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## RELIGION AND MORALITY<sup>1</sup>

Rom. i. 18.

“For the wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men . . . .”

I PROPOSE to call your attention to but two words in the text, namely the words “ungodliness” and “unrighteousness”. And in particular, we shall be interested in the order in which the two words appear and the relationship between them. To use more modern terms, we are invited by these two words in our text and the order in which they appear, to consider the relationship between religion and morality. Here again we are face to face with a matter that has occupied much attention during the past hundred years. Here also we are considering what can be termed another of the fundamental fallacies with respect to life which are largely responsible for the present state of affairs in the world. And, precisely as we found to be the case in connection with the matter of comparative religion and man’s approach to God, here again we find that during the past century there has been that same reversal of the condition which prevailed prior to that.

It is truly amazing and astonishing to note how this second half of the first chapter of the epistle to the Romans sums up so perfectly the modern situation. Had it been written specially and specifically for our day it could not have been more perfect or more complete. Each of the main trends in the thought and reasoning of the majority of people is considered carefully and traced to its ultimate consequences.

The key to the understanding of the whole situation is in the realisation of the fact that man by nature is inimical to God, and does his utmost to get rid of God and what he regards as the incubus of revealed religion. Man, rebelling against God as He has revealed Himself and from the kind of life that God dictates, proceeds to make for himself new gods and new religions and to elaborate a new way of life and of salvation.

<sup>1</sup>The second of a series of addresses delivered at the Free Church College, Edinburgh, in March, 1941.

Here, in this special matter that we propose to consider together, we have a perfect example and illustration of that tendency.

Until about a hundred years ago it was true to say of the vast majority of the people of this country that religion came first and that morality and ethics followed. In other words all their thinking about the good life, the kind of life that should be lived, was based upon their religion and their understanding of the teaching of the Bible. "The fear of God" was the controlling motive; it was, to use the language of the Old Testament, the beginning of their wisdom. This was so, of course, because it was as the result of the various religious revivals and movements that the people had been awakened to a realisation of the utter sinfulness and depravity of their lives. As the result of becoming religious they had seen the importance of right living. That was the position.

But then came the great change. At first it was not an open denial of God, but a change and a reversal in the emphasis which was placed on these two matters. More and more, interest became fixed upon ethics, and the emphasis was placed increasingly on morality at the expense of religion. God was not denied, but was relegated increasingly to the position of a mere background to life. All this was done on the plea and the pretext that formerly too much emphasis had been placed upon the personal and experiential aspect of religion, and that the ethical and social aspects had not been emphasised sufficiently. But increasingly the position developed into one in which it was stated quite openly and unashamedly, that really nothing mattered but morality and conduct. Religion was seriously discounted, and it was even stated blatantly that nothing mattered save that one should live the good life and do one's best. Everything that stressed the miraculous intervention of God in life, and for man's salvation, was queried and then denied; everything that emphasised the vital link between God and man was minimised until it became almost non-existent. Creeds and confessions of faith, the sacraments, and even attendance at all in a place of worship, were all regarded as expedients which had served a useful purpose in the past while men were ignorant, and had to be more or less frightened into living the good life. They were now no longer necessary. Jesus of Nazareth, far from being the unique Son of God

Who had come on earth in order to prepare a miraculous way of salvation for men, was but the greatest moral teacher and exemplar of all time—simply greater than all others, not essentially different. The religious motive and the religious background to the good life practically disappeared altogether, and their place was taken by education and a belief in the inevitably good effect of acts of social amelioration. With an air of great patronage and condescension we were told that the magic and the rites and the taboos of religion had been more or less necessary in the past, but that now man, in his intelligent and intellectual modern condition, had no need of such things. Indeed they had become insulting. Nothing was necessary save that man should be shown what was good and given instruction concerning it.

Has not that been the popular teaching? The supreme thing has been to live the good life, to be moral. The majority have ceased to attend a place of worship at all, and (alas!) many who do attend do so, not because they believe it to be essential and vital, but rather out of habit or because they believe vaguely that it is somehow the right thing to do. Religion far from being the mainspring and source of all ideas concerning life and how it should be lived, has become a mere appendage even in the case of many who still adhere to it. Righteousness, or morality, has been exalted to the supreme position, and little is heard of godliness. Like the Pharisees of old there have been many amongst us who were shocked and scandalised by certain acts of unrighteousness, but who failed to realise that their own self-righteousness denoted an ungodliness which was infinitely more reprehensible in the eyes of God. The order has been reversed, morality has taken precedence over religion, unrighteousness is regarded as a more heinous crime than ungodliness.

