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CHANGING ONE'S RELIGIOUS MIND

One of the most liberal-minded men living once remarked that the older he grew the more difficult he found it to change his mind. Young people can hardly understand such a regret. Youth is afraid of changing its mind. Most young people like to give the impression that after they have made their minds up, they abide by their decisions. They want their consistency to be taken seriously.

There is, we grant, a great deal of satisfaction in this sort of feeling. No one likes to get the reputation of being vacillating. Furthermore, a person who is all the time changing his mind is pretty apt to get to a place where he has no mind to change. But there is another side to this. Supposing that after one's mind is made up, new evidence is brought in. What is to be done? Of course we know what some persons will do. They will close their eyes to the new evidence and cling stubbornly to opinions which they already hold. Such an attitude of mind is certainly not scientific. Indeed it is not honest.

Fortunately there are other persons who subject new evidence to examination. If it is shown to be trustworthy, an older opinion is modified or even abandoned. Such action is the part of honesty and loyalty to reality.

Several years ago when the first sensational discoveries were being published regarding radium, a physicist was asked what he supposed scientists would do with their theories of matter. He paused a moment, evidently recalling the great struggle with which these theories had been formed, and then bravely replied: "I suppose we shall have to revise our theories of matter." That is a true scientific attitude—which after all is only another word for honesty.

NEED A CHRISTIAN BE RELIGIOUS?

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Is the spiritual part of Christianity essential to the man who is in other respects a good man? In addition to Christian morals must a man have the Christian religion also, in order to be complete? The chief reason why so many people believe that that question must be answered in the negative, and that a man can be "just as good" without the religious part of Christianity as with it, is because they are not very clear in their own minds as to the meaning of that which they are trying to discuss. They do not understand just what is meant when the spiritual or purely religious aspect of Christianity is being emphasized.

In any average group of our contemporaries, if the question be asked, What do you understand by the phrase personal religion? there are sure to be some among them who answer in such a way as to show that in their minds there is no clear distinction between religion and morals. And if, having had their attention called to this confusion of ideas, they are asked to leave the moral contribution of Christianity quite at one side, and to deal exclusively with the spiritual contribution of Christianity, many of them are completely baffled. As to what the word "moral" means they have a fairly clear idea: it relates to character and conduct, to motives and purposes, to questions of right and wrong, to duties and temptations and virtues. Those matters can

be discussed with considerable confidence because they are all fairly concrete and definite; and even though there may arise in this moral realm puzzling questions, the solution of which may be difficult, yet it will at least be clear what sort of thing it is that is being talked about.

But these people having been asked to turn from the moral realm to the spiritual, and to face the question, What sort of reality is presented there? many of them have at once a feeling that there is something thin, vague, misty about that word "spiritual"; or, if they do attach some concrete meaning to the word, they interpret it as describing the sort of people who neglect the ordinary duties and decline the ordinary pleasures of life, in order to devote themselves to religion. If they hold the one view, they naturally conclude that as long as people are good morally, it does not make much difference whether they are religious or not; if the other, they of course believe that religion would actually be a detriment to morals.

They might reach a conclusion very different from either of these, if only they could be provided with a clear idea of what the Christian religion, as distinguished from Christian morals, really is. The purpose of the present paper is to make an attempt in that direction, and in doing so it is proposed to use a concrete method. Let us place before us an individual, as though an actual

person from among our own acquaintance, and try to decide whether we find in his life any elements which are plainly due to his being, not merely moral, but religious; also, just what those elements are and whether they are valuable or not.

We will assume, at the outset, not only that this man has the ordinary good qualities which belong to all well-behaved people, but also that his goodness is marked by the distinctive qualities of a Christian morality. He is not only upright and honorable and well-behaved; he is unselfish; he is generous, both in thought and in deed; he lives not merely for what he can get, but even more for what he can give; his very virtues are valued by him, not so much because of what they do for him, as because of what they enable him to do for others. In short, he is a genuine lover of his fellow-men. What more can personal religion, if he has it, add to this man's Christian morality?—that is our question.

We will also assume that the man we are now to examine is a Christian in the technical sense, a church member, with well-established religious habits; for that is the type of man from whom we can most readily learn what we want to know. Not but that there doubtless are truly religious men outside of the churches, but their religion is not so easy to get at, not so easy to estimate; and why go out of our way to make our problem any more difficult than it need be? Besides, the church-member sort of religion is precisely the sort about which doubt is most often expressed as to whether it really adds anything of value to a man's life. Let us, then,

select for our study a man with all the earmarks of the religious Christian. Our present problem could not be more squarely presented than in the form of an inquiry whether a man of this particular type has found in Christianity, treated as a religion, something which Christianity, treated as a code of morals, did not give him, and something without which he would be incomplete.

