

THE MAKING
OF RELIGION



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The Making of Religion

The Essey Hall Lecture

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ONE day as you stood at the foot of a mountain you looked up and saw a little cloud upon the summit. Elsewhere the sky was clear, but on the peak the cloud rested as if it were becalmed. You climbed the mountain. Then you saw that it was not calmly resting there, 'shepherded by the slow, unwilling wind.' The wind was keen, and was driving the cloud away.

You stood and watched the particles of hurrying mist. Every instant they were

being driven away before the wind. So you said to yourself, 'I will wait, and in a little time the cloud will be dissipated.'

You wait, but you wait in vain. At length you realize that you are in the laboratory of the sky—you are in the place where clouds are being made; you are watching not only something that is being destroyed, but something that is being created. The warm air is rising from the valley, bearing with it an invisible burden. As it comes to the cool mountain-summit that burden is revealed—the cloud appears. What you are watching is the process both of destruction and of creation. The same winds that are blowing the particles of mist away are also the forces that are creating the cloud.

Upon the summit of human life, at its highest point, there has always been a mystery. Always there have been the forces that seem to be dissipating that mystery—the keen winds of thought continually blowing the cloud away; and yet the wonder of it is that the mystery abides—the pillar of cloud by day—the mystery of love, of wonder, of worship, and aspiration—all that we call Religion.

We speak of ourselves as being in an age of transition, which only means that we can see what is going on in our age more clearly than we can see or imagine what has been going on in other ages. We can see the particles blown before the wind, the changing of the substance of the cloud. One mystery

after another is explained, yet all the time the wonder grows.

It is from this standpoint, that I wish to approach the subject of the Making of Religion. It is a process that is never finished. It is going on all about us. It passes through many phases, and the forces which are destroying are the same forces which are creating. Let us ask ourselves, not what are the arguments for this or that form of opinion in regard to religion. What we are interested in is the nature of the energy that is behind it all. What are the forces which tend to make religions, and which impel to worship and to hopeful service?

The great thing for the student of religion

is to have a strong grasp upon his subject-matter. That which strikes one in many books is the fact that the writers in their attempt to give a clear definition and analysis of Religion lose the sense of the reality of that which is the object of their research. What they have defined is some single phase of historic religion. It is

The fluent image of the unstable Best
Still changing in their very hands that wrought.

After catching one image distinctly and making it the standard for all else, all further change seems to be sheer destruction.

In the attempt to find the origin of religion we are likely to lose ourselves in antiquarian research. We take it for granted that it must be found in its purity in its historic

beginning, and that as we leave that point of time behind us we become less certain of its real essence.

This preconception is seen in most attempts to answer the question, 'What is Christianity?' The question usually resolves itself into the less interesting question, 'What *was* Christianity?' We are asked to follow the method of elimination, which indeed is necessary if we are to understand any particular period in the past. What was Christianity in the Apostolic Age? Obviously it is necessary for us to shut out all confusing elements in order that we may see clearly. We must dismiss the thought of those peculiar questions which so trouble the modern mind; our social, political, and

scientific problems. We must, as far as possible, eliminate the ideals of an industrial civilization which is the product of our western world. We must divest ourselves of all that has come through the experience of Christendom in order to enter into the frame of mind of the handful of believers who in Antioch were first called Christians.

But when we have investigated, so far as it is possible for us, that phase of what is now a great world-religion the question comes, 'If that was Christianity what has become of it?' Who thinks any more just as those disciples thought? Revolution has followed revolution, and what remains of that pure faith once delivered to the saints? Has it not long ago been lost amid alien elements?

Its very purity and spirituality gives it an air of remoteness to those whose interests are with the contemporary world. We watch it as we watch 'slow pallid sunsets.' It is the fading of something beautiful.

A similar effect is produced when in the same way we seek the historic origin of religion in general. We take counsel of the anthropologist and he refers us to the cave-dwellers. 'Once upon a time' he assures us there was religion. It was unmoral, it was irrational, but it was a vivid reality to the imagination of primitive man. It was associated with dreams and vague fears and strange superstitions born of the darkness. It was a part of primeval chaos. There are still the survivals of the impres-

sions of the childhood of the race. We still respond, though more feebly, to the impulse to worship. There are still dark places in our experiences, and sometimes we feel almost as our fathers felt.

