

CT 181

THE  
IDEAL OF RELIGION.

A Lecture

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PUBLISHED BY THOMAS SCOTT,

11 THE TERRACE, FARQUHAR ROAD, UPPER NORWOOD,  
LONDON, S.E.

1876.

*Price Threepence.\**

LONDON:  
PRINTED BY C. W. REYNELL, LITTLE PULTENEY STREET,  
HAYMARKET.

## THE IDEAL OF RELIGION.

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THE ideal of religion is the most permanent and, at the same time, the most variable characteristic of religion. It is always present. It is never intellectually long the same. It is ever to be seen, as Israel of old saw the sacred watch-fire upborne by its advancing vanguard, a pillar of cloud by day, a beacon of flame by night, guiding humanity upon its way; ever moving forward, far in front of the mixed multitude; ever exceeding the most favourable image of man's actual state; and yet, the observant eye is compelled to notice that this perfectly natural and constant phenomenon of our long human pilgrimage is affected by the material with which the perpetual altar-fire is fed; by the state of the intellectual atmosphere through which it is borne; by the general characteristics of the day or hour in which we regard it. In still air the moving cloud may rise directly up and away from earth into the rare ethereal blue of heaven. But anon, when adverse winds prevail, and the skies are dark and lowering, when our human exigency is severe, it shall seem to be driven violently this way and that, to be utterly dissipated in the upper altitude, to come quite down from the high aerial regions, and be only a true, flame-like brightness upon our immediate earthly duties.

Sufficient illustrations of this constancy and of this variability of the religious ideal will suggest themselves along that single line of religious development with which we are by our common education the most familiar,—I mean that line with the Chaldean patriarch, Abraham, at one end, and ourselves at the other. Two or three instances of the changed aspect

which changing times and circumstances evolved are all that need be cited. In Abraham, that powerful-minded chieftain himself, going forth in thought beyond the known objects of worship to the great Unknown Object, rising above the visible deities to the vaster Invisible Deity, lifting his trust beyond the constellations to One who made them so bright and strong, we have an ideal at once simple and sublime. Just how it disciplined the life and modified the habits of so successful a conqueror is to us obscure. It doubtless delivered him and his retinue from many rites belonging to the Syrian idolatry in that nomadic time. We only know that it impressed itself profoundly on that Semitic race as it became more capable of supersensuous thought. But in the Mosaic age, when the fierce tribes which were no people were striving to become a people, this fundamental conception of God, and of supreme reverence for Him, has assumed additional features. A peculiar notion of partnership is prominent. He is the Hebrew's God; the Hebrews are his people. The Mightiest desires to make Himself a nation. The tribes have entered into covenant with Him to become that nation. The ideal is still that of the great invisible Power, but toned by this conception of His especial interest in a fierce struggle into national existence, and disciplining this people to social strength and coherency. For nothing else does He care, or they care. For the great and powerful civilizations of the time, for the millions of other better-cultured men, this Hebrew ideal assumes that God has none other than intense and hostile feelings. In Christ, however, all this is changed. The fundamental thought remains, but instead of Jehovah, the mighty man of war, the Supreme is now perfect in the beauty of the best and tenderest character. Wrath has given way to love. National limit has vanished. He has only love toward them that hate Him. He is merciful toward the unmerciful, just toward the

unjust. Yet you know, along these Christian centuries, how the ideal has wavered, as in Christ's name it has been upborne; how it has risen into visions of new Jerusalems, into hierarchies marching in Roman order and Pagan pomp along the world to come, into orthodox assemblies which should never break up, and Sabbaths which should never end; or how it has come down again, in sober and staid Quaker or Unitarian common sense, into the yea and nay of the moralities of our earthly life. It has ever varied, ever been present, from Abraham, and from before Abraham, through Moses, through Christ, even unto us. Man projects it as he goes. To-day we see its guidance flaming still. What appearance has it now? What are the mental and moral aspects of the religious ideal rising above the day and hour that now is, and far surpassing the actual religious advance of the present? What are the main, the great, the influential considerations which direct the march of modern civilization religiously? With what is our sacred watch-fire fed? Whither does it seem to lead? How, through the intellectual atmosphere of the age, moves the constant vanguard signal that leads the mighty human host?

