

The Sources of Religious Insight. –

Gentleman of the Theological Club: –

It is no part of the task of the present paper exhaustively and accurately, to define religion. I address you as a company of theological students who have your own views regarding the nature and the truth of your religion. I do not know how far my personal opinions as to these topics accord with your own. But there is here no time to be thorough going as to the treatment of [2] the definition of religion, and I prefer at the outset merely to assume that, for us all, religion means some sort of genuine and valuable personal intercourse with a real and significant spiritual world, – a world such that to know it sustains us in our conflict with fortune, helps us to solve the problems of life, support us in our efforts to do right, and win us over to what is better than are own natural selves.

Assuming this as our common view of the general [3] nature of religion, my present paper is to be confined to the question: What are the sources of religious insight? The spirit in which I discuss this question is very naturally determined by the audience whom I am privileged to address. You, as theological students, are intending, in your professional work, to be religious teachers. That is, you intend, amongst other things, to aid those whom you teach to acquire insight into the realities and the truths of religion. This of course is not your whole task; for there is in religion, and in the work of the religious teacher, something [4] more than the word insight, more than the task of producing insight, can be said to name. Religious life, religious consolation, piety, morality in general, and various special forms of social serviceableness in particular, – all these are names for objects and interests which you will bear in mind in your calling. These you will try to promote to impart, to illustrate, to teach. But if there is any sort of

objective reality behind or beneath religion, part of your task will be to obtain and to teach religious insight. And by religious insight I mean of course any genuine knowledge of religiously important truths and realities. [5] And as I propose in this paper to discuss with you the question: What are the sources of religious insight? Whence comes our knowledge of religious truth, in case we have any such knowledge at all?

If we had asked this question of the religiously minded amongst our forefathers, we know that they would have answered, with many variations in detail, but with a general accord, that the principal source of religious insight is the revelation which God has chosen to make, has made and is making, – the revelation of himself and of his will, first through [6] his inspired Word, and then through the present working of his Spirit, in the church, or in the hearts of the faithful, or in manifestations of Divine Providence. Many of the variations in detail which would have appeared in the expression of this answer are well known to you. I need not attempt to develop them at any length. Whether God had revealed himself mainly through the inspired word, or had also continued to reveal himself anew through or in the church, how far and in what sense the work of the Divine Spirit was a continuing one, constantly expressing itself afresh in the hearts of the faithful, how far the [7] unconverted also were the subjects to whom God, at his own good pleasure revealed himself when he moved their hearts by his grace, whether and how the course of divine Providence in the affairs of men constituted a legible revelation, known to all who chose to study it, – well, these were in the former days, matters of important doctrinal difference. Their variety does not concern us now. Enough, – to such a view God himself was, through an essentially supernatural, a miraculous process, the creative source of religious insight. He revealed himself, or had revealed

himself to the foretime, when, how, and to whom he would, by making prophets and holy men speak as they were moved by his spirit [8] by uttering his word, by asserting his infallible authority. What was thus revealed, the rightly prepared subject of revelation faithfully and more or less passively accepted, all the certainly true expression of one who, being God, must know whereof he spoke, and must be incapable of deceit. However men might differ as to their theories of revelation such men as those whom I now have in mind generally agreed in holding the principal source of religious insight was just such revelation, – a revelation dependent wholly on God's own will.

Now, how, on the whole, do we modern men tend to regard these older views regarding the main source of religious insight? I think [9] that few of you, whatever you personally believe about this or that revelation, would prefer to define the chief source of religious insight in the traditional terms that I have just used. Most of you, if you still employ these terms at all, would very greatly modify their interpretation even in attempting to use them. For you would use them only in a certain context. You would interpret them in some way different from the way in which they were formerly used. Whatever place you still give to the concept of revelation in your own religious views, most of you are pretty clearly conscious of something that some of the forefathers also occasionally emphasized, but that for you is likely to be much more prominently present to consciousness than it was to most of the forefathers.

[10] To what I refer you all know. Let me briefly explain my meaning. Revelation is a very general word. If one tries to define it more exactly, one is forthwith met by the fact that revelation, as tradition conceived it, may be classified roughly, into two sorts: External revelation, and internal revelation. I am not attempting to be precise or technical

in my account of either of these types which traditional revelation was supposed to take. Let us contend ourselves by a bare indication. An external revelation would be an event of the sort that, in an extreme form, the story of the giving of the law at Mount Sinai would exemplify. In such a story of this extreme type of external revelation, God in one way or another shows his presence, first [11] by physical signs, secondly by words which express his will. He appears as the king of heaven may be expected to appear, surrounded with wonders and displaying overwhelming power. He says what he chooses. Nobody who stands in his presence doubts that it is God who speaks. The evidence is momentarily unquestionable. The authority of the revelation is, at least for that moment, irresistible. Such is the event reported in the legend of Sinai.

The tradition in question is I have said an extreme instance of the external type of revelation. Later theology has always been obliged to interpret the reported events so as to make them agree with far more spiritual accounts of the doctrine of nature than the original narrators of the tale had in mind. The giving of the law at Sinai appears when thus interpreted, even by the most literal believer in tradition, as more or less of an accommodation to the senses and the beliefs of crude minds. The God who in fact inhabits [12] eternity and whom a later religious insight views as unchanging and transcendent and omnipresent and bodiless, could not quite literally have done what the original tradition conceived him as doing. This reported scene at Sinai was, for such later theology, rather a signal apparition than a completely real revelation. It appeared to the people as if God had a bodily presence behind the clouds and thunders of Sinai. It was as if he spoke with a physical voice. Thus he accommodated himself to the still crude mind of Israel. So later thinkers still quite orthodox in their intent, often said; and hereby of

course they admitted what today is clear to most of us, viz., that, whatever the true source of religious insight is, the thunders of Sinai, [–] even if they actually occurred before us [–] could now hardly constitute what a higher religious consciousness would regard as any thoroughly satisfactory revelation. Such events, were they real, could shake or terrify us. They could no longer [13] meet any of our deepest religious needs.