It follows from this identification of religion with its earliest and crudest manifestations that the whole course of human evolution takes us further and further from the sources of piety. As we grow in intelligence we outgrow religion.

It seems to me that this is a false method of approach to our subject. It is as if one were seeking the origin of a great river and were content to follow the suggestion of a purely conventional geography that a river can be traced to a single source. Suppose

one were to seek in this manner the origin of the Mississippi. Standing at the point where the great river makes its way into the Gulf of Mexico, he would say 'This is not the pure Mississippi! This is a corruption of it. A thousand alien streams have been mingled in this turbid current.' We must go up the valley more than two thousand miles before we can understand what the river is. At last we come to a lonely lake in the Minnesota woods. A little stream flows out of it. 'This,' we say, 'is the Mississippi!'

Ah! but that is not what is most important. To know the Mississippi is to know it at its greatest. The true geographer has in his mind a more comprehensive picture.

The river has not one source alone but millions of sources. Far away on the distant mountains to the east and to the west are springs and little brooks that run among the hills. Each contributes its part to the mighty whole. It is not one of them but all of them that make the river.

In some such way as this must we look at Religion. We are right in saying that it is historic, that what we have in the present comes to us from the past. But it comes not from a part of the past but from all of it. The real greatness lies in the union of many elements. Our interest is in what *is*, rather than what has been.

Do we not see that in the making of religion, as in the making of a river, the important

points are those at which streams that had before been separate converge and mingle? The new tributaries add volume and velocity, and deepen and broaden the main channel.

The question, 'What is Religion?' can never have a final answer any more than the question, What is Truth? We are continually making new discoveries. From time to time tendencies and movements which we had looked upon as merely 'secular' become consciously and enthusiastically religious. They mingle with the ancient streams of faith and love.

We in these days hear much of 'the simple life.' There is a sense in which the good life is simple. There is another sense in which it is not simple at all but marvellously

complex. Elements which were once deemed contradictory are fused into a new spiritual unity.

The reason why it is so hard to understand ancient forms of religion is that they were so extremely simple. The good man was content with exhibiting a single quality at a time. If he had faith, it was pure, unadulterated faith, unmodified by any other feeling. The man of faith must be willing to sacrifice his son on the altar. Why not? The reason why the modern believer would not do that is because what he calls faith is in reality a much more complex feeling.

What in the ancient world men meant by religion was devoid of many elements

which to us are of its very essence. When we fail to recognize these elements we are inclined to accuse them of hypocrisy.

It is very difficult for a modern man to really appreciate, or to conceive, an 'unmoral' religion. That is because in the experience of the ages Religion has come to be moralized—we have come to worship the good, the just, the pure, and we cannot conceive of anything being true worship that does not have a certain element of justice or philanthropy about it. We have come to believe in God as the High and Holy One that inhabiteth Eternity; and therefore it is hard for us to conceive of faith that does not have some moral implication in it.

We find it difficult to understand a char-

acter like that of Jacob. Jacob was a man of pure religion—one might say that his religion was chemically pure. It was religion without any tincture apparently of moral insight; he was simply devout. There was a time when there seemed absolutely no reason why a person who was religious should also take the trouble to be moral—that was a work of supererogation. A man was religious who believed, who saw visions, who built altars, who made sacrifices, but that left him perfectly free to do just as he pleased in regard to his ordinary business.

The great significance of the Old Testament lies in the fact that it is the record of the way in which this primitive religion met another stream of ethical energy. There was

first conflict and finally fusion. The passion of the great prophets was primarily a moral passion. To the priests of the older cults they must have seemed to be mere iconoclasts, despisers of the old sanctities. In the end they succeeded in uniting what before had been separated.

So in the formative period of Christianity we are conscious of the meeting of many forces. Christian historians with an apologetic bias have done their best to belittle the spiritual energy which was characteristic of the period in which the new church grew into power. But we cannot fail to see the signs of promise, the austere morality of the Stoics, the spiritual aspiration in the new forms taken by the Greek philosophies,

the revival of oriental mysticism, the cosmopolitan sympathy which widened with the Empire itself. The whole story cannot be written, for these diverse elements unconsciously blended with the new faith. Multitudes were seeking a higher kind of life. The Christian Church represented the aspirations not merely of a little band of Galileans, but the spiritual struggles of the world.

We cannot understand Christianity if we belittle the age in which it arose, any more than we do honour to Jesus by underrating the race to which he belongs.