But now we must come to the vital question. What has been the result of all this? To what consequences has it led? The answer is to be found in the present state of the world. We were told that man could be trained not to sin. He could be educated into seeing the folly of war. And here we are in the midst of a war. But apart from the war and prior to it, this teaching had led to the terrible moral muddle that characterised the life of the people of this country and most other countries. The very term "moral" has been evacuated almost

entirely of any meaning, and the sins of the past have become "the thing to do" of the present. No one, surely, can deny the statement that, morally and intellectually, the masses of the people have sunk to a lower level than at any time during the past two hundred years, in fact since the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century.

Now my whole case is that that, according to the Bible, is something which is quite inevitable, something which follows as the night the day. Once the relative positions of religion and morality are reversed from that which we find in our text, the inevitable result is what we find stated in such clear and terrible terms in the remainder of this chapter. Religion must precede morality if morality itself is to survive. Godliness is essential to ethics. Nothing but a belief in God and a desire to glorify Him, based upon our realisation of our utter dependence upon Him and our acceptance of His way of life and salvation in Jesus Christ His Son, can ever lead to a good society. This is not merely a dogmatic statement. It can be proved and demonstrated repeatedly in the history of mankind. As St. Paul reminds us here, it is the essential story of mankind. Observe it in the story of the Children of Israel in the Old Testament. See it again in the history of Greece and Rome. They had exalted moral ideas and fine ethical systems and conceptions of law and justice, but the ultimate downfall of both is to be traced finally to moral degeneracy. And then consider it in the history of this country. Religion and spiritual revival have always led to moral and intellectual awakening and a desire to produce a better society. And conversely, ungodliness has always led to unrighteousness. A slackening in spiritual zeal and fervour, even though the zeal and fervour be transferred to a desire to improve the state of society, has always eventuated ultimately in both moral and intellectual decline. The great periods in the history of this country in every sphere are the Elizabethan, the Puritan and the Victorian. Each followed a striking religious revival. But as religion was allowed to sink into the background, and even into oblivion, and men thought that they could live by morality alone, degeneration set in rapidly. Emil Bruner has said that this is so definite as to be capable of statement as a law of life in which there are distinct steps and stages. He puts it thus : "The feeling for the personal and the human which is the fruit of faith

may outlive for a time the death of the roots from which it has grown, but this cannot last very long. As a rule the decay of religion works out in the second generation as moral rigidity, and in the third generation as the breakdown of all morality. Humanity without religion has never been a historical force capable of resistance. Even to-day, severance from the Christian faith, whenever it has been of some duration, works out in the dehumanization of all human conditions. 'The wine of life has been poured out'; the dregs alone remain."

Here then is a fundamental principle which we must grasp firmly before we begin to organise a new state of society and a new world. Religion, a true belief in God in Jesus Christ, is fundamental, vital, essential. Any attempt to organise society without that basis is doomed to failure even as it always has been in the past. The pragmatic test as we have just seen demonstrates that abundantly. But we are not left merely in the world of pragmatism. A study of the Bible, indeed a study of man himself in the light of the Bible, furnishes us with many reasons which explain why it must inevitably be the case that to trust to morality alone without religion, or to place morality before religion, leads only to eventual disaster. We must consider some of these reasons.

## I

First of all we note that to do so is *an insult to God*. We must start with this because here we have the real explanation of all that follows. But even apart from that we must start with this because it is absolute. And we must be very careful always to draw that distinction. Before we begin to think about ourselves and the results in ourselves, before we begin to consider the good of society or anything else, we must start with God and we must start by worshipping God. If we advocate godliness simply because it leads to the true morality, if we commend religion because it does lead to the best state of society, then we are again reversing the order actually and insulting God. God must never be regarded as a means to an end; and religion is not to be commended primarily because of certain benefits which follow its practice. And yet one hears statements not at all infrequently which give the impression that religion and the Bible are to be valued solely in terms

