

The Relation of Religion to Morality

By

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... Almost everyone considers that the all-important problem in life is to make [people] moral, to inject into their minds a principle that will lead them by the force of their own feelings to do what is right ... Heretofore [people] looked upon God as a sort of invisible policeman, who by means of severe punishment of evil and enticing reward for good, kept men in the straight and narrow way, but now that faith in God as a policeman is rapidly disappearing, many people find little reason for being good. So my purpose ... is to bring about the meaning of morality—to show you that it is not the result of arbitrary commands on the part of a supernatural being ... that moral action is not action in fear of punishment or in hope of reward, but that it is action according to principle, pre-eminently social principle; to show you that it is born out of social instincts—instincts which belong to every moral [person] ...

... the first step in this direction is to point out the relation which exists between religion and morality, what this relation has been in the past, what it is now, and what it should be. And here I find lamentable confusion in the religious world ... About a year ago, I attended a meeting of ministers representing practically every denomination in this city. [It] was called by the Superintendent of Public Instruction to discuss the teaching of morality in our public schools. Now these ministers all agreed that morality should be taught, and they all agreed practically on what is right and what is wrong, but they could not agree upon the sanctions of morality. With the exception of myself, every minister there (some more emphatically than others) insisted that there is no morality apart from religion, that the only reason for being good is because God said that we must be good. One of the best-known ministers of the city, who is said to be both liberal and intelligent, said that ethics has neither “sanction nor support” without religion, that morality without God means, in the long run, “humanity without morality.”

... Morality, we are told, is inseparably bound up with religion, because it is religion that gives morality its standard. Religion places God before man as the type of perfection. But how do we make up our idea of God—particularly in respect to his morality? Anyone who is at all acquainted with the evolution of the idea of God sees that instead of knowing God at first and taking him as a pattern for ourselves, we gather together the loftiest ideas of our minds and with them make up our image of God ... It is because we know goodness and justice and love in our own thoughts that we are led to imagine that absolute form of them, which we call God ...

[Yet] The basis of morality lies in the facts of human life. Here we see what right and wrong mean, and how they work. Here we know what goodness is, what love is, what justice is; and we know the effects of these things upon life. Of course, they are never full and perfect—but ... we know that they are what make life tolerable, and what would make it blessed if they were full and perfect. We know or can think of a father's love and so men picture to themselves a heavenly father; we know what justice and judgment are among men, and so we can conjure up before our minds ... a perfect judge in heaven ... But ... turn your eyes to the heavens and try to penetrate to what lies behind nature, and what do you find? You find greatness, power, order; but where can you see any perfect type of goodness or justice or love? ... There is no perfect type of these virtues there which [we] may follow.

... [Herbert] Spencer, in his "Sociology," shows us savages who have no words to designate the idea of God or soul or heaven or hell, yet who exhibit moral traits equal and even superior to what we commonly find in the Christianized world. [Geologist William] Sollas, in his "Ancient Hunters," speaks in ... the highest praise of the bushmen "their energy, patience, courage, loyalty, affection, good manners, and artistic sense" who have no religion worthy of the name. [Peter] Kropotkin, in his "Mutual Aid," speaking of the Hottentots whom he knew well, says: "Their word is sacred, they know nothing of the corruption and faithless arts of Europe. They live in great tranquility and are seldom at war with their neighbors, and are all kindness and goodwill to one another"... [Yet] We hear and are constantly filled by clergymen that the brotherhood of man can come only as a result of the recognition of the fatherhood of God. But these savages do not wait for this roundabout logic; they practice brotherhood by instinct ...

And as one studies the history of the world, [one] is simply [astonished] at the number of [those] who have contributed to the social idealism of their time and labored for the good of humanity, who neither professed nor practiced religion as it is commonly understood. [British statesman, William] Gladstone ... a devoted and ardent churchman ... said: "To my great pain and disappointment, I have found that it was the churchmen who supplied the great mass of those who have gone lamentably wrong upon questions involving the interests of truth, justice, and humanity; while those who stood firmly for these principles have been non-churchmen" ...

