

LITTLE BLUE BOOK NO.  
Edited by E. Haldeman-Julius

1463

# Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?

Bertrand Russell



LITTLE BLUE BOOK NO. 1463  
Edited by E. Haldeman-Julius

# Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?

Bertrand Russell

HALDEMAN-JULIUS PUBLICATIONS  
GIRARD, KANSAS

Copyright,  
Haldeman-Julius Company

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

## HAS RELIGION MADE USEFUL CONTRIBUTIONS TO CIVILIZATION?

My own view on religion is that of Lucretius. I regard it as a disease born of fear and as a source of untold misery to the human race. I cannot, however, deny that it has made *some* contributions to civilization. It helped in early days to fix the calendar, and it caused Egyptian priests to chronicle eclipses with such care that in time they became able to predict them. These two services I am prepared to acknowledge, but I do not know of any others.

The word "religion" is used nowadays in a very loose sense. Some people under the influence of extreme Protestantism employ the word to denote any serious convictions as to morals or the nature of the universe. This use of the word is quite unhistorical. Religion is primarily a social phenomenon. Churches may owe their origin to teachers with strong individual convictions, but these teachers have seldom had much influence upon the churches that they founded, whereas churches have had enormous influence upon the communities in which they flourished. To take the case that is of most interest to members of western civilization: the teaching of Christ, as it appears in the Gospels, has had extraordinarily little to do with the ethics of Christians. The important thing about Christianity, from a social and historical point of view, is not Christ, but

the Church, and if we are to judge of Christianity as a social force, we must not go to the Gospels for our material. Christ taught that you should give your goods to the poor, that you should not fight, that you should not go to Church, and that you should not punish adultery. Neither Catholics nor Protestants have shown any strong desire to follow His teaching in any of these respects. Some of the Franciscans, it is true, attempted to teach the doctrine of apostolic poverty, but the Pope condemned them and their doctrine was declared heretical. Or, again, consider such a text as "Judge not that ye be not judged," and ask yourself what influence such a text has had upon the Inquisition and the Ku Klux Klan.

What is true of Christianity is equally true of Buddhism. The Buddha was amiable and enlightened; on his deathbed he laughed at his disciples for supposing that he was immortal. But the Buddhist priesthood, as it exists, for example, in Tibet, has been obscurantist, tyrannous, and cruel in the highest degree.

There is nothing accidental about this difference between a Church and its Founder. As soon as absolute truth is supposed to be contained in the sayings of a certain man, there is a body of experts to interpret his sayings, and these experts infallibly acquire power, since they hold the key to truth; like any other privileged caste they use their power for their own advantage. They are, however, in one respect worse than any other privileged caste, since it is their business to expound an

unchanging truth, revealed once for all in utter perfection, so that they become necessarily opponents of all intellectual and moral progress. The Church opposed Galileo and Darwin; in our own day it opposes Freud. In the days of its greatest power it went further in its opposition to the intellectual life. Pope Gregory the Great wrote to a certain bishop a letter beginning: "A report has reached us which we cannot mention without a blush, that thou expoundest grammar to certain friends." The bishop was compelled by pontifical authority to desist from this wicked labor, and Latinity did not recover until the Renaissance. It is not only intellectually but also morally that religion is pernicious; I mean by this that it teaches ethical codes which are not conducive to human happiness. When, a few years ago, a plebiscite was taken in Germany as to whether the deposed royal houses should still be allowed to enjoy their private property, the Churches in Germany officially stated that it would be contrary to the teaching of Christianity to deprive them of it. The Churches, as everyone knows, opposed the abolition of slavery as long as they dared, and with a few well-advertised exceptions they oppose at the present day every movement towards economic justice. The Pope has officially condemned Socialism.