The first fact about this man that strikes our attention, as we begin to look for indications of his personal religion, is that he has certain definite religious beliefs. There are in his mind certain ideas about God, what God's relation has been to human life in the past, is now, will be in the future; also certain beliefs about human life itself, what its fundamental nature is, what the relation is of a man's spirit to his body and to the material universe, on the one hand, and to other spirits, human and divine, on the other.

Are these beliefs a true part of this man's personal religion? and, as far as they are distinctly Christian beliefs, are they a true part of the Christian religion which he has added to his Christian morality? Not necessarily. These beliefs, even the most Christian of them, are not in themselves an element of his personal religion. They may be merely part of his intellectual equipment. Just because the subject-matter of them is religious is no proof that they are part of the man's own personal religion. If his beliefs about God, for instance, are to him, as is the case with many people, merely intellectual conclusions, they do not provide him with personal religion, any more than a man's beliefs about the

facts of science do. There is nothing necessarily religious about just believing that certain facts are facts. In other words, if the man treats his beliefs merely as something outside of himself, which he looks at and approves, somewhat as he would look at a fine piece of architecture or a beautiful painting and admire it, then he must show us something more than these beliefs of his, in order to prove to us that he has personal religion. And if some critic, seeing his beliefs to be of this sort says, "These add nothing of any importance to this man's fine Christian morality," we cannot but admit that he is right.

But his beliefs may be to him something very much more than this mere acceptance of certain facts as true. They may be held by him with such intense conviction that they radically affect his whole life. Or to put this in another way, they may be to him, not merely a reality over against him, which his mind faces, as it were, and recognizes, but a reality which he has taken inside of him, where it has gotten behind his will and pushes it forcibly in certain definite directions. This means that his beliefs have become an actual motive power in his life.

And suppose that his beliefs are distinctively Christian beliefs. This is not always true, even in Christian church members; but assume that in the case of this man it is true. Then the motive power which those Christian beliefs provide will be of the sort that will nerve the man's will to the acceptance of distinctively Christian motives, and reinforce his will's energies in the pursuit of distinctively Christian ends, that is,

it will be a real help to him in practicing a Christian morality. Religious beliefs which actually do this are perfectly well known in human experience. There is nothing imaginary nor doubtful about them. Every one knows people in whom beliefs have just that energizing effect, people whose daily lives, in whole and in detail, are to a marked degree what their beliefs make them. It is the possession of beliefs of this sort that marks this man as a religious man. It will hardly be denied that if religion makes such a contribution to a human life, it has a very definite value.

A second feature in this man's life which we shall need to examine, in the pursuit of our present purpose is the use that he makes of his church relationship. We find that he regularly attends church services, that he takes active part in the church's practical enterprises of one sort and another, and that he, therefore, enters heartily into the Christian fellowship which the church offers.

Are not these facts indications that he has added personal religion to his good life, that spiritually as well as morally he is a Christian? No, that is not necessarily the case. It is possible that his relation to the church is largely the result of mere habit, a mere following of one of the lines of less resistance which have developed in his life. Or even if his relation to the church has a more positive basis than that, it may be due only to loyalty to the local church, or to the people connected with it, living and dead—not different in character, therefore, from any other loyalty based on sentiment. There is not really any element of personal religion in that, and if that were all that devotion to the

church meant in Christians, church membership would be poor evidence that personal religion is indispensable to the complete life.

But suppose, instead of this, that for this man his entering into the life of the church means connecting up his life to several well-defined channels by which power, similar to that already described in connection with his beliefs, may flow into an individual. That would be something worth looking into. Power, real power, new power, always commands the respectful attention of intelligent men. Suppose, then, that this man uses the church because it brings him into vital energizing touch with truth, with people, with God. With truth—the same truth that we have already seen becoming power in his life through his belief in it, better acquaintance with that same truth, reinforcing the belief in it which he already has, or acquaintance with new truth, leading to new belief; with the result in either case that added power is put back of his will. With people—his fellow-worshippers in the church and his fellow-workers there: he gets power from them, too, from their Christian comradeship, from their Christian example; when his own vital energies flag, he can keep going in his moral life, because he is tied up with this group of Christians, who constantly encourage one another, keep one another true to their common cause through fair days and foul. And with God—suppose this man tells us that the Christian church, its worship, its teaching, the opportunity which it offers for practice in the actual doing of God's will, has brought him into a close relation with God himself, and that his whole life has

been energized and re-energized by that continuing experience.

The cautious may say, "But is that really a fact? Is it true that through the church—attendance on its services, a share in its work—new power really comes to this man direct from God?" At least it seems to be evident that such power has come somehow into human life! For when we look back over the centuries we see how the total amount of it in the world has tremendously increased, and as we study individual lives, we see how in some of them this power has visibly and astonishingly increased with the years. Where does it come from? This man's conviction that it has come to him from God, at the particular times and in the particular ways which he describes in his account of what the church means to him, is at least worthy of serious consideration. And if he is right, even in part, if his personal religion, as lived in his relation to the church, has actually put new power back of his will in its performance of Christian tasks in a Christian way, this is certainly a fact that cannot be set aside as of no particular importance.