Not only can morality exist apart from anything we ordinarily call religion; but religion can exist without any appreciable influence upon morality ... Look at the religion of Greece and Rome ... Their object was to foretell the future, to explain the universe, to avert calamity, to obtain the assistance of the gods—that to make men virtuous was no more the function of the priest than it was of the physician. If the proper ceremonies and rites and services were performed, the gods cared not a whit about the character of the individual or the moral condition of the people. Indeed, of the religion of Israel itself, which we usually think of as a peculiarly an ethical religion, it may be said that it was not so much moral as liturgical

down to the days of the noted prophets. The God of the early Hebrews instead of being a moral being was guilty of demanding practically every immorality of his people—dishonesty, theft, murder, rape—all commanded by Jehovah. Or turn to the history of Christianity, and see how licentiousness and bribery and unblushing murder was associated with its very head, the papacy; and how when Christianity was at its highest, the moral life of Europe was at its lowest ...

The principle that you should bear in mind is this—religion and morality were totally distinct in their origin. At first, they had nothing to do with each other. Religion was simply an arrangement between man and his gods, by which he was supposed to be able to gain their favor or ward off their wrath. Morality, on the other hand, is a matter of behavior between man and man. The relation in which we stand to one another, the manner of our life together, that is morality ... Morality has some connection with religion only when [people] believe that they can best win the favor of God by living a decent life, and not by performing ceremonies and sacrifices; only when they happen to believe that their God is a moral being and more interested in the lives of his subjects than in the material offerings they can make him ... The religion of any people is simply the reflection of its moral ideals. The gods in heaven speak the words of the people on earth. The bibles contain the precepts that experience has proved best for the time. The religious institutions take their shape from the moral life of the people.

Considering religion as the world knows it, there could not be a more harmful and pernicious doctrine than this—that morality rests on religion for its foundation. The people who are taught this are very apt to find their morality slipping when they come in contact with scientific thought and see the structure of their religion tottering. Many of you have read the experience of Benjamin Franklin in this regard. He tells us that when he first began to think and saw that his religion was founded on false premises, he found his morality giving way with his religion. And ... it was only after much reflection that he began to realize that wrong was wrong, not because it was forbidden, but that it was forbidden because it was wrong.

Another danger connected with this confusion of thought is that of identifying what made be called “religious morality” with natural morality. Natural morality rises out of the needs of man and social life, which a good religion would simply adopt and give an added sanction; and then there is a morality which religions have in the course of their development created—the belief in certain creeds, the observance of certain ceremonies, the keeping of certain days. Of course, there is no reason why a religion should not make rules and regulations for its followers, just as any other organization does, so long as they are recognized as of minor importance and are never confused with the really binding rules of natural morality. But when there is this confusion, when a creed or ritual are made binding requirements, when disregard of them is treated as sin, for instance when it is

considered a sin not to observe Sunday in a certain way or not to believe the apostles creed, then we have that peculiar thing which I have called religious morality, which is extremely dangerous because it transfers the emphasis from something very important to something unimportant.

There are people for instance, who think it is almost as bad, if not altogether as bad, not to go to church, not to pray, not to keep Sunday in a certain way, not to believe in God or in Christ, as to commit robbery or adultery, or to deal unjustly with one's fellows. Dr. [Charles] Spurgeon, the great English revivalist, used to say, "the moral who are not devout, the honest who are not prayerful, the benevolent who are not believing, the amiable who are not converted—these must all have their portion with the openly wicked in the hell which is prepared for the devil and his angels" ... Billy Sunday, who is looked upon almost universally by the Christian Church as the greatest preacher of its gospel, once said that *the immoral and lawless man, if he has a belief in God, he's a good man and a valuable member of society as compared with the infidel, who, however pure his life denies the existence of God, the truth of divine teachings, and the gospel that was taught by Jesus Christ* ... Let us do away with this kind of nonsense. It is almost as detrimental to [humanity's] true welfare as the opposite extreme of immoral conduct. Let us have a rational natural morality, and save our sense of sin for violations of truth and love and justice as [we] have come to understand them.

