

SELF-GOVERNMENT IN RELIGION

BY M. E. ROBINSON

SO many lives of unselfish devotion have derived their force and beauty from the traditional religions, especially, perhaps, the Jewish and the Christian, that one hesitates to plead for a fresh presentation of the old religious truths. These, however, can hardly be accepted, in their present form, by many of the learners in the self-governing schools, because they are often supported by arguments which would convince only those who rely on authority without observing and thinking for themselves.

For example, Dr. Gore defends divine “justice” which used “cruel and monstrous tyrannies” as instruments of chastisement and then destroyed them for this compliance; maintains that, in the Scriptures, “unconstrained naturalness of narrative is more convincing than scrupulous accuracy:” and states that God, “perfect in righteousness,” made Himself known to man largely through the “true” Hebrew prophets—true according to their own showing and their contempt of their rivals—whose message consisted, the unlearned reader finds, in angry self-assertions and particularized threatenings of hideous devastations and massacres, with a general command, here and there, to do justly and love mercy. These writers were acutely conscious of God as a person, distinct from themselves, issuing their denunciations, of the divinity of which this conviction, for Dr. Gore, is evidence enough.

This great apologist confesses that his religious beliefs are native predispositions, and that he allows science to modify them only up to the point beyond which he feels that his innermost self would be “quenched or blinded.” He thus reveals the reason why religious and political thinking promotes enmities and favouritisms—why, for instance, the ruling classes in England do not regard the Government as cruel and incompetent for letting the miners well-nigh perish; and why the late Mr. A. C. Benson, as a child, would

pass a Nonconformist chapel with a thrill of horror. By the mistaking of principles and convictions for facts lamentable consequences are, today, being wrought; e.g., the division of all the great churches into quarreling sects, and the fighting of Jews against Arabs in Palestine.

Such hatreds are due to deep impressions made in babyhood. A very indulgent mother may turn a child into a Roman Catholic, who needs protective influences, or, by reaction, into a blatant atheist or Protestant, or a quietly independent Quaker; just as a stern father whom he admires may bring him up to be a power-loving Lutheran, like the Germans who wanted to subject all the world to their discipline.

All the religions, in fact, particularly those which claim divine sanction for belief and conduct, have produced both weak and strong, ugly and beautiful characters; and most of them, now, embody ideas of authority and obedience, punishment and reward, which have long been abandoned in criminology and education. Dr. Relton, representing the Anglican Church, threatens unbelievers with the loss of personal immortality, and, as if to give a psychological appearance to this warning, suggests that their personalities may be disintegrated after death, and the fragments cast on "a spiritual dust-heap" and worked up into new souls.

Would not self-disciplined learners regard this doctrine as an insult? Having been placed in circumstances that suit their character and abilities, but offer difficulties enough to give them only a hero's chance of reaching the appointed goal, they have won not prizes, as the result of bribery or competition with others, but the triumph of having arrived at a standard to which their own self-respect has urged them. They do not what they are told by God, king, parent or teacher, but the right they have themselves discovered after making experiments and mistakes. Therefore the work is stimulating sport, and the master a friend and referee, not an angry, commanding, punishing tyrant.

The child of the age will, in time, create a world

"Where the will rages not with fever to destroy

Differing wills, or warp another's life to its use,

But each lives in the light of its own joy."

Those who would assist him in this constructive work must base their religion not on creeds and ceremonies, but on kindnesses,

understandings and imaginations. Knowing that belief on demand is impossible, they must leave the child free to form his beliefs according to his own experience and poetic power. They must therefore put splendid examples before him in the shape of great works of art, and employ stories instead of sermons to drive morals home. The story constitutes a valuable discipline, because it is a challenge to the listener's own intelligence to side with the noble and against the ignoble characters; whereas the sermon carries with it a criticism of him which, deep in his mind, often creates resentment and rebellion. Moreover the preacher may, unwittingly, take an unfair advantage of the congregation because his personality hypnotizes them and paralyzes their judgment. On the other hand, the personality of the story-teller is lost in the story. For the time being he is the story.

The religious helper of the modern child, adult and adolescent must, further, bring out heroism and the power to take responsibility and reject enervating doctrines—that, for example, disease can be removed by pure thought or prayer; that pardon cancels ill deeds; that Christ will come again to tell His people exactly what to do, as their parents did when they were children, or as, in the war, the commander did on the field and the doctor and nurses at the hospital: or that sin is a debt which can be paid by the sacrifice of an innocent saviour. The victim pays, and so does the offender, in the long run, by the degradation of his character and the hatred of others; and nothing will remove the stain or right the wrong but rebuilding the character and confessing the sin to the sufferer and, as far as possible, making amends to him.

To make such reparation transgressors will sometimes need the aid of a pastor who will interpret their relation to the injured ones. He should be a specialist in the study of human nature and social organization, and, like the psychologists at the clinics for child guidance, ought to be so interested in and sympathetic for individuals, that he will make no trouble of studying their mental and physical make-up and all their history if he cannot, otherwise, help them to understand themselves, their companions and their circumstances.