There is one thing more about this man, which we must take account of in our endeavor to learn from him what the spiritual element of Christianity is worth. We find that he is a man who maintains the practice of private devotions. He reads to himself the records of the religious experience of other men, especially in the Christian Bible, and he has the habit of prayer.

Does he by these facts show us that he is a religious Christian, and help us thereby to understand what a religious

Christian ought to be? One hesitates to say, No, for it would be a pity to discourage anyone who practices any sort of prayer and Bible-reading, however imperfect. And yet, to be frankly honest, No: in themselves the facts that a man says his prayers and reads the Bible may not really amount to much. Suppose that the Bible-reading is superficial and careless, so that the truth barely gets into the man's mind, to say nothing of getting into his heart. Suppose that the praying, though very regular perhaps, is only talking, only telling, only asking, not waiting, not listening, not the opening of the heart to God's influence, not the offering of the will to his direction; or even suppose that it is only a mechanical habit, so that it comes not from the heart at all, barely from the mind, chiefly from the lips. Exercises of that sort would have no personal religion in them, no, nor much value of any sort.

But this man whom we are studying cries out against such a travesty as that is of the true devotional life which he knows. What he says about it is this: that to him it is the very closest and surest approach to the unseen God; or rather that it is by this means that he has experienced the closest and surest approach of God to him. The reading and study of the Bible have meant to him, not merely the understanding by him of the Bible's words and thoughts, but an opening of his own mind, a quickening of his own powers of spiritual apprehension, which have given God himself a new chance to speak to him. And prayer—not only the prayer that is spoken, but also the prayer that is thought and felt, and not least the prayer

that is lived, an actual experiment in trust and loyalty, a watching for God through the hour or the day or the year spent in trying to do his will, a vital communion with God, which even the word "prayer" is too small a word to describe—that, above all else, has opened up a free way for God's power to come into this man's life.

Power, always power, that is what a true personal religion means: new power, more power, God's power added to man's. And for the religious Christian it is the power of the Christian God, the power that really and accurately and mightily helps a man to live his life in the Christian way. That surely is something much needed, and not least by the man who is honestly trying to do his duty in everyday life. He needs it most of all if he interprets his daily duty in accordance with that Christian standard which rises above the ordinary moral standards of the race as the snow-topped mountains rise above the foothills. And he needs power, not only for the hard task of living his own life according to the Christian standard, but also for the still harder task of gradually bringing the life of the world into conformity to that standard, of embodying that standard progressively in laws, customs, institutions, of triumphing over all the thousand obstacles and enemies that gather to prevent or overthrow it. Christian morals need spiritual power in order to make them effective, just as an electric light bulb needs to have the current turned on in order to give light.

Personal religion is nothing more nor less than the means of getting that power. And the personal religion of the

Christian is the means of getting it in the most available and effective form. Is the man complete who is without that power? How can the man who lacks it count himself complete in this great age of Christian responsibility and

Christian ambition? Will he excuse himself by saying "No; it is true I have not enough power, but I have some power"? Will a man in the age of electricity be satisfied to live by the light of kerosene and candles?

THE CHURCH OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND JACOB IN CHINA

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To those who have studied the development of the Jewish religion the term "The church of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" must seem an anomaly. Those worthy patriarchs had no "church." Their religious beliefs and forms of worship were primitive and elementary. To find the significance of the term, therefore, we should look, not to a period thousands of years before Christ, but to the present time; not to Palestine, but to the church being established by missionaries in China. There is danger that, instead of building the church of Christ, we may be building a church patterned after the early Hebrew patriarchs. How far this danger may be true of countries other than China the writer cannot state with authority. As certain conditions are true to missionary work in many lands, it may be that such a danger exists in other countries also. Here in China the problem is one worthy of serious attention.

Perhaps the main danger lies in the possibility that the Chinese Christians will accept the narratives in the first books of the Old Testament as an

adequate expression of the principles on which the Christian church should be built, and as of equal importance with the teachings of Jesus. Unless the Old Testament narratives are taught very carefully, so that they are rightly understood and correctly interpreted by the Chinese, they may cause the Chinese to study the teachings of Jesus with an entirely untrue perspective. His teachings may be discolored and distorted because of an entirely erroneous conception of the relative value of the stories of the Old Testament and of his teachings.

On the mission field the problems involved in teaching the Old Testament to the converts from non-Christian religions are far more serious than the problems involved in teaching the same material to people in a "Christian" land. For example, there is a greater danger in teaching the Chinese the narratives in the books of the Hexateuch than there is in teaching such narratives in America. In America the entire environment represents a plane of civilization thousands of years