There is another sense in which religion as it is understood and practiced becomes an actual menace to good moral action ... In asserting a God, it is very apt to leap to the conclusion that all is well, and that we should glorify him ... instead of serving [humanity]; in asserting a belief in immortality it is very apt to persuade [people] to think too little of this life and too much of the life beyond. It tends to give the divine sanction to the order of society as it exists ... It is sometimes naively said, "Things could not be as they are, were they not for the best" ... If [this] is correct, then teaching that some things are right and others wrong is nonsense. "Why try to sit right what is already right?" So it is of the first importance both for the moral life and for progress, that a view of life be developed in which not religion, but morality, plays the determining part ... If we leave our social ills to be cured by Providence, they will never be cured. Experience has taught us that much. The true trust is not in Providence, but in human endeavor. And the true religion would be one that is permeated with the spirit of morality, that believes that if we do our duty all will be well within the world, but that otherwise there is not the slightest assurance for human betterment.

This remark leads me to a consideration of the second phase of my subject, as to what the relation between religion and morality should be. We have thus far been talking about what it was in the past, and what it is today. Now what should it be? I do not believe that this separation should exist or at least should continue to exist. I have tried thus far to show

that morality has existed apart from religion and that religion was quite distinct from morality; but I held that each is an imperfect and inadequate thing when thus divorced. I wish now to make this clear, by showing first how the two may be united, and second, the strong and imperative need that they be united.

As I have already said morality was originally simply the customs of a community, the settled ways of conduct that men living together naturally fell into. By this process of natural selection, the good customs tend to survive, since the bad ones weaken a community and eventually lead to its extinction; and in time this customary conduct comes to be what we call real morality. So a great deal of all morality is more or less unconscious, that is, we do most of it without thinking. In fact, a good part of the morality in the world today is of this instinctive kind, it is second nature to man[kind], and it has nothing to do with religion.

On the other hand, religion was at the beginning little more than an arrangement by which men gained the favor or warded off the enmity of the gods. They were friendly and hostile powers in nature—powers that were made into persons by the imagination of these early people—and religion was the reverence and awe which these persons naturally inspired ... Now, as I pointed out a moment ago, this has practically nothing to do with the way in which men dealt with one another, which we call morality. One might take part in the religious rights of a community and experience the thrill of religions emotion, [but] one's religious life was apart from his moral life. ... Religion is even now regarded as concerned with another realm than that of morals. Reverence and awe still go out to divine persons, not to the laws of morality. That is why we find so many religious scoundrels, because to them religion and morality are as separate as religion and business or religion and amusement.

And yet you will all agree that both religion and morality when thus considered are imperfect and inadequate things. For when [people] begin to use their reason, when they rise to the stage where they are no longer content to follow in the ruts of custom, when they begin to ask why they should do this or refrain from doing that, they realize that only those customs which contribute to the good of the community, which make it strong and happy, are valid customs for real morality; they realize, too, that the community's welfare is dependent upon these conditions, that so long as certain things are not done in the community, it is foolish to sacrifice to the gods or to pray for their favor. For instance, it is silly to pray for health while breaking the rules which make for health, and it is silly to pray for social welfare while living the kind of life which contributes to social disintegration ... In time they come to realize that since welfare and happiness are not arbitrary gifts from the gods but the natural results of certain conduct on the part of men, then the natural order in which we live becomes the real object of reverence and awe—the true reverence is to revere right and justice and love ...

The purpose of religion has always been to secure blessings for mankind. It's worship, it's sacrifices, its prayers are all for this end ... But when [people] see that the blessings they crave, the welfare they desire, are based on other conditions, that these things are secured only as the result of a certain type of life among men, that there is no such thing as arbitrary action in the universe, but that everywhere in the world there is recognizable unchanging law, then what a change comes into the very heart of religion. The very ends which religion craves lead it to pay attention to the real conditions of life, to study the laws of the physical world upon which life depends—and then instead of praying or sacrificing for peace and happiness, [they] do the things which make for peace and happiness; Instead of imploring Apollo or Jehovah or Allah or God to stop a pestilence, they search out and remove the causes of the pestilence. This kind of religion, instead of being separate from morality, is ethical and scientific. It believes that morality guided by science is its very life and soul. And, in comparison with a religion of this kind, palpitating with life and reality, a practical force in the development of man[kind], how feeble and false seems the other type of religion that teaches [us] to rely upon things that are mere figments of the imagination.