### CHRISTIANITY AND SEX

The worst feature of the Christian religion, however, is its attitude towards sex, an attitude so morbid and so unnatural that it can

only be understood when taken in relation to the sickness of the civilized world at the time when the Roman Empire was decaying. We sometimes hear talk to the effect that Christianity improved the status of women; this is one of the grossest perversions of history that it is possible to make. Women cannot enjoy a tolerable position in society, where it is considered of the utmost importance that they should not infringe a very rigid moral code. Monks have always regarded Woman primarily as the Temptress, they have thought of her mainly as the inspirer of impure lusts. The teaching of the Church has been and still is that virginity is best, but that for those who find this impossible marriage is permissible. "It is better to marry than to burn" (I Cor. vii:9), as St. Paul brutally puts it. By making marriage indissoluble and by stamping out all knowledge of the *ars amandi*, the Church did what it could to secure that the only form of sex which it permitted should involve very little pleasure and a great deal of pain. The opposition to birth control has the same motive: if a woman has a child a year until she dies worn out, it is not to be supposed that she will derive much pleasure from her married life; therefore birth control must be discouraged.

The conception of Sin which is bound up with Christian ethics is one that does an extraordinary amount of harm, since it affords people an outlet for their sadism which they believe to be legitimate, and even noble. Take, for example, the question of prevention of syphilis. It is known that by precautions



taken in advance, the danger of contracting this disease can be made negligible. Christians, however, object to the dissemination of knowledge of this fact, since they hold it good that sinners should be punished. They hold this so good that they are even willing that punishment should extend to the wives and children of sinners. There are in the world at the present moment many thousands of children suffering from congenital syphilis who would never have been born but for the desire of Christians to see sinners punished. I cannot understand how doctrines leading to this fiendish cruelty can be considered to have any good effect upon morals.

It is not only in regard to sexual behavior, but also in regard to knowledge on sex subjects, that the attitude of Christians is dangerous to human welfare. Every person who has taken the trouble to study the question in an unbiased spirit knows that the artificial ignorance on sex subjects which orthodox Christians attempt to enforce upon the young is extremely dangerous to mental and physical health, and causes in those who pick up their knowledge by the way of "improper" talk, as most children do, an attitude that sex is in itself indecent and ridiculous. I do not think there can be any defense for the view that knowledge is ever undesirable. I should not put barriers in the way of the acquisition of knowledge by anybody at any age. But in the particular case of sex knowledge there are much weightier arguments in its favor than in the case of most other knowledge. A per-

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

son is much less likely to act wisely when he is ignorant than when he is instructed, and it is ridiculous to give young people a sense of sin because they have a natural curiosity about an important matter. Every boy is interested in trains; suppose we told him that an interest in trains is wicked, suppose we kept his eyes bandaged whenever he is in a train or in a railway station; suppose we never allowed the word "train" to be mentioned in his presence and preserved an impenetrable mystery as to the means by which he is transported from one place to another: the result would not be that he would cease to be interested in trains; on the contrary, he would become more interested than ever, but would have a morbid sense of sin, because this interest had been represented to him as improper. Every boy of active intelligence could by this means be rendered in a greater or less degree neurasthenic. This is precisely what is done in the matter of sex, but as sex is more interesting than trains, the results are worse. Almost every adult in a Christian community is more or less diseased nervously as a result of the taboo on sex knowledge when he, or she, was young. And the sense of sin which is thus artificially implanted is one of the causes of cruelty, timidity, and stupidity in later life. There is no rational ground of any sort or kind for keeping a child ignorant of anything that he may wish to know, whether on sex or on any other matter. And we shall never get a sane population until this fact is recognized in early education, which is

impossible so long as the Churches are able to control educational politics.

Leaving these comparatively detailed objections on one side, it is clear that the fundamental doctrines of Christianity demand a great deal of ethical perversion before they can be accepted. The world, we are told, was created by a God who was both good and omnipotent. Before He created the world, He foresaw all the pain and misery that it would contain; He is therefore responsible for all of it. It is useless to argue that the pain in the world is due to sin. In the first place this is not true: it is not sin that causes rivers to overflow their banks, or volcanoes to erupt. But even if it were true, it would make no difference. If I were to beget a child knowing that the child was going to be a homicidal maniac, I should be responsible for his crimes. If God knew in advance the sins of which man would be guilty, He was clearly responsible for all the consequences of those sins when He decided to create man. The usual Christian argument is that the suffering in the world is a purification for sin, and is therefore a good thing. This argument is of course only a rationalization of sadism, but in any case it is a very poor argument. I would invite any Christian to accompany me to the children's ward of a hospital, to watch the suffering that is there being endured, and then to persist in the assertion that those children are so morally abandoned as to deserve what they are enduring. In order to bring himself to say this a man must destroy in himself all feelings of