I. In regard to doctrine, which is a constituent in every ideal of religion, our time is by no means so deficient as is commonly assumed. The religious thought of the age is as clear and firm, I think, as that of any former age, only it is less hard in its outlines, less harsh in its dogmatic annunciations of itself, and must be sought rather as pervasive ideas common to enlightened people than as an inflexibly articulated creed. Those who doubt this can easily verify it, either by attempting to revive old-time religious doctrines with anything like their former effectiveness, or by striving to give currency to new religious beliefs, which, however acceptable to the feelings, yet do violence to certain intellectual conclusions, wide-spread now among the people. The

thoroughness of the failure in either case will sufficiently attest the coherency of the intellectual or doctrinal fabric of our age.

One of these wide-spread ideas is that which really identifies God and Nature. The great object of reverence is not outside nature, above nature, apart from nature, but is nature, its very power, procedure, life. Nothing is more noticeable in the writings of our most advanced yet religious men than the utter elimination of the supernatural element. To the once powerful domain of supernaturalism they give not the slightest consideration. For them it does not exist. If they allude to it, it is as to an extinct hypothesis. Nature includes all. She is everywhere sufficient unto herself, not because they have deprived her of any of the attributes of God, but because all that they know about any attribute of God she has revealed. Her constant procedure has forced upon human attention the all of revelation. When they perceive what her invariable order implies in regard to human conduct, a truth has been revealed. And this, broadly diffused, has become a characteristic of the religious thought of our age. With us all, it is the supernatural claim which does violence to our habits, and our best habits, of thought. If one wishes to stir a sentiment of incredulity, he has but to affirm of anything, no matter what, that its origin, its procedure, or a single phenomenon in that procedure, is supernatural. We take his measure at once. Either his education has been imperfect or he pretends. Nature alone stretches beyond our conception of nature. We recognise no upper story as the habitation of a super-nature. There is indeed a super in the natural, though we know of no super as above the natural. The natural order is the eternal, universal, all-determining one.

In this intellectual aspect the ideal of the present differs sharply from that of the religious past. Then supernatural theology alone seemed solid,

beside which natural theology walked like a thin and impalpable shadow. Then the great object of reverence was conceived as striving to effect one thing, while all the forces of nature were doing their utmost to effect another. Religion scorned a natural origin, was sure she should be good for nothing if she should yield her supernatural foundations. Whatever authority she had, whatever truth she proclaimed, whatever right she enjoined, came from a region outside the natural order of the universe, and had been given by special stroke and intervention of miracle. While now, the very possibility of maintaining any of these things has utterly passed from the doctrinal possibilities of the time.

Another characteristic of this part of the doctrinal fabric of the present is a diffidence in all affirmations of deity. In this respect the age of reason walks more humbly than the ages of faith. Men shrink from sharply outlined definitions concerning what God is and what God is not. To men of other days our thoughts of the object of worship would seem exceedingly vague. Their minds were full of definitely graven images of Him. They dogmatised concerning His purposes. Theologically speaking, they knew all about them. Our knowledge is not less than theirs but vaster, and we cannot know all about them. The world has grown diviner, the Great Power is better understood from the things that are made; and yet we are less able to utter the unutterable greatness of its might, to fathom the unfathomable depths of its mystery. The Life and Law of all outward things, and of all human things within, is more truly revealed to the thoughtful mind of our day than ever before; and it is just this which makes it so next to impossible to express the revelation in definite forms of speech. Each earnest thinker says to his brother thinker concerning God—

“ Draw if thou canst the mystic line  
Severing rightly His from thine.”

So that this theological vagueness, sometimes the reproach of the age, is the result of finding the whole world so full of His eternalness, the facts of the natural order so much diviner than the fables of supernaturalism. Now that the spirit of the Ever-living Life rolls through all things, we dare not give it the likeness of anything less than the incomprehensible all of being, dare not belittle it to some convenient figure, image, or limit. And this very simple, flexible, and reverently diffident attitude of our theology, before the supreme object of its thought, this beholding of Him as

“The Source divine and Life of all,  
The Fount of Being’s wondrous sea,—

is a doctrinal characteristic of the religious ideal of our age.

