

The Thirst for a Living God

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The attitude of many people to-day towards religion is said to be that of indifference. They look upon it as some sort of interesting relic of the past which has some such place in the lives of men as the relics of the American in a museum have. They are interesting, they throw light upon a people that have been and are fast passing from the family life of the races. So also, we are informed, is religion. It was once a potent factor but is rapidly becoming an obsolete thing which no longer interests except as an indication of what has been, of what people have thought, and what motives have dominated their lives. To what extent this feeling has extended, and whether it is increasing or on the wane, does not interest us now particularly. The point is that it exists.

Again, even where there is a formal allegiance to religious forms, there is a sort of a dry rot permeating it all, so that it fails to hold the devoted, spontaneous consecration that has marked the great religious movements of the past. Did you ever in your wanderings come across a deserted village? What a strange, haunting sense of vacuity you feel. Or did you over return to your house when the family is away, and feel the utter desolation that comes over, because the master spirit that made the place alive has gone. You wander from place to place, vainly hoping to meet a familiar face, haunted by the grim barrenness of the furniture and trappings that only few hours before glowed with atmosphere of coziness. The cold dead ashes of the fire-place send a shiver through you. Goldsmith in his wonderful

¹ There is no date on this manuscript. However, the paper-size and type-are identical to sermons that can be dated to Earl Davis' time at the Unity Church in Pittsfield (1905-1919). His early sermons (1905-07) there were hand-written. So this typed manuscript is later than 1907.

poem, "The Deserted Village" tells a tale like this. "These were thy charms—but all these charms have fled."²

Much that same feeling has come into the formal village of organized religion. From all sides come the complaints that the zeal, the vitality, the whole souled interest has fled. A spirit of ennui has crept over the body. All the furnishings of doctrine, or sacrament, all the customs and formalities are the same. Pious exhortation, appeal for consecration, appeal for loyalty fail to overcome the dismal feeling, for many at least, that no longer does "the Real Presence," dominate the ancient village, where God once was. To many even the feeling of lack, of the absence of the Master Spirit of life the feeling that the great values have passed from the lives of men, seems to have extended not alone through the organized religions of the times, but to have spread through-out society. That we are living in an age haunted by the absence of the master spirit, that we aimlessly, and restlessly run from one thing to another, trying to find that which will satisfy, and demand the full and unreserved allegiance of our hungry spirits.

To a very large extent this is a true description of our times, often overstated, and exaggerated, but nevertheless grounded in truth. What is the meaning of it?

Simply this, we are forever confusing the permanent spirit with the accidental manifestation. We look for the living among the dead. We seek for spiritual warmth before the dead embers of the past. To be sure they once glowed, but they glow no more. No dead God can satisfy our living souls and only a living God can rekindle the fires in our dead hearts.

The word "God" is a word which we use in a symbolic manner to express our conception of the totality and essence of things. God is spirit, God is life, said Jesus. Even so it is. In the face of the tremendous fact and challenging mystery of natural and human life, we feel the over-powering grandeur of it all, and with that strange, subtle heroism which makes even the least

² Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774) Anglo-Irish novelist, playwright and poet. He published his poem "The Deserted Village" in 1770. The quoted line here can be found in Louise Pound, Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village, Edited and Introduction and Notes*, Boston: Ginn & Co., 1907, p. 2.

of man-kind wonderful, and we cast forth onto the unexplored seas of effort, and truth. To the best of our experience, and wisdom we explain that Great Mystery of Life, and call it God, an imperfect symbol of our imperfect insight into the reality and possibility of Life.

After we have little, limited Gods to represent the great reality, we deceive ourselves with the idea that our God is the only God, perfect and complete. Then we set about to make other people see why we think so. We develop dogmas, and our little sentiments become sacraments, and by the time we have converted a few followers to believe in our little "home-made" God, all the life, all the spirit, and the human and enthusiastic passion that glowed in our God as we made disappears as soon as we have finished. For God is not static, God is life. While we are worshiping the deserted village, that we once built, the life spirit has passed on and is building elsewhere. The God that we made was vital and interesting while we were making him. But when we had finished and put a fence about him, he was dead. Life flows on. The God of the Ancient Hebrews was wonderful in the making, but he is dead now. The God of the Middle ages, is dead, however great and wonderful he was. We believe to-day that we are painting an image of "the God of things as we see them for the God of things as they are" that is greater, better, and truer, than man has ever done before. In this great human task there is life, satisfaction. It is the "Master Presence" that holds us in its all absorbing Grip. The living God, the God that is Life, that is Human Life, that dwells in the individual men and women, with all their noble hopes, all their achievements, all their defeats and their limitations, all their mistakes, and selfish, cruel sins, the God that all this and more, infinitely more, that is the totality of life, that God grips our souls. When we look at life that way, we no longer feel the haunting fear of vacuum, of absence. Every being, everything, every life, every shrub, is pulsating with such tremendous vitality, such wonderful hope, insuppressible purpose, that we are fairly carried off our feet, by the infinite sweep of life, which like a mighty river carries us past the present of to-day towards the infinite possibilities of to-morrow. Villages may be deserted, ancient creeds may become void of life, but the streaming, surging, flow of life goes on, building, creating, dreaming, loving, and living. There is the Living God, for which we hunger and Thirst. Life, Life and evermore Life.