mercy and compassion. He must in short make himself as cruel as the God in whom he believes. No man who believes that all is for the best in this suffering world can keep his ethical values unimpaired, since he is always having to find excuses for pain and misery.

### THE OBJECTIONS TO RELIGION

The objections to religion are of two sorts, intellectual and moral. The intellectual objection is that there is no reason to suppose any religion true; the moral objection is that religious precepts date from a time when men were more cruel than they are, and therefore tend to perpetuate inhumanities which the moral conscience of the age would otherwise outgrow.

To take the intellectual objections first: there is a certain tendency in our practical age to consider that it does not much matter whether religious teaching is true or not, since the important question is whether it is useful. One question cannot, however, well be decided without the other. If we believe the Christian religion, our notions of what is good will be different from what they will be if we do not believe it. Therefore to Christians the effects of Christianity may seem good, while to unbelievers they may seem bad. Moreover, the attitude that one ought to believe such and such a proposition, independently of the question whether there is evidence in its favor, is an attitude which produces hostility to evidence and causes us to close our minds to every fact that does not suit our prejudices.

A certain kind of scientific candor is a very important quality, and it is one which can hardly exist in a man who imagines that there are things which it is his duty to believe. We cannot therefore really decide whether religion does good without investigating the question whether religion is true.

To Christians, Mohammedans, and Jews the most fundamental question involved in the truth of religion is the existence of God. In the days when religion was still triumphant, the word "God" had a perfectly definite meaning; but as a result of the onslaughts of Rationalists the word has become paler and paler, until it is difficult to see what people mean when they assert that they believe in God. Let us take for purposes of argument Matthew Arnold's definition: "A power not ourselves that makes for righteousness." Perhaps we might make this even more vague, and ask ourselves whether we have any evidence of purpose in the universe apart from the purposes of living beings on the surface of this planet. The usual argument of religious people on this subject is roughly as follows: "I and my friends are persons of amazing intelligence and virtue. It is hardly conceivable that so much intelligence and virtue could have come about by chance. There must therefore be some one at least as intelligent and virtuous as we are, who set the cosmic machinery in motion with a view to producing Us." I am sorry to say that I do not find this argument so impressive as it is found by those who use it. The universe is large; yet if

we are to believe Eddington, there are probably nowhere else in the universe beings as intelligent as men. If you consider the total amount of matter in the world and compare it with the amount forming the bodies of intelligent beings, you will see that the latter bear an almost infinitesimal proportion to the former. Consequently, even if it is enormously improbable that the laws of chance will produce an organism capable of intelligence out of a casual selection of atoms, it is nevertheless probable that there will be in the universe that very small number of such organisms that we do in fact find.

Then again, considered as the climax to such a vast process, we do not really seem to be sufficiently marvelous. Of course I am aware that many divines are far more marvelous than I am, and that I cannot wholly appreciate merits so far transcending my own. Nevertheless, even after making allowances under this head, I cannot but think that omnipotence operating through all eternity might have produced something better. And then we have to reflect that even this result is only a flash in the pan. The earth will not always remain habitable; the human race will die out; and if the cosmic process is to justify itself hereafter, it will have to do so elsewhere than on the surface of our planet. And even if this should occur, it must stop sooner or later. The second law of thermodynamics makes it scarcely possible to doubt that the universe is running down, and that ultimately nothing of the slightest interest will be possible anywhere.