More frequent and important, in the old traditions is another class of supposed external revelations. In such cases God's will is manifested through some messengers, – an angel, or a prophet, or a man who is inspired to write a sacred book. In case of such supposed revelations, one has more or less consciousness that in order to make sure that the revelation is what it purports to be, there must be some sort of evidence furnished to show that the message is from God. Such evidence often consists, according to tradition, of well known sorts of signs and wonders, which are supposed to prove that the messengers who reports God's will is indeed in touch with the divine. Whoever is the bearer of the revelations has supernormal [14] powers. Either he has visions and hears voices that to the faithful to be of supernatural importance, or else, he works nil. He heals the sick, he raises the dead, he foretells the future. In brief, he comes with signs and wonders. All this proves to the believer that God is with him. And accordingly, his message is from God, as they hold, must be true. Through the messenger there thus comes to men a new source of supposed religious insight.

I need not further illustrate such type of external revelation. It is enough here to repeat what our forefathers already knew, viz., that no such external revelation could possibly be a sufficient source of genuine insight unless the supposed external revelation was addressed to one already possessed of the right sort of faith, or at least to one rightly

prepared to have such faith awakened in him. If the hearts of men [15] were sufficiently hardened, God's messengers were not believed. As for sign's and portends, – it was admitted that false gods or devils might stimulate them. Only the truly devout could have the inner enlightenment that enabled them to discern the true prophets from the false. The wise in heart, they and they alone could know for certain what the marks of a genuine external revelation from God were.

All this, I say, even the forefathers often admitted. That they still made so much of the traditions of miraculous external revelations was partly due to the fact that they had not become clear as to where their own deepest religious interests lay. They therefore, unless they were them- [16] selves mystics, seldom formulated in a clear way the thought which is, I suppose familiar to most of you, – the thought that an external revelation could be, at best, only a stimulus to bring to pass an internal revelation. That is, – otherwise worded, – it would be impossible for anybody to know that he heard God's voice speaking to him, or that this or that vision, prophet, wonder-worker, or document, was an expression of the divine will, unless the one who was to be thus externally instructed had already learned, apart from external revelation, what are the marks, the distinguishing features, the unmistakable signs, whereby God, and no other being manifests himself. Whoever already knew this, would have been [17] already enlightened before the external revelation came. His touch with the divine would therefore already have occurred in some internal fashion. Otherwise, Sinai would thunder and the prophet speak, or one would rise from the dead to tell the divine truth, – in vain.

Tradition used to recognize this, – imperfectly I think, – in laying stress upon the need of the right sort of faith as an inner prerequisite to our being able to profit by any

external revelation. Hume's cynical comment at the close of his Essay on Miracles gets its dry humor from its formal identity with a perfectly true and deep principle regarding the nature of religious insight. In order that one should really be able to [18] learn through a miraculous external revelation the very truth about the divine will, – an internal miracle must already have been performed, – the miracle whatever it is whereby the finite being should be prepared to recognize God when the thus prepared believer came in contact with God's expression of his own mind.

How in fact should I know the true God from another one, in case various supernatural beings chanced to be pleased to work wonders to influence my mind? A being, if there were such, who actually worked wonders vast enough and often enough repeated, could indeed readily convince us that he was of superhuman might, and of superhuman wisdom, perhaps also of benevolent intentions. But would [19] such a being thereby prove himself to be the one true God? How could we pretend to judge? He might be, for all that his wonders proved, – he might be however wise, still fallible, and might even suppose himself to be the only god when he was merely a kind of Faustean Erdgeist, august, but finite, and subject to possible dethronement by other gods. Or he might think it best to mislead us as to his own limitations. If his world of mystery were known to us only through his account of it, how could we test such surmises? How could we judge his rights to make assertions about his powers and his world? How could we pretend to fathom his plans? – Suppose that we began to come into some sort of intercourse with the inhabitants of Mars. Suppose that hereupon they ere long displayed prophetic and supernatural powers, and began to give us messages re- [20] garding the miracles that their supposed god had wrought for them, or that they could in his name work for us.

Suppose that the new miraculous powers actually began to appear in our world, and that the Martians hereupon undertook a sort of wireless missionary propoganda, revealing to us: their God and his doings. Suppose that hereupon that their theology proved to be wholly counter to ours. Well, what external evidences could of themselves decide whose God was the real one?

You know the only possible answer to these questions, in case any source of religious insight whatever is to be recognized as genuine. The witness of the spirit must be, at least in its deepest essence, an internal [21] witness. Religious insight cannot exist unless the spirit itself bears internal witness, – unless something, – call it faith, or the inner workings of divine grace, or reason, or intuition, or what you will has first adapted us to know religious truth when we meet it, to recall the true sound of the divine voice when and if we ever externally hear it. Our religious insight, if indeed we ever are to get any such insight, must, in some measure meet the Platonic requirement. Our knowledge of such truths must, namely, be a sort of reminiscence, – an inner memory of our lost home which arises within the spirit, and which tells us what signs and words and deeds are really worthy to be viewed as expressions of the divine truth regarding that home.

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