There is then no necessary antagonism between religion and morality. Religion is merely a set of feelings and a set of practices which result from these feelings. These feelings are practically always the same, no matter how different the objects which arouse the feelings may be ... It is the same thing with the Catholic dropping on adoring knees before the blessed virgin, and with the Buddhist gazing in homage on a statue of Buddha, and with the Greek extending out his arms to Apollo, and with the savage standing mute before a sacred stone—yes, and with the rationalist hushed and subdued, as he thinks of those mighty laws on which the health and safety of their race depend. Religion, I say, is this peculiar feeling, and the peculiar acts and practices that grow out of it ...

On the other hand, there is nothing in the nature of morality to hinder it from blending with religion. Morality is a way of acting rather than a way of feeling. But when [people] become thinking and alive, when they realize the issues involved in human conduct, when they see that true morality is the way of life and that immorality is the way of death to [individuals] and communities—then there is no reason why [people], conscious of their responsibilities and of the great issues at stake, should not be touched with reverence and awe as they think of these things ... As for instance the worship of Apollo or of Jehovah was once a religion, as the imitation of Jesus or of Buddha is now a religion, so can the worship of morality be a religion to man ...

I trust that you now realize the sense in which religion and morality may become one. It is because religion is a general term—meaning whatever one holds sacred, whatever one venerates, whatever gives one [their] supreme rule of life ... From this point of view morality—the laws of life—is simply one of the possible objects of religion. There may be other objects, indeed there usually are other objects—that is why morality and religion

have been and are divorced. In fact, other types of religion are so common that it is actually imagined that they alone are religion; and that the [person] who sets up the Moral Ideal as an object of worship is not a religious [person].

And yet I stand here this morning ready to reverse this thought entirely, and to say that in an enlightened age of the world, the Moral Ideal is the only fit object of intelligent worship, that morality alone is fit to be a religion—that the prevailing types of religion are outworn and should be cast aside, that only so far as religion concentrates its worship upon the Moral Ideal has it any saving power. In fact, I am willing to accept the jealous tone of the first commandment, if you will let Righteousness speak instead of Jehovah. And Righteousness said, “I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have no other gods before me” ... What use are all sorts of mystical emotions, all sorts of philosophical speculations, all sorts of scientific inquiries, if we have not the emotion necessary to keep us straight in our daily lives, if we have not an eye for cause and effect here and now, if we have not the secret of happiness and of peace from day-to-day. A religion that will teach us how to live, that will hold up clear and high the laws of life and win our obedience to them—this is the religion the world needs, and it is the only true religion. All other religions, all that seek to make something else sacred, that cause men to put their trust in church or creed, in Christ or God, divert man from the real issue. They are the blind leading the blind, they are a delusion and a snare.

... I am frequently told that our society here is not a religious organization. I am told it is an educational and ethical society, but not a religious society ... [But] Down at the bottom of religion, even in the popular sense, is the idea of reverence. And who, when he turns his thoughts on goodness and justice, can fail to have feelings of this description? It may not be a religion to talk much about, but it is one to guard sacredly in the heart and to give proof of in one's life ... I am willing to let this church be judged by its fruits; the only way in fact, it can be judged. You members of this society must give the answer to the question as to whether or not morality can be a religion to us. How far do you try to live according to moral ideals, how much would you sacrifice for principles, how earnest are you with what you believe to be your duty from day-to-day, how far can you withstand public opinion, how firm can you be when men call you infidel and atheist, have you a solid footing in this changing world; have you, amid whatever could frighten or distract you, access to what Shakespeare calls, “A peace above all earthly dignities, a still and quiet conscience”? The answer to these questions is the answer to the question whether or not the Moral Ideal can be a worthy object of devotion, whether or not this society is a religious organization.