Of course it is open to us to say that when that time comes, God will wind up the machinery again, but if we do say this, we can only base our assertion upon faith, not upon one shred of scientific evidence. So far as scientific evidence goes, the universe has crawled by slow stages to a somewhat pitiful result on this earth, and is going to crawl by still more pitiful stages to a condition of universal death. If this is to be taken as evidence of purpose, I can only say that the purpose is one that does not appeal to me. I see no reason therefore to believe in any sort of God however vague and however attenuated. I leave on one side the old metaphysical arguments, since religious apologists themselves have thrown them over.

## THE SOUL AND IMMORTALITY

The Christian emphasis on the individual soul has had a profound influence upon the ethics of Christian communities. It is a doctrine fundamentally akin to that of the Stoics, arising as theirs did in communities that could no longer cherish political hopes. The natural impulse of the vigorous person of decent character is to attempt to *do* good, but if he is deprived of all political power and of all opportunity to influence events, he will be deflected from his natural course and will decide that the important thing is to *be* good. This is what happened to the early Christians; it led to a conception of personal holiness as something quite independent of beneficent action,

since holiness had to be something that could be achieved by people who were impotent in action. Social virtue came therefore to be excluded from Christian ethics. To this day conventional Christians think an adulterer more wicked than a politician who takes bribes, although the latter probably does a thousand times as much harm.

The medieval conception of virtue, as one sees in their pictures, was of something wishy-washy, feeble, and sentimental. The most virtuous man was the man who retired from the world; the only men of action who were regarded as saints were those who wasted the lives and substances of their subjects in fighting the Turks, like St. Louis. The Church would never regard a man as a saint because he reformed the finances, or the criminal law, or the judiciary. Such mere contributions to human welfare would be regarded as of no importance. I do not believe there is a single saint in the whole calendar whose saintship is due to work of public utility.

With this separation between the social and the moral person there went an increasing separation between soul and body, which has survived in Christian metaphysics and in the systems derived from Descartes. One may say, broadly speaking, that the body represents the social and public part of a man, whereas the soul represents the private part. In emphasizing the soul, Christian ethics has made itself completely individualistic. I think it is clear that the net result of all the centuries



of Christianity has been to make men more egotistic, more shut up in themselves, than nature made them, for the impulses that naturally take a man outside the walls of his ego are those of sex, parenthood, and patriotism or herd instinct.

Sex, the Church did everything it could to decry and degrade; family affection was decried by Christ himself and by the bulk of his followers; and patriotism could find no place among the subject populations of the Roman Empire. The polemic against the family in the Gospels is a matter that has not received the attention it deserves. The Church treats the Mother of Christ with reverence, but He Himself showed little of this attitude. "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" (John ii:4) is his way of speaking to her. He says also that He has come to set a man at variance against his father, and daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and that he that loveth father and mother more than Him is not worthy of Him (Matthew x:35, 37). All this means the break-up of the biological family tie for the sake of creed, an attitude which had a great deal to do with the intolerance that came into the world with the spread of Christianity.

This individualism culminated in the doctrine of the immortality of the individual soul, which was to enjoy hereafter endless bliss or endless woe according to circumstances. The circumstances upon which this momentous difference depended were somewhat curious. For

example, if you died immediately after a priest had sprinkled water upon you while pronouncing certain words, you inherited eternal bliss, whereas if after a long and virtuous life you happened to be struck by lightning at a moment when you were using bad language because you had broken a bootlace, you would inherit eternal torment. I do not say that the modern Protestant Christian believes this, nor even perhaps the modern Catholic Christian who has not been adequately instructed in theology, but I do say that this is the orthodox doctrine and was firmly believed until recent times.

The Spaniards in Mexico and Peru used to baptize infants and then immediately dash their brains out; by this means they secured that these infants went to Heaven. No orthodox Christian can find any logical reason for condemning their action, although all nowadays do so. In countless ways the doctrine of personal immortality in its Christian form has had disastrous effects upon morals, and the metaphysical separation of soul and body has had disastrous effects upon philosophy.