Another wide-spread tenet or doctrinal characteristic of religion in our time is that which arises from the perception of the social solidarity of our human life. Up to our century, as too largely in it, the social affair has been regarded as anything else than moral and religious. Politics have been the arena for might, for clever craftiness in diplomacy, for compacts and competitions which no religiously or honestly educated conscience could sanction. It was granted that Cæsar had a right to his natural way; just as God and the religious had their right to a supernatural way. But now the social becomes the religious affair. Politics are invaded by conscience and the right. Cæsar’s way is not natural, and nature disowns it, if it be only the march of selfish and personal power. There is no supernatural way any longer, either for God or for the religious among the sons of men; but the natural way for the conduct of all human affairs is God’s, and is religion’s. The natural order of things has brought it home to our dull perceptions at length, that the function of religion is not merely to save here and there an individual, to quiet his conscience, to give him inward



peace, and fit him to go out of this world; but rather to save people from their sins and consequent miseries, to bring the general conscience up to the level of the best, and to fit men to live together more as they should in this world. The natural laws of our common life teach us that man the individual "is at peace within only when he is in harmonious union with his fellows." The object of all reverence is revealed in the solid human affairs of men as truly as in the processes of nature external to man. The Deity is incarnate in us, as well as embodied in the universe around.

Thus the religious ideal of the present has for the satisfaction of the intellect an eternal and real Power embodied in the actual universe, to balance its loss of a power shaped by the caprice or the exigency of man's once less disciplined imagination; and also a solid scientific reason why it should subordinate the individual into a religious harmony with the social instinct, to balance any appearance of loss of supernatural command to love our neighbour or keep the golden rule.

2. But another constituent of every ideal of religion is that which satisfies the feelings. How does this scientific basis of doctrine, which gives intellectual consistency to the thought of our time, meet our need of moral emotions? How does it stir the sentiment of love and worship?

Now men can only love what they see to be lovable, can only worship what they perceive has worthiness, can only give moral submission to what is morally perfect. And I notice that the men of our time who are the best representatives of its intellectual drift, and are at the same time men of deeply religious natures, are finding satisfaction for their need of worship in two different ways. One class, and the one with which at present I have the most sympathy, feels that the Spirit which Nature reveals to us is not only infinitely wiser than man is,

but infinitely better than man's thought of the best. The natural order embodies Perfection, Righteousness, Goodness infinite. Not that there are not plenty of particular facts which, if exclusively insisted on or held as finalities, do present a contrary aspect; but these men believe that it is rather their failure, their necessary failure, to see all the relations of these adverse phenomena to the perfect order, rather than an absolute moral blemish in that order itself, which gives rise to the appearances which, equally with other men, they see. To them there are not only traces of moral goodness upon the face of creation, but the creation to them is so good that, even where they cannot explain or comprehend, they trust its thorough goodness. They look out into the great universe, or back along the march of human history, and the general impression which comes to them, despite any adverse sound, is that of perfect wisdom, perfect love; a power which stirs the heart's emotions by its moral beauty, by the perfection of its quality and attributes. They are satisfied when looking up to the Power Supreme, and say

"Thy depth would every heart appal  
That saw not love supreme in Thee."

The other class equally religious, but more oppressed by appearances of evil in outward things, and in imperfect men, and inclining more to the idea of a dualism in nature, satisfies its need of worship by contemplating that new order of goodness, which it thinks to be a purely human creation. The goodness revealed by humanity is adorable and authoritative to it. The tender sympathies that bind heart to heart, the noble fellowship of generous souls, the beautiful bonds of social life knitting each to all, and enriching all by each; the highest excellence of character, which the experience of men, and their own exercise in goodness has disclosed, as a human possibility, awaken the emotions of moral love, of heart-felt worship, of aspiration, in these. They are not sure

that the nature of material things, the nature of brutes, the nature of wild and savage men, is either admirable or divine; but they are sure that there is a power in humanity whose quality is worthy of an unfaltering and undivided heart.