What was true of early Christianity has been true of its periods of revival and reformation. They were times when new elements

were being recognized. Matthew Arnold used to argue for an established Church by pointing out the dangers which came when religion was isolated from other great human interests. There was nothing, he insisted, more perilous than for religious people to get out of the main current of national life.

But the question arises, What is the main current of national life? The main current may no longer run in the ancient channel.

The national life when it is most vigorous is likely to make new channels for itself. This is what happened in the sixteenth century, and again in the great period of English Puritanism in the seventeenth century. Mr. Arnold was accustomed to speak of the Puritans as Hebraizing. But this

was formal rather than vital. They, indeed, loved to call their children by Hebrew names, and to quote Hebrew texts. But their power came because they were so essentially men of their own country and time. They were first of all Englishmen, and they gave an English interpretation to the religion they had inherited. The French revolutionists loved to quote Plutarch and to think of themselves as reproducing the republican spirit of Greece and Rome. Their real significance lay in the fact that they expressed that which was essentially modern. It was in the same manner that the Puritan quoted the Bible. He used its great words as war-cries in his battle for the liberation of the mind from the tyranny of an ecclesi-

asticism that was foreign to the temper of the people. What ordinary men had all the time been thinking and feeling was now given religious expression. When Latimer preached his sermons 'On the Plough,' he voiced a real religion. The ploughman confronted the priest. He also had a faith. He believed in patient industry, in integrity. He found God in his manly labour. Let the clergy do their work as faithfully as the farmer did his and all would be well. Here was a great stream of religious life mingling with the religion of the Church and purifying it.

When we seek the signs of promise in our own day, we must learn a lesson from the past. We must remember that religion is not the outgrowth of intellectual or moral ease. It

is always born out of struggle. We must seek it not in the quiet places where those live whose questions have all been answered, and who are content with what has been established. These beautiful traditions may show where religion has been, but they do not show where it is to-day. The catechisms of the Church are full of splendid irrelevancies. They contain questions which people are no longer eagerly asking, and answers which they no longer take the trouble to understand. In regard to the questions which men are now asking they are, for the most part, silent.

In the meantime the new world is coming into consciousness of itself. If it does not find the leaders of the old churches sym-

pathetic it has power to create a new Church. We see again the conflict between secular and ecclesiastical ideals, and out of that conflict there is coming a larger union.

We already may see a new element introduced into our religious consciousness. It is a habit of mind which is the result of scientific discipline. A generation ago theologians began to talk of the 'reconciliation of science and religion.' We have all long since become tired of these formal reconciliations. They were only the attempts at reconciling specific results of scientific investigation with certain dogmas of the church. The real conflict, which they for the most part overlooked, is between the dogmatic temper and the habit of scien-

tific inquiry. Religion had allied itself to dogmatism. This alliance had been challenged. A generation is growing up which has been educated in the atmosphere of free inquiry. Men are familiar with the severe tests to which every statement must be subjected before it may be received as true. They bring this temper with them into all the affairs of life. The question which confronts us is, 'Does this education prepare men or unfit them for the service of religion? Must they unlearn in the Church the best habits of the school?'

It is not possible for us to ignore the seriousness of the demand for greater intellectual clearness.

There has been a tendency on the part

of religious men to escape from the contact with serious thought. I have often heard persons speaking of an intellectual reaction against liberalism in these days. I have seen no evidence whatever of any such intellectual reaction, except this—that many persons who ought to be thinking quite seriously have given up the habit. They are saying, ‘After all, religion does not belong to the sphere of intellect; religion belongs purely to the sphere of emotion, religion is purity, love, worship—all these beautiful things of the spirit; it is a beautiful ideal, but it does not involve anything so commonplace as the recognition of plain everyday facts.’

I think the significant thing to-day is that this position is becoming untenable;

and it is becoming untenable in this way—that we are seeing the development of a kind of mind in which the scientific spirit invades the inner temple of religion itself. We cannot any longer ignore the fact that men are arising to whom Science, in the sense of pure and disinterested love of the truth has become something more than an exercise of intellectual curiosity; it has become a deep, solemn, and austere piety. That is what we have to meet.