### SOURCES OF INTOLERANCE

The intolerance that spread over the world with the advent of Christianity is one of its most curious features, due I think to the Jewish belief in righteousness and in the exclusive reality of the Jewish God. Why the Jews should have had these peculiarities, I do not know. They seem to have developed during

the captivity as a reaction against the attempt to absorb the Jews into alien population. However that may be, the Jews, and more especially the prophets, invented emphasis upon personal righteousness and the idea that it is wicked to tolerate any religion except one. These two ideas have had an extraordinarily disastrous effect upon occidental history.

The Church has made much of the persecution of Christians by the Roman State before the time of Constantine; this persecution, however, was slight and intermittent and wholly political. At all times from the age of Constantine to the end of the 17th century, Christians were far more fiercely persecuted by other Christians than they ever were by the Roman emperors. Before the rise of Christianity this persecuting attitude was unknown to the ancient world except among the Jews. If you read, for example, Herodotus, you find a bland and tolerant account of the habits of the foreign nations he has visited. Sometimes, it is true, a peculiarly barbarous custom may shock him, but in general he is hospitable to foreign gods and foreign customs. He is not anxious to prove that people who call Zeus by some other name will suffer eternal perdition and ought to be put to death in order that their punishment may begin as soon as possible. This attitude has been reserved for Christians. It is true that the modern Christian is less robust, but that is not thanks to Christianity; it is thanks to the generations of freethinkers, who from the Renaissance to the present day have made Christians ashamed of many of

their traditional beliefs. It is amusing to hear the modern Christian telling you how mild and rationalistic Christianity really is, and ignoring the fact that all its mildness and rationalism is due to the teaching of men who in their own day were persecuted by all orthodox Christians.

Nobody nowadays believes that the world was created in B. C. 4004, but not so very long ago skepticism on this point was thought an abominable crime. My great-great-grandfather, after observing the depths of the lava on the slopes of Etna, came to the conclusion that the world must be older than the orthodox supposed, and published this opinion in a book. For this offense he was cut by the County and ostracized from society. Had he been a man in humbler circumstances, his punishment would doubtless have been more severe. It is no credit to the orthodox that they do not now believe all the absurdities that were believed 150 years ago. The gradual emasculation of the Christian doctrine has been effected in spite of the most vigorous resistance, and solely as the result of the onslaught of free-thinkers.

### THE DOCTRINE OF FREE WILL

The attitude of the Christians on the subject of natural law has been curiously vacillating and uncertain. There was on the one hand the doctrine of free will in which the great majority of Christians believed, and this doctrine required that the acts of human beings at least

should not be subject to natural law. There was on the other hand, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, a belief in God as the Lawgiver, and in natural law as one of the main evidences of the existence of a Creator. In recent times the objection to the reign of law in the interests of free will has begun to be felt more strongly than the belief in natural law as affording evidence for a Lawgiver.

Materialists used the laws of physics to show, or attempt to show, that the movements of human bodies are mechanically determined, and that consequently everything that we say, and every change of position that we effect, falls outside the sphere of any possible free will. If this be so, whatever may be left for our unfettered volitions is of little value. If, when a man writes a poem or commits a murder, the bodily movements involved in his act result solely from physical causes, it would seem absurd to put up a statue to him in the one case and to hang him in the other. There might in certain metaphysical systems remain a region of pure thought in which the will would be free, but since that can only be communicated to others by means of bodily movement, the realm of freedom would be one that could never be the subject of communication, and could never have any social importance.

Then again, evolution has had a considerable influence upon those Christians who have accepted it. They have seen that it will not do to make claims on behalf of man which are totally different from those which are made on behalf of other forms of life. Therefore in

order to safeguard free will in man, they have objected to every attempt at explaining the behavior of living matter in terms of physical and chemical laws. The position of Descartes, to the effect that all animals are automata, no longer finds favor with liberal theologians. The doctrine of continuity makes them inclined to go a step further still and maintain that even what is called dead matter is not rigidly governed in its behavior by any alterable laws. They seem to have overlooked the fact that, if you abolish the reign of law, you also abolish the possibility of miracles, since miracles are acts of God which contravene the laws governing ordinary phenomena. I can, however, imagine the modern liberal theologian maintaining with an air of profundity that all creation is miraculous, so that he no longer needs to fasten upon certain occurrences as special evidences of divine intervention.