The need for personal guidance and enlightenment may be gauged by the popularity of spiritualistic mediums, advice columns in the newspapers, bureaus for would-be suicides, and similar work-

ers and institutions. And indeed the duties of life are perplexing and numerous enough to overburden even the strongest man or woman acting alone. They consist in doing one's work well, fulfilling one's family obligations, and being just and generous to all the world.

We do not know who made the universe or gave us power to explore it. We only know that it is magnificent beyond our loftiest imaginations, a vast and beautiful inheritance that we can think of and use, at once deeply humble and exultantly proud, only with reverence, joy and gratitude. We are living in a world which is at least fifty million years old and has illimitable resources. That signs and wonders are necessary to declare the glory of the spirit or spirits who wrought so stupendous a creation is a pitiful misconception. Never have these left themselves without witness; and so great and beneficent is their power that no man need fear to trust himself to them, even in death, which, probably, is not a solution of personal continuity, but a fulfilment of our best selves.

It is true that we must bear the burdens and cure the diseases of humanity unaided; but it is only by meeting these responsibilities with courage and faith that we achieve what Professor Abercrombie calls "the first of all virtues, the virtue of personal existence which is wrought in the white heat of man's essential vigor, that vigor by which he is himself against the world." For this creational work secondhand experience will not serve. Probably it is the impulse to evade the difficulties of "this present" which has led so many people to borrow bizarre foreign religions, like the English Buddhism and Mazdaznanism of today, and the Judaism which has made British folk sing "Jerusalem my happy home" without a sense of strangeness, or think of heaven as a glittering city, not, according to their natural inclination, as a place of woods, fields and gardens.¹ On the authentic testimony of our own eyes and ears, honestly accepted and checked by the testimonies of contemporaries, we shall see visions more splendid than documents and excavations have revealed; and they will give rise to finer benevolences. Have we not "a cloud of witnesses" of "the things that are more excellent?" What scripture has equalled the majesty of M. Adrien Le Corbeau's *The Forest Giant*, the simple kindness of Mr. David Grayson's *Adventures in Friendship*, or the noble catholicity of Mr. Ralph Hodgson's *The Song of Honor*? There

¹See, *Studies in Arcady*, by Norman Gale.

scores of painters, musicians and writers whose works, like these, are so human that mortals deem them to be divine. They and their work are imperfect, but such as they have they will give us if we will only take.

The people at large need a laymen's religion which would make systematic use of the gifts of present-day artists; promote the patience, charity and serenity which are waning with the decline of Christian culture; perpetuate the noble respect of Jesus for suffering and failure; maintain the joyful dependence on others that is so much more gracious than the hard self-sufficiency of the non-religious; and bring about the prayerful tranquillity in which, maybe, communion is established between human creatures and higher, discarnate beings of many orders.

As it would never be an end, but always a means, the new church—or school of personality, or social art and science association—ought to have a minimum of organization; and it should provide facilities for pursuits which, like those of the Boy Scouts, would in themselves be a discipline, willingly undergone, for an ideal, without external authority, and thus would help the members toward self-realization.

The following scheme is presented in the hope that it will draw criticism and attract workers who will co-operate in realizing it.

SUNDAY PROGRAMME

The services, held on a Sunday afternoon or evening, would consist in stories—mainly biographies, but also fairy and folk tales, narratives belonging to world history, nature stories, etc.—told by a gifted and well-trained story-teller. There would also be readings of poetry and essays, as often as possible by the authors themselves; music of both the past and the present; a familiar hymn or two; and a few minutes of silence.

WEEKDAY PROGRAMME

The pastor would be versed in applied psychology, in order that, as father—or mother—confessor, he—or she—could help enquirers to make the best of themselves, and to overcome faults which prevented them from being happy, successful and useful to others.

He ought, also, to give lessons on home life and hygiene to parents, adolescents and betrothed men and women, and help children to choose their vocation; and he might lecture on demography, the

mental causes of war, the origin of hatreds and similar themes.

There would be many activities which would enable the members to act up, without self-consciousness or self-righteousness, to the visions that were shown them on the Sundays. For instance, there might be a gardening club; a nursing sisterhood; an ideal-homes exhibition committee; a Bible-study group; a prayer circle, a series of seances; a drama troupe; a book-and-picture society; a choral association; a musical appreciation company; a literature class, and so on.

As much as possible the leaders of the church associations would use existing institutions rather than establish new ones. For example, it is to be hoped that they would persuade the whole congregation to join Peace and Health societies; and that they would take advantage of the evening institutes in the neighborhood for learning any sciences, arts and industries which they wished to master in order to help themselves and the others.

The church would, indeed, be like a large family the members of which were always promoting one another's prosperity—but not at the expense of outsiders—and cultivating each other's personality. Each would be expected to bring the characteristic gifts of the rest into use, and not to demand self-sacrifice of anyone.

The works of the church would, in fact, be neither "charities" nor, for the most part, mere amusements like dancing and whist drives; but well-conceived, educative enterprises of the nature, to some extent, of social experiments. On the Montessori and Dalton principle they would be initiated and maintained almost entirely by the members, not by the organizer or the pastor; and would show that good people need not be sentimental and merely harmless, and are not necessarily inferior to the makers of evil conspiracies in patience and endurance, energy and imagination, intelligence and *esprit de corps*.