No one can meet the young men in our Universities to-day—the best of them—without seeing this. There are men of purity of heart and purity of mind; and these men when they look upon conventional religion are shocked at—what shall I say?—they are

shocked at the profanity of it. I say the profanity, because as a part of these men's religion, their deepest impulse, the thing they would die for, is the disinterested worship of truth; and that worship has its ritual, that worship has its liturgy, that worship has its ordered discipline.

What was the cult of the Priest? Why did men think of him as a superior being? It was because the priest stood first of all for purity. It was symbolized by the white garments untouched and unsullied by anything that could defile. The priest has always been sensitive to anything which casts suspicion on his spiritual purity. That caused the great triumph of the prophets when they turned the tables on the priests.

The priests had been saying, Our hands are clean, our garments are white; and then the prophets brought before them the idea of the new kind of purity which the priests heretofore had not conceived: Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, who shall stand in his Holy Place? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart. Then they explained that they must be pure from bribery; they must be pure from every vain thought. Then came the collapse of the priestly pretension, until there should be a priesthood that should have in it some idea of perfect rectitude as between man and man.

Now I believe that one of the most tremendous facts of our generation is the

bringing into the view of men a new standard of veracity. It is austere in its demands, and it must be heeded. It is something more than the old, vague, worship of truth. It means something absolutely different from that fierce intense holding of our opinion and calling it truth. It demands purity, absolute purity of mind.

The man seeking truth must come as a worshipper. He must deny himself his own prejudices and preferences. He must put aside all pride and worldly passion and ambition. He must not ask for the applause or even of the sympathy of the multitude. His duty is to observe the thing that is, and to allow it to make its own impress upon his mind. Then he is bound to give

an absolutely simple report of what he has found. To allow any ulterior motives to influence him would be to profane the altar at which he serves. Even the utility of the truth he discovers is not to him the primary consideration. The question, 'Is it true?' must not be confused with any other.

And need I ask whether the Church as it is to-day is in the eyes of such a worshipper the sacred place which he longs for? It certainly is not.

Yet there are forces which are slowly building the new Church in which the Truth-lover can worship, without mental reservation or apology. The very forces which are destroying ecclesiastical pretentiousness are making for a more sincere and vital faith.

But you may ask, 'Is not the keen air of criticism fatal to that in religion which is most tenderly human? Religion in the hands of scientific investigators may become austere true, but will it not become cold?'

But religion is more than a doctrine, and it is being humanized at the very time that it is being rationalized. Another tendency of our time is that of the great democratic enthusiasm which is taking upon itself the form of religion. If you would be greatly heartened go among those who are working for a society based on brotherliness. Here you will find a ferment of the spirit such as was characteristic of early Christianity. There is dissatisfaction with what is and a great faith in what is to be. Demo-

cratic idealism, with its passion for human equality, is destructive of the old order. Before it the ancient hierarchies crumble,

the calm Olympian height
Of ancient order feels its bases yield
And pale gods glance for help at gods as pale.

But we are coming to see that Democracy while it destroys also builds, and that it builds a fairer world. St. Augustine commenting on the words 'Let brotherly love continue,' declared that *brotherly* love was the only kind that could or ought to continue, because it was based on equality. The relations of the helper to the helped, of the teacher to the taught, of the benefactor to the beneficiary are in their nature temporary. To attempt to make the relations permanent

is to destroy their moral and spiritual value. You give bread to the hungry. But do you desire that he should always be hungry in order that you may feed him? Then you are not his friend. The time will come when you will use your power to keep him down in order that your beautiful relation may continue. The relation between the pupil and the teacher is good, but do you wish him always to be ignorant in order that you may teach? Then you are not kind, but unkind in your wish. The only permanent wish which allows philanthropy itself to continue, he says, is this; this is real Charity—that 'you shall wish him to be your equal.' I think amid all that we call ingratitude—the heart-burning between one class and

another—you find that after all it comes back to this spiritual point which Augustine saw clearly: the inner wish of the heart. What do you wish to be the final outcome of all your effort? And the great splendid response from the youth of our own day is coming in new interpretations of the wish that all may be equal—not the levelling down but the levelling up.

In America one of the most promising signs is the establishing in our large cities of Schools of Philanthropy for young men and women who are going from our Universities for courses of patient study of social conditions—not any more with the idea of mere giving, but with the desire, first of all, of knowing the truth—then with their brother

men engaging in the great Divine work of uplifting humanity.