Under the influence of this reaction against natural law some Christian apologists have seized upon the latest doctrines of the atom, which tend to show that the physical laws in which we have hitherto believed have only an approximate and average truth as applied to large numbers of atoms, while the individual electron behaves pretty much as it likes. My own belief is that this is a temporary phase, and that the physicists will in time discover laws governing minute phenomena, although these laws may differ very considerably from those of traditional physics. However that may be, it is worth while to observe that the modern doctrines as to minute phenomena have no

bearing upon anything that is of practical importance. Visible motions, and indeed all motions that make any difference to anybody, involve such large numbers of atoms that they come well within the scope of the old laws. To write a poem or commit a murder (reverting to our previous illustration), it is necessary to move an appreciable mass of ink or lead. The electrons composing the ink may be dancing freely round their little ballroom, but the ballroom as a whole is moving according to the old laws of physics, and this alone is what concerns the poet and his publisher. The modern doctrines therefore have no appreciable bearing upon any of those problems of human interest with which the theologian is concerned.

The free will question remains therefore just where it was. Whatever may be thought about it as a matter of ultimate metaphysics, it is quite clear that nobody believes in it in practice. Everyone has always believed that it is possible to train character; everyone has always known that alcohol or opium will have a certain effect upon behavior. The apostle of free will maintains that a man can by will power avoid getting drunk, but he does not maintain that when drunk a man can say "British Constitution" as clearly as if he were sober. And everybody who has ever had to do with children knows that a suitable diet does more to make them virtuous than the most eloquent preaching in the world. The one effect that the free will doctrine has in practice is to prevent people from following out

such common sense knowledge to its rational conclusion. When a man acts in ways that annoy us, we wish to think him wicked, and we therefore refuse to face the fact that his annoying behavior is a result of antecedent causes which, if you follow them long enough, will take you beyond the moment of his birth, and therefore to events for which he cannot be held responsible by any stretch of imagination.

No man treats a motor car as foolishly as he treats another human being. When the car will not go, he does not attribute its annoying behavior to sin, he does not say: "You are a wicked motor car, and I shall not give you any more gasoline until you go." He attempts to find out what is wrong and to set it right. An analogous way of treating human beings is, however, considered to be contrary to the truths of our holy religion. And this applies even in the treatment of little children. Many children have bad habits which are perpetuated by punishment, but will probably pass away of themselves if left unnoticed. Nevertheless nurses with very few exceptions consider it right to inflict punishment, although by so doing they run the risk of causing insanity. When insanity has been caused, it is cited in courts of law as a proof of the harmfulness of the habit, not of the punishment. (I am alluding to a recent prosecution for obscenity in the State of New York.) Reforms in education have come very largely through the study of the insane and feeble-minded, because *they* have not been held morally responsible for their failures, and have therefore been treated



more scientifically than normal children. Until very recently it was held that if a boy could not learn his lessons, the proper cure was caning or flogging. This view is nearly extinct in the treatment of children, but it survives in the criminal law. It is evident that a man with a propensity to crime must be stopped, but so must a man who has hydrophobia and wants to bite people, although nobody considers *him* morally responsible. A man who is suffering from plague has to be imprisoned until he is cured, although nobody thinks him wicked. The same thing should be done with a man who suffers from a propensity to commit forgery, but there should be no more idea of guilt in the one case than in the other. And this is only common sense, but it is a form of common sense to which Christian ethics and metaphysics are opposed.

To judge of the moral influence of any institution upon a community, we have to consider the kind of impulse which is embodied in the institution, and the degree to which the institution increases the efficacy of the impulse in that community. Sometimes the impulse concerned is quite obvious, sometimes it is more hidden. An Alpine club, for example, obviously embodies the impulse to adventure, and a learned society embodies the impulse towards knowledge; the family as an institution embodies jealousy and parental feeling; a football club or a political party embodies the impulse toward competitive play; but the two greatest social institutions, namely the Church and State, are more complex in their psychological

motivation. The primary purpose of the State is clearly security against both internal criminals and external enemies. It is rooted in the tendency of children to huddle together when they are frightened and to look for a grown-up person who will give them a sense of security.