of England's greatness. That is why the charge of national hypocrisy is so frequently levelled against us by other nations. We tend to believe, and perhaps rightly, that we have been blessed in the past because we have been religious. But when we make use of that fact and advocate religion in order that we may be blessed we are insulting God. The more religious the nation, the more moral and the more dependable and solid is the nation. Hence the temptation to statesmen and leaders to pay lip service to religion and to believe in its maintenance in a general form. But that is the very opposite of what I would stress and what is emphasised everywhere in the Bible. God is to be worshipped because He is God, because He is the Creator, because He is the Almighty, because He is the "high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity", because His Name is Holy. And in His presence it is impossible to think of anything else. All thoughts of self and of benefits that may accrue, all ideas concerning the possible results and advantages to ourselves or to our class or country are banished. He is supreme and He is alone. To place anything before God is to deny Him, however noble and exalted that thing may be. The results and blessings of salvation, the moral life and the improved state of society—all these things are the consequents of true belief and they must never be allowed to usurp the supreme position. Indeed, as I have said, if we truly worship God and realise His presence, they cannot do so.

This is one of the most subtle dangers that faces us as we try to think out and plan a new state of society for the future. It is a danger which can be seen in the writings of a number of writers to-day who are concerned about the state of this country. I think in particular of men like Mr. T. S. Eliot and Mr. Middleton Murry. They advocate a religious society and a Christian education—or what they call such—simply because they have found all else to fail, and because they think that this is more likely to be successful. But they fail to realise that before you can have a Christian society and Christian education you must first of all have Christians. No education or culture, no mode of training will ever produce Christians and the corresponding morality. To do that we must come face to face with God and see our sin and helpless plight; we must know something about the wrath of God and repent before Him and then receive His gracious offer of

salvation in Jesus Christ His Son. But that is not mentioned. Men ever desire the benefit of Christianity without paying the price. They need to be reminded again that "God is not mocked", and that even in the name of Christian civilisation He is often grievously insulted. Whatever may follow, God must be worshipped for His own sake because He is God. He demands it and will have it.

## II

But, secondly, I would show you that to place morality before religion is also *to insult man*. It is remarkable to note how it invariably happens that when man sets out to exalt himself, he always ends by lowering himself and insulting himself. This is something which we hope to consider again in greater detail. I am anxious to emphasise the principle now. Verse 22 sums it up very perfectly by telling us that "professing themselves to be wise they become fools". Man always feels that God fetters him and refuses to allow him to give free scope to his wonderful powers and capacities. He rebels against God in order to exert himself and to express himself—he rebels in the name of freedom, proposing to produce a larger and nobler type of personality. That, as we have seen, has been the real meaning of the revolt against revealed religion during the past hundred years. Ah! how much we have heard about the emancipation of man! Moral man was conceived to be so much higher than religious man. That was why morality was placed before religion. But what are the actual facts? Let me but cite them in order that I may demonstrate that the old rule is still in force, and that man in attempting to elevate himself has simply succeeded in insulting himself.

(a) For one thing, morality is interested in a *man's actions rather than in the man himself*. At the very outset it hurls that insult at us. I do not pause to emphasise the point that its interest in our very actions is always much more negative than positive, which makes the insult still greater. But regarding it at its very best and highest and at its most positive, nothing is so insulting to personality than to say that its actions alone matter. There is no need to demonstrate this point. We have but to recollect what we think of the kind of person who shows



clearly that he is not really interested in us at all but simply in what we do or what we are—our office or status, or position, or the possibility of our being of some help or value to him. How insulting! But that is precisely the position with respect to morality. It is interested only in our conduct and behaviour. It may argue that as our conduct improves, so we improve. But that does not lessen the insult, for it leaves me, the essential "I" who I am, still subservient to my conduct. And that is ultimately destructive of personality. How evident that has become in these last few years. We have all become standardised in almost every respect, and there is a monotonous drab sameness about the whole of life. As we have concentrated more and more on conduct and behaviour, on the mere acquisition of knowledge and how we appear before others, not only has variety vanished, but genius and "character" have become rarer and rarer and true individuality has been lost.

