

the goal of religion

THE IDEA OF FREEDOM is one which requires thinking about rather carefully from time to time. There is always a danger that people will accept and try to apply it in a purely negative sense. It has, of course, a negative value as well as a positive: there is freedom 'from' as well as freedom 'for'. But the negative aspect is significant only in relation to a proper grasp of the positive aspect. These general remarks are true of freedom in every walk of life; but it is my purpose to consider the matter mainly in connection with religion.

Broadly speaking, religion should be free from everything which is an unnecessary hindrance in the achievement of the goal of religion. It is delightfully easy to lay down broad principles like this; everyone will agree, and no great demand is made on the intelligence of any of us by such statements. The difficulty, of course, always begins when we take the general and try to make it particular in relation to concrete instances. What are we to understand by the goal of religion? And what in fact are hindrances? These are large questions, and all I can aim at now is to offer one or two suggestions for our consideration.

The goal of religion, as I understand it, is the attainment of a certain type of experience which issues in certain kinds of conduct. It is impossible to express in ordinary, and especially in few words what the nature of the experience is. Poets, prophets and mystics have come nearest perhaps to a statement in words; musicians and painters

have often hinted at it in their own forms of expression. Shall we leave that question, merely being content with the bald description of the experience as a sense of fellowship and union with God? Where that sense is real there are always fruits. Again I do not propose to try to enumerate the cardinal virtues which religion establishes. It is enough to accept the key word of Christian character: love. This, I find, is only another way of saying that the goal of religion is the Kingdom of God. The experience is the knowledge and enjoyment of membership of a divine society; the fruits are the deeds of loving kindness which issue from the fundamental law of the kingdom, which is love.

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The aim of a free religion then is, on the negative side, to discard and remove every unnecessary hindrance to the achievement of this end. At once we come to the real difficulties. What actually are the main hindrances which are removable? I am not at the moment thinking of those hindrances which are summed up in the term 'sin'. Our own infidelities and failures to do the good which we would be obvious hindrances in the realization of the goal of religion as a personal matter, and we are perpetually in need of striving to enlarge the scope of our freedom from our own lower selves. But at present my concern is rather with things of more general organization. Religion as a social force must be organized, and all organization involves some measure of control. Good organization may be described as the elimination of irrelevancies and the enforcing of essentials. The materials which are organized, for example, in a motor bicycle, have various qualities, and the construction of a motor cycle means so arranging the materials that the essential qualities may find expression without interference with what I may call, from the motor cycle point of view, irrelevant qualities.

The trouble is, of course, that while experience will teach what are the essential and what are the

non-essential qualities of the material organized in a motor cycle, there are differences of view when it comes to religion. Many people have supposed, for example, that the goal of religion is a gnosis, a special knowledge which can be accepted by faith, and the result of this has been that considerable number of intellectual restraints have been imposed. In truth belief is an important matter in religion, but it is not the goal. It is for the sake of participation in a much more fundamental experience, and consequently only such beliefs as can be shown to be essential to participation in the experience of religion can be said to be compulsory. Other beliefs may be, often have been made compulsory by human tradition, but they are not implied in the nature of religion itself. And we do not approach the real difficulty unless we recognize that men and women of goodwill have differed and continue to differ conscientiously as to what are the minimum beliefs that are indispensable in the attainment of religious experience and life. I do not believe that we can advance beyond the general principle laid down by Jesus concerning the tree and its fruits. There is an all important distinction which is often lost sight of — between true believers, and truly religious men and women. When we remember that Jesus himself was not a true believer in the estimation of the custodians of religion in his age, we may be inclined to recognize the importance of religion being free from subservience to a theory of true belief.

If you read the gospel records of the teaching of Jesus you will find numerous passages dealing with the need to be free from attachment to the accidental and the external. In the parable of the man with two sons, it is not saying he will or saying he will not that necessarily indicates the doer of the will of the father. In the parable of the Good Samaritan anchorage in 'true' belief is treated by Jesus as of no moment compared with travelling in the right direction. In the 23rd chapter of Matthew there is a prolonged and almost violent condemnation of the people who stereotype religion in special forms. The anger of Jesus seems to have been peculiarly aroused by arrogance — the arrogance not so much of individuals, but of men

in groups who make void the word of God because of human tradition. It was not that Jesus was impatient with human traditions as such. He subscribed to them whenever they seemed to him to be true and valuable. But what he tried hard to free religion from was that mistaken and intolerant fidelity to tradition, ceremony, or belief which could override the dictates of human sympathy and love.

THE ATTITUDE OF JESUS

Religion cannot exist without deeply cherished convictions, and a mere formless revolt against creeds of all sorts is not necessarily either freedom or religion. You will not find that in the attitude of Jesus or any seer who comes not to destroy but to fulfil. What Jesus protests against is the substitution of any body of cherished convictions for the living spirit of religion. For him religion is an experience which must find expression in love. If a body of cherished convictions comes into opposition with the imperative of religion in this sense, it is cherished conviction which must go under, not religion – so Jesus taught and so he practised. If you find cherished convictions leading you to suspect your brother, and to hate him; if it makes you loyal to a point of view, a system of ceremonies, but indifferent to the sufferings and needs of those who do not share them, then Jesus teaches it is time to claim freedom from such convictions. The priest, no doubt, cherished the conviction that there is nothing more important than the worship and service of God, and in loyalty to this idea he hastens past the man fallen by the wayside. He evidently had this further cherished conviction that the sole and universal way of service to God was by the ceremonial of temple worship. Jesus does not want to get rid of the worship in the temple, but he does want to get rid of a frame of mind which regards that as so important that it takes precedence over the imperatives of human fellowship and love.

Here then is what religion must be free from: not creeds, convictions, ceremonies, symbols,

houses made with hands, and so forth, but the attitude of mind and heart which will allow these things to pass from being means and usurping the place of the end. While, and if our various convictions, devotional habits, and the rest serve to deepen that religious experience which must express itself in the love of *1 Corinthians 13*, they are good, though they may be different from what is accounted orthodox. But if they separate man from man in sectarian bitterness, if they increase arrogance, and dry the fountains of pity and sympathy, they are hindrances. Perhaps one of the greatest tests of true religion is whether, holding deep convictions, we can co-operate with, honour and love the man who shares them not, without condescension or any sense of superiority. Here and there we meet such people – and they are the salt of the earth.

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