The question comes to us, that always comes when we see great forces at work, about the outcome: 'With what body shall it come?'—the new Church and the new worship. It is needless to say that it will be the old body in just so far as that old body is able to readjust itself to new conditions; but one thing I think is clear—that the actual religiousness of this age is not waiting for some one to organize it according to old lines; it is already organizing itself; and when we ask, in regard to the organization of the religion, let us make sure that we understand the power that is really the organic power of life, the

organic power of a great, irresistible spiritual impulse. We are inclined to imitate. We are all more imitative than we imagine. A French writer has said that there are two kinds of social imitation—one, direct imitation, where one takes a model and deliberately copies it; the other is what he calls 'counter imitation,' when one looks at the same model and then puts his wits together and says: How can I make something exactly the opposite of that? Some of our friends of other Churches are more apt to follow the method of direct imitation; we are often apt to follow counter imitation. The Church—the religion of the present day—let us make sure is organizing itself, and if it is to be broader, more tolerant, more spiritual,

it will not be because of some gentlemanly desire on our part to make things pleasant, or, as theologians say, having an 'irenic' theology, it will be because the most effectual way of doing the work of Religion demands something broader.

What is the test of good organization? It is in the idea of economic efficiency. A man has a work to do. There is a certain amount of potential energy. The problem of all organization, as of all invention, is, to use every bit of the energy so that it shall accomplish the real thing in view; that is a good organization which does that, and that is a bad organization which does not do it. That which spurs on the inventor, and the organizer, is always

the discrepancy between the total amount of energy and that which is actually utilized. We are told that even in our age of steam, the engine often gets out of the coal only about five per cent. of the stored-up energy that is in it; and every inventor is trying so to organize his machinery as to do away with such waste. A perfect machine would be the machine that would perfectly utilize the power.

Now here is the problem of religious organization at the present day. We ask ourselves: What do men wish to do with religion? We must have first of all that clear, distinct aim; and I think we are coming to see that it is something more than the salvation of an individual soul—

it is the salvation of human society. That is the declared end, let us say, of every Church, of every minister of religion, of every believer. Let us get that clear before us, the cleansing of society from its sin, building it up in strength, bringing in hope, and love, and possibility of worship to each son of man here upon the earth.

That ideal is coming. And now, suppose we ask our best, our noblest, to come to us, putting before them this clear aim, and say: How can we do it? Now let us take account of stock; let us say to ourselves that, in order to do this we must have the co-operation of every good man—we must have the co-operation of all the lovers of light and truth in every community: how many of them

do we get? Out of the potential, the spiritual energy, of the world, how much have we been able to organize into an effective machinery for the actual doing of this Divine work?

The steam-engine that gets five per cent. of the energy out of coal is a great invention. I doubt whether we have any institution which utilizes even a perceptible amount of the total spiritual energy of the community for the great work we have in mind. The objections to the divisive creeds, to the petty dogmatism, the small sectarian animosities—these objections are not any longer that they interfere with our peace of mind. We have learned to stand them and thrive on them personally. The ob-

jection is that they interfere with our work, our common work, God's work here upon the earth; and the great plea for union is the plea for the economic efficiency of the Christian life.

Let us, then, if we would see religion in the making—if we would believe that it has been making and that it is making—let us get into right relations with the human makers of it. We look back, and we see, when we are in a retrospective and reverent mood, the great cloud of witnesses. We look back and we can see, because we are looking right into the faces of these men, the men of all generations of whom the world was not worthy, and we see, looking back, age after age, what the men who were

with them did not see; we see that these men were all worshippers, all believers, all had something of a transcendent vision. Then the question comes, as we see the light in their faces, What was it all about? What did they see, after all, that made them so full of light? Ah! this we can only understand, we can only, in our heart, believe, when we cease to look back, and when we turn to see what they were looking at—these were men whose faces shone, because they were looking forward; because, standing at the beginning of great tasks (too great for them) they saw, and they knew the light dawning from afar, they were hoping because they were looking in the direction wherein hope always dawns, they

were knowing, because they were doing, God's will, they were believing because out of their experience faith was made, and joy came again; they were children of the dawn and they rejoiced in the light. We cannot know what religion is by looking back at our saints and heroes, but by looking forward to that which they looked for. We are here not to preserve their work, but to continue it. Religion consists 'not of spent deeds, but of doing.' As we face our tasks, resolutely determined to go forward, we see the same vision that cheered our fathers, because we are moving in the same direction.

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