

Religion, In Life and In Reality

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The topic which I wish to consider this morning, "Religion, In Life and In Reality," is a paraphrase or even a free translation of a passage in the Gospel of John where the writer puts into the mouth of Jesus these words, "God is Spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."² The word used here in the Greek is Pneuma, which means life. Or, in other words, "God is life, and they that worship him, must worship him in life and in reality." I make this paraphrase to suggest an approach to our question this morning.

We are living just now in a time when everything is in a state of flux. In all the relations of life, we are being called upon to cast our special treasures into the common fund for revaluation and judgement. This is true in personal life, in political life, in social life, in the intellectual life, in moral life, and in the spiritual life. Whatever you and I may think of our own particular thoughts, theories, possessions or lives, that makes little difference to the world. The world is saying to us, "What you have, give, not half of it, not a quarter of it, nor three-quarters of it, but the whole thing."

In response to this demand, we are rising to give what we have, whether that bit be little or great. Some are doing with a whole-souled abandonment that makes the times great. Some are giving half of what they have, and hiding the rest for use in case of emergency. Such are actually dead to the times they live in. Some are not giving at all, but are

¹ Given both the mention of the war and the fact that this manuscript was bound together with other manuscripts that can be dated to 1918, this almost certainly is the manuscript of a sermon delivered at the Unity Church, Pittsfield, MA, and very likely during the year 1918.

² John 4:24.

exploiting the times in the interest of some pet project, some special class, some specially political party, the bank account, their profits, and, sad to say, some even in the interests of some religious cult. But, on the whole, the men and women of the world today are surging forward through the debris of this war catastrophe, to a far better day than we have ever seen, and a far better world than we have ever known.

This assertion, that we are surging forward towards a better tomorrow, I make boldly, although I realize that the outcome is not a predestined end. I hold to this faith, because I believe that there are men and women enough, thinking, clear-headed, and devoted men and women enough, to carry the burden, do the work, and overcome the half-hearted, the self-seekers and the profiteers.

We are met here this morning in the name of religion. However, much I may be interested in all these other questions that are before us all the time, I want to speak of what seems to me to be some essential matters concerning religion, and religion as it now is operating in human life.

In order to get at the essence of the situation as I see it, it is necessary to recall two facts of recent history. During the 19th century we have learned, if we have learned anything at all, that God operates in and through human life, human history, human experience. We no longer expect to see the New Jerusalem come down out of heaven ready-made, perfect and complete. Rather we have learned those great values which men cherish above all others, truth, goodness and beauty, are values which men discover, which men mine out of the dross of human experience. They are not given to us. They are in the universe as possibilities for our discovery and knowledge. So we have learned to look at the facts of life, all the facts, the good and the bad, to discover there the presence that gives us a feeling of awe, and reverence, the presence of a power that, through the process of time, makes for right or Justice. Presently, as we examine more closely this thorn covered bush of life, we discover the elements of its majestic beauty, seeking expression in a great purpose. In some moment of insight,

we learn to say, "That life is God, and they that worship him must worship him in life and in reality."

But in this approach to the question of God and religion in the nineteenth century, there has taken place, for reasons which are apparent, a division of men into two extremes of thought. One is sometimes called the left wing. The left wing has seen that all knowledge, all wisdom, all ideals, and all fantastic dreams even, are so closely related to experience, that they have come to the conclusion that they are simply the products of mechanical forces, the secretions of the brain. These are the extreme materialists, who deny the claim to the validity of any ideals or standards. Things are what they are, and we are automatons, cast upon the surface of time by blind forces leading nowhere in particular. We may be what we call good, or we may be what we call bad; we may be rich or poor; dead or alive; it is of little importance which. We are what we are, and the world is what it is. The whole thing moves on without care and without purpose. In the midst of these tremendous forces we struggle for existence, without real purpose, real standards, or real values. This is the extreme statement of the extreme materialist, so far as his theory goes. Yet it is fair to say that the most materialistic of the materialists have always lived in open defiance of their theory, and have been among the greatest workers for a better day and a better life.

But, on the other hand, we have had the other extreme of the absolute spiritualist, who has emphasized the validity of the ideal. In trying to combat the extremes of the materialist, he has been lured over into statements, points of view, and assertions, and purposes even, that the actual experiences of life render untenable. In the name of idealism, or the spiritual interpretation of life, men have set forth programs, standards, and aims that, so far as human experience goes, have no standing in the universe. Such extreme idealists, whose idealism has taken the form of fantastic things that are sentimentally nice to look upon, and dream about, but improbable in reality, have wreaked havoc in the world of religion. During the nineteenth century, the extreme idealists have rejected the cornerstone of life and reality, and railed at the world for its wickedness. During that same time the extreme

materialists, have rejected the cornerstone of spiritual values, and railed at the world for its silly attempt to [be] good or better.