(b) But again, morality is always *more interested in man's associations than in man himself*. Its interest is in society, or the state, or the group, and its main concern about the individual is simply that he should be brought or made to conform to a common pattern. Its very terms prove that, "state", "society", "social", those are its words. The individual personality has been ignored and forgotten. Everything is done for the good of the state or of society. Here again the argument is, that as the mass is improved, so will the individual be improved. But that is to insult personality by suggesting that it is merely a speck in a huge mass of humanity. Religion believes in improving society by improving the individuals that compose it. Morality believes in improving the individual by improving the general state. I leave you to decide which really places value on the human personality, on man as such. And the methods employed show this still more clearly. Morality uses compulsion. It legislates and forces men to conform to the general standard. Whether we will or not we have to do certain things. That this is essential in order to govern a state, I grant freely, but still I argue that it is essentially insulting to personality. Moreover it is the very antithesis of Christianity which brings a man to see the rightness of the thing advocated, and creates within him a deep longing and desire to exemplify it in his life. Morality dictates and commands, but as St. Paul tells the Galatians "faith worketh by love".

(c) But above all else, morality *insults man by taking no account whatsoever of that which is highest in man*, of that which ultimately differentiates man from the animal. I refer to his relationship to God. It deals with him only on the lower planes and forgets that he was made for God. At its best and highest it sets limits to his achievements and to the possibilities of his nature. It may help to make man a noble and a thinking animal, but it knows nothing of the glorious possibility of man becoming a son of God. It is earthbound and temporal and entirely ignorant of the delectable mountains and the vision of eternity. And it ultimately fails for that reason. A simple and familiar illustration may help here. A little child is away from home, perhaps even staying with relatives. It becomes homesick and cries for its mother. The friends do their best. They produce toys, they suggest games, they offer sweets and chocolates and everything that they know the child enjoys. But it all avails nothing. Dolls and toys and the rarest delicacies cannot satisfy when a child wants its mother. They are flung contemptuously aside by the young philosopher who realises that at that point they are a veritable insult. He needs his mother and nothing else will do. Man in his state of sin does not know what he really needs. But he shows very clearly that the best and highest offers of men cannot satisfy him. Deep within him there is that profound dissatisfaction which can be satisfied by nothing less than God Himself. Failure to realise this is not only inadequate, it is insulting. Man was made for God and in the image of God, and though he has sinned and fallen and wandered far away there is still within him that nostalgia which can never be satisfied until he returns home and to his Father.

### III

But, thirdly, this attempt to give morality priority over religion also fails because *it provides no ultimate authority or sanction* for man's life. Here we are coming to the realm of the practical application of all we have said hitherto. We are urged to live the good life. But immediately the question arises "Why should we live the good life?" And, here, face to face with this question of "Why?" this isolation of morality from religion leads again to failure. We can show this along two main lines.

(a) The view which regards morality as an end in itself and which advocates it for its own sake only, bases its answer to this question "Why?" upon the intellect alone. It appeals to our reason and to our understanding. What was formerly regarded as sin it regards as due to nothing but ignorance or lack of true education. It sets out therefore to show and to picture a higher and a better type of life. It outlines its Utopia, in which all people being taught and educated will restrain themselves and do their utmost to contribute to the common good. It shows the evil results and consequences of certain actions both to the individual himself and also to the community at large. But, further, it will have him see that such actions are quite unworthy of him and that in committing them he is lowering his own standard and being unworthy of his own essential self. That is its method. It teaches man about his own wonderful nature and of how he has developed from the animal. It pleads with him to see that he must now leave the animal behind and rise to the heights of his own development. It then tries to charm him into an acceptance of these views by holding before him pictures of the ideal society. It is essentially an appeal to the intellect, to the reason, to the rational side of man's nature.

But this means that ultimately it is a matter of opinion. It claims that its view is the highest, the best, and also leads to the greatest happiness. But when it meets with those who say that they disagree and that in their view it fails to cater for man's real nature, it has nothing to say by way of reply. And that has been the position increasingly, especially since the last war, with the cult of self-expression becoming stronger and stronger and ever more popular. Those who belong to this cult have denied that the picture drawn by the moralists is the best and the highest. They have regarded it rather as something which fetters and restrains, something therefore which is inimical to the highest interest of the self. Placing happiness and pleasure as the supreme desiderata they have drawn up a scheme for life and for conduct which is the exact opposite. We have no time to consider that now. All I am concerned to show is, that face to face with that challenge any moral system which is not based upon religion has no answer. One opinion is as good as another, and therefore any man can do as he likes. There is no ultimate authority.

