believed that babies come into this world filled with "original sin." This conviction that infants are incarnated with the spirit of Satan at birth has produced such rites as infant baptism, certain phases of the theory of foreordination and predestination, and child salvation. But the geographers and explorers produced evidence and dared journeys that destroyed our saucer picture of the earth, and the psychologist has shown us very clearly that the inherent tendencies of human beings as individuals are just as likely to be "good" as bad. As a consequence of this geographical and psychological enlightenment we have changed our practices. No longer do we serenely admonish children to be good in general, but rather good for something. What a person does naturally is no longer trusted as a dependable guide for behavior. Indeed, our most noted students of child behavior, tell us that the

<sup>1</sup>"Invictus" William Ernest Henley.

function of education is to modify some original tendencies, eliminate some original tendencies and perpetuate other original tendencies, all of which is fundamentally different from the older principles of child training. But the parent who has accepted and practices the new principles of education is no less loving, no less tolerant, no less a father or mother because of a changed point of view as to what is better or worse for the boy or girl.

In other words, our scientific knowledge is increased. Our familiarity with human conduct becomes more intimate. But such advancement reflects expansion and enhancement rather than replacement and contraction. Bitter controversies rage in some quarters as to whether there is as much religion now as was possessed by the generation of half a century past. These heated disputes cluster around such external elements as mode of dress, the wooing of lady nicotine by the fair sex, bobbed hair, or the Charleston. But after all, even though these practices do differ radically from hoop-skirts and the minuet, are they not entirely irrelevant to the matter under consideration? True it may be that religion does affect our clothes, speech, and means of recreation, but surely no one would for a moment wish to keep these things immutable. No, it must be remembered that religion is the spiritual power of life interpretation, and it is this inexhaustible reservoir that human souls must constantly tap in order to generate the currents of human hopes, ideals and aspirations that will crystalize into an unquenchable desire to serve. Inasmuch as religion does pertain to spiritual matters, since it is a personal affair of great individual concern, and at the same time of tremendous group significance, certainly to remain essential, it must change in its fashions, but not its functions. Its generating power must remain the same as ever. Therefore, may there be a cessation to needless agitation over the fact that our canons of religion differ in form from those of the past. And instead may there be a constantly surging urge in all human souls to be the proud but humble possessors of real religion.

*Possessors and Dispensers of Religion.* Countless people, who would put the publican to shame in their vehement declarations are frequently most devoid of religion. Rituals are too often confused as ends rather than symbols. As has been indicated, membership and attendance in and of themselves are considered the sine qua non of religious expression. The conscientious adherence to an observ-

ance of such forms is entirely praiseworthy if such allegiance is made to what such forms represent, rather than to the styles themselves. But, "Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only," surely applies to that rather insipid group of professional religionists who are so wrapped in the symbolism of religion that the power is never gained or used.

Hundreds of real people who modestly disclaim any religious qualities most beautifully typify the constant glowing reflections of magnetic power of interpretation. Such folk are not ostentatious. They do not stand in public places and pray, neither do their names grace local newspapers in heralding headlines when they subscribe to the Community Chest or Far East Relief. But for consistent, sympathetic understanding of life in its innumerable puzzling paths these people may be counted as the proud but humble holders of the key to life.

#### BY WAY OF STOPPING

*The Source of Religion.* The intent has not been mine to cast innuendoes against anything or anybody. Neither do I feel the need for dismal hopelessness about religion, but in order for religion to exert its rightful influence over the lives of men and women, it is essential that individuals take full cognizance of and make adequate provision for the adoption and cultivation of this force. The first basic requirement for this is the personal recognition of a God. The interpretation of this divine authority must be an individual matter, hingeing not upon such conceptions as a personal God and the divine Triumvirate just because such descriptions have been imposed by religious formulas, but rather on what this God means to the particular man or woman involved.

*The Leaders of Religion.* In the practical accomplishment of religious ideals, it is apparent that there must be a more generous and whole-hearted recognition and support of the efforts of some of the leaders of religious thought today. Fosdick in New York, Arbuckle in Newton Center, Barstow in Madison, Gilke in Chicago, and Henderson in Los Angeles, bear striking testimony to the fact that the pulpit at its best senses the need for fresh religious guidance. These men are outstanding in the transmittal of spiritual power by the church. Frank at Wisconsin, and Hall at Oregon,



bear equally potent evidence of the recognition of the place of religion in university life.

Because of the inspired work of these men and their like, it is my firm conviction that religion will flourish. But such development, to be of value must be one of functional import, directly affecting contemporary life and not a story of exegetical dispute.