During the past twenty years or more there has been developing a fusion of these two tendencies in one common point of view, which recognized the fact that they never should have been rent in twain. We are coming to see, even through the agony of a terrible war, that no reality can long exist which does not recognize the presence of those ideal standards of human life which give life its meaning; and we are coming to see no ideal by whatever name we may call it, can have any place in the world unless it is an ideal that may be realized in the actual experiences of life. Ideals are subject to the same standards of survival in the process of evolution, that every other value of life is, they must meet the requirements, they must be related to reality, they must fit life.

Let us not deceive ourselves at this point. The God we worship must be the living God, the God who is in life, who, amid the process of development in time and space, is working out purposes of which we have some faint inkling, some glimmer, but whose far ends we know not nor cannot imagine.

Religion is not a thing apart from life, but is the very essence of life. The great commandment, "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy mind and with all thy soul,"³ is taking on a new meaning these days. Not a far off absentee God who rules the world as an autocrat seeks to rule his people, but a very present living God who is in the world, through the world, in us, working with us, in us and through us, towards a great end. Thy shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart—all thy feelings, all thy emotions—the Lord thy God, whose presence is manifest in the grandeur of nature, in the common and the transcendent struggles of the Human race, in this common life where, amid the possibility of error and mistake and sin, we work together with him for a greater tomorrow. Love him with all thy mind. Not all the good intentions in the world will save us from measuring rods of

³ Matthew 22:37.

reality. I love the glorious hero who throws himself without restraint and self-seeking in a lost cause, or a foolish cause. God save us from being less than he. He has lightened the pages of history, and told us the tale of the soul of the universe. As compared with the learned self-seeker, he is as an angel of light. But still greater than the unwise emotionalist, is the man whose power of emotion is multiplied by the insight of wisdom and knowledge. The power of reason is with us to be used, and used to its full capacity. Here at the present time we are facing reality, which an unreasoned, unenlightened good intention may turn into another lost opportunity. We have to face the cold facts, know them, understand them, sift them to their last meaning. What are the demands of religion on real actual life? What are the facts of real actual life? How are we meeting them. Here there can be no Ananias and Sapphira business.⁴ The good intentions of a weak sentimental religion, the self-seeking of an exploiting religious institution, that seeks its own salvation first, and the rule of right second, cannot long be hidden these days. Already I hear the feet of the young men and the young women returning from the burial of that institution. Into the common experience of these years we have to bring our intellectual apparatus, without reservation, or questioning, willing, glad and anxious to prove all in the reality of experience, and cast aside the worn-out and the dross. The universe is ordered in intelligence, and to our tasks we must bring intelligence, disinterested, fearless, and keen. Every thought, every custom, every institution must be subjected to this test, and is being subjected to this test.

Finally, we may have the best of intentions in the world, and the most intelligent and wise appreciation of the facts and values of human life, and yet fail completely because we have not the power to put that intelligent intention into operation. The surgeon may have diagnosed the case with the greatest of appreciation, good will and surgical knowledge, but has he the nerve to take the chance? Can he perform the operation? Can he transform his knowledge, his good intention into action? The engineer may see his way clear through a difficult bit of engineering, but has he

⁴ Acts 5:1-11.

the nerve to try? Has he the nerve to try and take the chance of failing? Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God with all thy soul, thy will. There is the test. New worlds are before us, new problems, have we the nerve, the courage to face them and come through? Have we, we men and women who are interested in life from the point of view of religious institutions, have we the nerve and the courage to face the issue of actually worshipping God in life and in reality?

For after all, that is the significance of the meetings here. The great undercurrents of the times are simply testing in a dramatic way, the worth of us. Like other institutions we are brought to the test of actual need today. All around us, in us and through us, the rising tide of human purpose and human life is sweeping on through the rapids of war to a comparatively peaceful tomorrow. Out of the midst of our luxury-loving, slothful age are springing eternal forces that are sweeping into oblivion institutions that seemed a part of the world order. The Giant of Democracy is rising. It is no respecter of persons, of nations, or of Churches. It may be turbulent and rugged in its fresh energy, but in the long run, it is the voice of the living God in life and in reality. That voice of the living God will speak to us as men have spoken all through the ages. To this end, have I been born and to this end am I come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Thus have they spoken, those who in the midst of turmoil, have seen a growing order; who in the midst of darkness, have seen the flickering light of dawn; who, in the midst of winter, have seen the beauty of spring, and the glory of another harvest, who, in the midst of reality, have heard the voice of intelligence, and purpose calling them to a great life. We have it in us today, to be so stirred, and who has not been stirred to the very depths of this being, that we will bring to bear upon the glorious and tragic days that we are living through, all the wisdom, not only our own, but all the wisdom of all of us, however widely we may differ, and all the determination that the will of man has, to carry on to a great tomorrow.