The Church has more complex origins. Undoubtedly the most important source of religion is fear; this can be seen at the present day since anything that causes alarm is apt to turn people's thoughts to God. Battle, pestilence, and shipwreck all tend to make people religious. Religion has, however, other appeals besides that of terror; it appeals especially to our human self-esteem. If Christianity is true, mankind are not such pitiful worms as they seem to be: they are of interest to the Creator of the universe, who takes the trouble to be pleased with them when they behave well and displeased when they behave badly. This is a great compliment. We should not think of studying an ants' nest to find out which of the ants performed their formic duty, and we should certainly not think of picking out these individual ants who were remiss and putting them into a bonfire. If God does this for us, it is certainly a compliment to our importance, and it is an even pleasanter compliment if he awards to the good among us everlasting happiness in Heaven. Then there is the comparatively modern idea that cosmic evolution is all designed to bring out the sort of results which we call "good," that is to say the sort of results that give us pleasure. Here again it is

flattering to suppose that the universe is controlled by a Being who shares our tastes and prejudices.

### THE IDEA OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The third psychological impulse which is embodied in religion is that which has led to the conception of righteousness. I am aware that many freethinkers treat this conception with great respect and hold that it should be preserved in spite of the decay of dogmatic religion. I cannot agree with them on this point. The psychological analysis of the idea of righteousness seems to me to show that it is rooted in undesirable passions and ought not to be strengthened by the *imprimatur* of Reason. Righteousness and unrighteousness must be taken together; it is impossible to stress the one without stressing the other also. Now what is "unrighteousness" in practice? It is in practice behavior of a kind disliked by the herd. By calling it unrighteousness and by arranging an elaborate system of ethics round this conception, the herd justifies itself in wreaking punishment upon the objects of its dislike, while at the same time, since the herd is righteous by definition, it enhances its own self-esteem at the very moment when it lets loose its impulse to cruelty. This is the psychology of lynching and of the other ways in which criminals are punished. The essence of the conception of righteousness therefore is to afford an outlet for sadism by cloaking cruelty as justice.

But, it will be said, the account you have been giving of righteousness is wholly inapplicable to the Hebrew prophets, who after all on your own showing invented the idea. There is truth in this: righteousness in the mouths of the Hebrew prophets meant what was approved by them and Yahweh. One finds the same attitude expressed in the Acts of the Apostles where the Apostles began a pronouncement with the words: "For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us" (Acts xv:28). This kind of individual certainty as to God's tastes and opinions cannot, however, be made the basis of any institution. That has always been the difficulty with which Protestantism has had to contend: a new prophet could maintain that his revelation was more authentic than those of his predecessors, and there was nothing in the general outlook of Protestantism to show that this claim was invalid. Consequently Protestantism split into innumerable sects which weakened each other, and there is reason to suppose that a hundred years hence Catholicism will be the only effective representative of the Christian faith. In the Catholic Church inspiration such as the prophets enjoyed has its place, but it is recognized that phenomena which look rather like genuine divine inspiration may be inspired by the Devil, and it is the business of the Church to discriminate, just as it is the business of an art connoisseur to know a genuine Leonardo from a forgery. In this way revelation becomes institutionalized, and fitted into the frame work of the Church. Obviously righteousness becomes

institutionalized at the same time. Righteousness is what the Church approves and unrighteousness is what it disapproves. Thus the effective part of the conception of righteousness is justification of herd antipathy.

It would seem therefore that the three human impulses embodied in religion are fear, conceit, and hatred. The purpose of religion, one may say, is to give an air of respectability to these passions, provided they run in certain channels. It is because these passions make on the whole for human misery that religion is a force for evil, since it permits men to indulge these passions without restraint, where but for its sanction they might, at least to a certain degree control them.