So that both these classes of modern men, those who adore the goodness revealed in the universe, and those who love the goodness manifest in humanity, lose not the moral benefit, the spiritual rapture of worship. They have not lost, they cannot lose a single moral distinction. They remain as noble as the noblest, as true as the truest, as brave for righteousness as the bravest. Their spiritual hunger is fed by what is divinest and best. They worship in spirit, but not without reference to their discernments of truth.

Worship based upon such conceptions of the natural order of the universe, or of the natural order of humanity, and of our religious relations to it, takes a different method and language from that which arose when religion had as the aim of its worship, to please or to propitiate a supernatural and distant deity. We find, accordingly, the worship of our time more in the attitude of a contrast, than in that of conformity to that of the great religious ages gone. It is more a matter of hearts, less a matter of garments. It is better expressed in humane acts, than ecclesiastical ceremonies. It is not a pomp but a prayer. It finds no pride in gorgeous processions, but it feels religious joy in doing whatever will truly benefit the least of these our brethren. It leads us to be more studious to do what is just and right, than to barter for exemption from spiritual consequences. Thus the ideal of worship in our time is less and less that of a traditional church performance, and more and more a quickening desire to put into the actions of our lives a true spiritual influence.

3. Besides the element of doctrine and the element of worship, the first a satisfaction to the thought of

man, and the second a satisfaction to his moral sentiment, there enters into every ideal of religion another constituent, that of discipline or government, the appropriate method of securing for the doctrine and the worship a practical efficiency in real life. How does the ideal of our time propose to realise itself, and attain the control of human conduct ?

You are all familiar with the idea of government under the reign of supernatural religion. Its method was appropriately despotic. The religious discipline for more than a millennium has been the military idea of discipline, inherited from the Roman Empire.

Uniformity of thought, uniformity of worship, uniformity of conduct, all to be secured by the word of external command. Universal obedience to outward authority. The whole discipline imposed from without. God residing outside the natural universe, and only thundering in at the door of miracle a commandment now and then ; and the conscience of humanity resident at Rome, or at some sectarian head-quarters. This is the notion of religious government in the vanishing ideal of the centuries gone.

Quite different is the way by which religion now proposes to gain ascendancy over human conduct. Our age admits, as frankly as it is possible to admit, that it is no matter what men believe as religious doctrine, no matter what they worship as objective goodness, if neither thought nor feeling, or both combined, are able to bring their lives into spiritual obedience, their actions into moral order and subjection. We should have no religious ideal if we had not our way of giving practical efficiency to what we know to be true, what we feel to be supremely beautiful and good. We have that way, and it is this—the development of morality from within, the enthronement of the divinest voice in the individual conscience, the throwing moral responsibility upon every man, the education of each person in the conviction that he will reap as he sows, the

education of each person in the perception that he can neither sow nor reap for himself alone, that he is born not only to keep and guard himself, but to keep and guard a common trust. The seat of authority is the soul commanding itself into harmony with its own nature, and the nature of its relations to other souls. The conscience of humanity is no longer resident at Rome, or in any sect, or in any supernatural book, but in human beings who are now appealing from all the ends of the earth, to have it so educated and strengthened, that they may rightly use it. For it has at last been made plain to us, by many sad deeds and bitter religious memories, that to be of real benefit our deeds do not merely need the spur of conscience, but of conscience trained into accord with scientific realities. So that the religious government of the world in our modern ideal is its government by a morality lodged in each separate conscience, a morality capable of being developed to a power, and educated to a fineness and sureness, and directness of action, of which the present is slow to dream. Religion now proposes to gain the ascendancy by putting each man in possession of himself, by teaching him to see the conditions under which he must live if he would live satisfactorily, by appealing to his reason, by putting him under his own spiritual control, leading him to be himself a priest and king, that the time may hasten when one man shall no longer say to another, "Know the Eternal, for all shall know Him from the least unto the greatest." The religion of our time has adopted the political doctrine of our time—that they are best governed who are least governed, or rather who have become capable of governing themselves. It would no longer enslave or repress men, but give them liberty, and put all their faculties to some appropriate and useful service.