(b) But this can be shown also in another way. The basing of the appeal solely upon the intellect and the rational part of man's nature, is also doomed to failure *because it ignores what is most vital in man*. That has been the real fallacy behind most thinking during the past century. Man was regarded as intellect and reason alone. He had but to be told what was right and he would do it. It is extraordinary to note how this view has prevailed in spite of the glaring facts to the contrary. The possession of intellect does not guarantee a moral life as the newspapers and the biographies and memoirs constantly testify. An educated and cultured man does not always and inevitably lead a good life. Those who know most about the consequences of certain sins against the body are often those who fall most frequently into those sins. Why is this? Here the new psychology has certainly given valuable aid and it is astonishing that its evidence has not finally exploded that view of life which regards man as intellect alone. Within man there are deep primal instincts. He is a creature of desire and lust. His brain is not an independent isolated machine, his will does not exist in a state of complete detachment. These other forces are constantly exerting themselves and constantly influencing the higher powers. A man therefore may know that a certain course of action is wrong but that does not matter. He desires that thing, and his desire can be so strong that he can even rationalise it and produce arguments in its favour. But you remember how St. Paul in the seventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans has put it all so perfectly: "For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I." A view which fails to realise that that is fundamental to human nature is of necessity doomed to failure. Man being what he is needs a higher sanction. Appeals to reason and to the will are not enough. The whole man must be included, and especially the element of desire.

## IV

But, lastly, we must say just a word on the other vital practical aspect of this matter. Having asked the question why one should lead the good life, the further question arises "How am I to lead the good life?" And here once more we find that *morality without religion entirely fails because it provides*

*no power.* "For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do," says St. Paul. That is the problem. The lack of power, the failure to do what we know we ought to do and what we would like to do, and the corresponding failure not to do what we know to be wrong. Mankind needs not only knowledge of the truth but, still more, power. Here morality fails, for it leaves the problem in our hands. *We* have to do everything. But, as we have just seen, that, in a sense, is the whole of our problem. We cannot. We fail. Ultimately moral systems only appeal to and help a certain type of person. If we are what is called "naturally good" and naturally interested in such things, they may help us much and encourage us. And when I say "naturally good" I mean good in the sight of man, not of God, good in the sense of not being guilty of certain sins, not good in the sense of the biblical terms righteous and holy. Such people are helped by moral systems. But what of those who are not constituted in that way? What of those who are natural rebels, those who are more dynamic and full of life? Those to whom wrong and evil come more easily and naturally than good? Clearly morality cannot help, for it leaves us precisely and exactly what and where we were. It provides us with no power to restrain ourselves from sin, for its arguments can be easily brushed aside. It provides no power to restore us when we have fallen into sin. It leaves us as condemned failures and indeed makes us feel hopeless. It reminds us that we have failed, that we have been defeated, that we have not maintained the standard. And even if it appeals to us to try again it really condemns us while so doing and dooms us to failure. For it still leaves the problem to us. It cannot help us. It has no power to give us. And having failed once, we argue, we are likely to fail again. Why try therefore? Let us give in and give up and abandon ourselves to our fate. And alas! how many have done so and for that very reason?

And in the same way it has no enabling power to give us. It provides a standard but it does not help us to attain unto it. It is really nothing but good advice. It gives no power.

We have seen therefore that it fails in every respect, theoretical and practical.

How tragic it is that mankind should so long have been

guilty of this foolish error of reversing the true order of religion and morality ! For once they are placed in their right positions the situation is entirely changed. In precisely the same way as morality alone fails, the gospel of Christ succeeds. It starts with God and exists to glorify His holy Name. It restores man into the right relationship to Him, reconciling him to God through the blood of Christ. It tells man that he is more important than his own actions or his environment, and that when he is put right he must then proceed to put them right. It caters for the whole man, body, soul and spirit, intellect, desire and will, by giving him the most exalted view of all and filling him with a passion and a desire to live the good life in order to express his gratitude to God for His amazing love. And it provides him with power. In the depth of his shame and misery as the result of his sin and failure it restores him by assuring him that Christ has died for him and his sins, and that God has forgiven him. It calls him to a new life and a new start, promising him power that will overcome sin and temptation and at the same time enable him to live the life he believes and knows he ought to live.

There, and there alone, lies the only hope for men and for the world. Everything else has been tried and has failed. Ungodliness is the greatest and the central sin. It is the cause of all our other troubles. Men must return to God and start with Him. And, God be praised, the way for them to do so is still wide open in "Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

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