I can imagine at this point an objection, not likely to be urged perhaps by most orthodox believers, but nevertheless worthy to be examined. Hatred and fear, it may be said, are essential human characteristics; mankind always have felt them and always will. The best that you can do with them, I may be told, is to direct them into certain channels in which they are less harmful than they would be in certain other channels. A Christian theologian might say that their treatment by the Church is analogous to its treatment of the sex impulse, which it deplures; it attempts to render concupiscence innocuous by confining it within the bounds of matrimony. So, it may be said, if mankind must inevitably feel hatred, it is better to direct this hatred against those who are really harmful, and that is precisely what

the Church does by its conception of righteousness.

To this contention there are two replies, one comparatively superficial, the other going to the root of the matter. The superficial reply is that the Church's conception of righteousness is not the best possible; the fundamental reply is that hatred and fear can with our present psychological knowledge and our present industrial technique be eliminated altogether from human life.

To take the first point first: The Church's conception of righteousness is socially undesirable in various ways, first and foremost in its depreciation of intelligence and science. This defect is inherited from the Gospels; Christ tells us to become as little children, but little children cannot understand the differential calculus, or the principles of currency, or the modern methods of combating disease. To acquire such knowledge is no part of our duty according to the Church. The Church no longer contends that knowledge is in itself sinful, though it did so in its palmy days; but the acquisition of knowledge, even though not sinful, is dangerous, since it may lead to pride of intellect and hence to a questioning of the Christian dogma. Take, for example, two men, one of whom has stamped out yellow fever throughout some large region in the tropics but has in the course of his labors had occasional relations with women to whom he was not married, while the other has been lazy and shiftless, begetting a child a year until his wife died of exhaustion, and taking so little care

of his children that half of them died from preventable causes, but never indulging in illicit sexual intercourse. Every good Christian must maintain that the second of these men is more virtuous than the first. Such an attitude is of course superstitious and totally contrary to reason. Yet something of this absurdity is inevitable so long as avoidance of sin is thought more important than positive merit, and so long as the importance of knowledge as a help to a useful life is not recognized.

The second and more fundamental objection to the utilization of fear and hatred in the way practiced by the Church is that these emotions can now be almost wholly eliminated from human nature by educational, economic and political reforms. The educational reforms must be the basis, since men who feel hate and fear will also admire these emotions and wish to perpetuate them, although this admiration and this wish will be probably unconscious, as it is in the ordinary Christian. An education designed to eliminate fear is by no means difficult to create. It is only necessary to treat a child with kindness, to put him in an environment where initiative is possible without disastrous results, and to save him from contact with adults who have irrational terrors, whether of the dark, of mice, or of social revolution. A child must also not be subject to severe punishment or to threats or to grave and excessive reproof. To save a child from hatred is a somewhat more elaborate business. Situations arousing jealousy must be very care-

fully avoided by means of scrupulous and exact justice as between different children. A child must feel himself the object of warm affection on the part of some at least of the adults with whom he has to do, and he must not be thwarted in his natural activities and curiosities except when danger to life or health is concerned. In particular there must be no taboo on sex knowledge, or on conversation about matters which conventional people consider improper. If these simple precepts are observed from the start, the child will be fearless and friendly.

On entering adult life, however, a young person so educated will find himself or herself plunged into a world full of injustice, full of cruelty, full of preventable misery. The injustice, the cruelty, and the misery that exist in the modern world are an inheritance from the past, and their ultimate source is economic, since life and death competition for the means of subsistence was in former days inevitable. It is not inevitable in our age. With our present industrial technique we can, if we choose, provide a tolerable subsistence for everybody. We could also secure that the world's population should be stationary, if we were not prevented by the political influence of Churches which prefer war, pestilence and famine to contraception. The knowledge exists by which universal happiness can be secured; the chief obstacle to its utilization for that purpose is the teaching of religion. Religion prevents our children from having a rational education; religion prevents us from removing



the fundamental causes of war; religion prevents us from teaching the ethic of scientific cooperation in place of the old fierce doctrines of sin and punishment. It is possible that mankind is on the threshold of a golden age, but if so, it will be necessary first to slay the dragon that guards the door, and this dragon is religion.