4. If now it be asked, what are the sanctions of this ideal of religion? we shall find they differ as widely from the sanctions of the religious past as

does the ideal itself. We enforce our doctrine, not by reading a few verses from a literature, but by reading as largely and carefully as we can from the immutable order of the actual creation. We appeal from all books to the universe. We sustain ourselves against the most powerful ecclesiasticisms by trusting to the more disinterested disclosures of science. We have discovered that "Nature is that word of God which theology really means." To us Nature is revelation, and the truth-loving spirit its best interpreter. Does Nature sustain this belief? In our answer to that question we find the sanction for our doctrine, or fail to find it. We find our doctrinal sanction in our knowledge, and not in our superstition. We enforce our truth by pointing to what is known, seen, scientifically sure. We say to the man who asks what he shall believe: believe whatever can be shown to be true, and believe nothing else at your peril!

We commend our worship by the same natural sanction. Is goodness of real worth? Then desire it. Is virtue truly excellent? Then pursue it. Are justness, and trustworthiness, and tenderness admirable in actual human character? Then strive for these qualities in secret, and the result shall bless you and others openly. Is uprightness of affection essential to integrity of conduct? Set then your heart upon it. These are our incentives to worship. Once men were incited by fear. They dreaded the descent of supernatural and arbitrarily imposed consequences if they did not pay a certain homage to spiritual excellence. If any dread enters into our worship, it is the dread of not being spiritually excellent, the fear of missing what we know to be the highest good and beauty of living. We fear the natural, the inevitable, consequence of not attaining true worthiness ourselves. Yet we are scarcely sensible of an enforced worship. We worship goodness, because it wins our homage, because it is supremely worthy. If a hateful God be preached,

we cannot worship him, If He can torture us for not admiring His vengeance, His vindictiveness, and His injustice—for not bowing down and acknowledging these qualities to be just and right—then to torture we must go. We could not bring ourselves to worship such a God, though He existed. If there are signs of evil, of wrong, of positive badness in Nature, as some claim, it is not these we worship. Only the Supremely Good—only the Pure and Holy stir our moral emotions, and quicken the affections of our hearts. The natural beauty of holiness, this enlists our homage. Every vision of it is a beatitude.

We trust to the religious discipline which shall come by the control of every man over his own spirit, to the end of his own and the common good; for experience teaches us that this alone can be religious government. The drill imposed by an external organization may have its benefits. But it may also bring the opposite of benefit. The authoritative commands may be fulfilled to the letter, while all the time the spirit of religion, the worship of goodness, the acknowledgment of truth may be dying out among men. But when men are trained to see with their own eyes, and feel with their own hearts, and fulfil the law of love toward their neighbour, out of their own spontaneous will, then humanity feels religious vitality all through and through. Then, not till then, will the reign of religion be established, and effect as naturally as the bird sings, or the sun shines, its perfect work amid the great communities of men.

Thus I have sketched, in imperfect outline, what appear to me to be the aspects of the religious ideal of our time. It is thus that reverent thought and endeavour are shaping the religious direction of the age. It is not the vision of any sect. It is the broad and comprehensive conception which enters everywhere. It struggles with, and bursts, the narrowness of every sect. It springs from a deeper and broader comprehension of the Eternal order, in which man

moves—and lives—and has his being. It develops naturally with the natural development of humanity. It far exceeds the actual religious attainments of the present; yet more and more shall we behold it guiding the religious, whether individuals, or churches, or nations, on their way.

“ One holy Church of God appears  
Through every age and race,  
Unwasted by the lapse of years,  
Unchanged by changing place.

“ From oldest time, on farthest shores  
Beneath the pine or palm,  
One Unseen Presence she adores  
With silence or with psalm.

“ Her priests are all God’s faithful sons  
To serve the world raised up;  
The pure in heart her baptized ones,  
Love her communion cup.

“ The truth is her prophetic gift,  
The soul her sacred page,  
And feet on mercy’s errands swift  
Do make her pilgrimage.

“ O living Church! Thine errand speed;  
Fulfil thy task sublime;  
With bread of life earth’s hunger feed;  
Redeem the evil time.”

