



SERMON.

Religion and Culture.

BY REV. ARTHUR C. TURBIVILLE.
Preached in Milton Congregational Church,
Huddersfield, England.

"Every good gift and every perfect boon is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights."—
Jas. 1. 17.

The Christian church has to face today a problem more complex and difficult than that of a residuum of the population estranged from Christ by ignorance and vice. This may seem a bold, and even a presumptuous, statement to many whose faith and energy have been sorely tried in the crusade against impurity and intemperance and the hearty inertia of men too besotted even to give any heed to the voice of reason or to the pleading of compassion. We are agreed that no work is nobler or more Christlike than the endeavor to save those who are equally lost to self-respect and to the good opinion of society. Yet I think the problem which most of our churches have to solve within their own borders is more difficult, and the difficulty is enhanced by the fact that many are but half conscious of the altered conditions of their work. When Christianity was first preached in that "vast Empire built upon the ruins of so many nationalities, and upon the disgrace of so many national gods," in an age when nameless vice and shameless luxury had crippled faith and befouled literature, it rarely if ever encountered men representing the higher life of the old Paganism. "Not many great, not many noble were called." Two centuries passed before Christian apologists in Alexandria were compelled to do battle with opponents who occupied the high ground of reason and virtue. In the meantime the cross of Christ had actually won the day. Its apostles had positively swept highway and bye-way, and had gathered into the kingdom the maimed, the halt, and the blind. With marvelous alacrity, with an enthusiasm which ignored the traditions of the past, and which welcomed the fires of martyrdom with an avidity which constituted the most impressive testimony to the regenerating power of the new faith, the common people forsook their sins and embraced the cross of their Redeemer as the symbol of their liberty and the pledge of their eternal life.

Today one of the most telling criticisms of Christianity is that men are not converted, that faith is no longer attested by this moral miracle of transformed lives which ceaselessly witnessed the spiritual vigor of an earlier age. The fault is often laid at the door of the preacher; he is less earnest, he does not watch with the same pastoral fidelity for lost souls, he does not preach the old gospel of repentance and forgiveness. May not the reason for altered methods be found, at least in part, in altered conditions? The fact is that preachers have discovered the folly of preaching to people who are not often found in their churches. The salvation army can show results like those which followed the ministry of Peter and Paul, of Wesley and Whitfield, for they have the same sort of people to work with. For the most part we have not, thanks to the good work our churches have done in the past. It is a good thing surely, that the men and women whom we are called to influence—and I am not speaking of church members and communicants, but of our constituencies in the widest sense—are not of the degraded and vicious class among whom Methodism won its early triumphs.

No one questions the existence of much secret profligacy and refined self-indulgence, or supposes that human nature has been radically renewed by the spread of education or the incidence of Christian ideas, but there can be few men in a modern Christian congregation to whom the gospel comes as a strange and unanticipated revelation.

We are surrounded by those who hear scathing rebukes of cruel, degraded, ruined lives, and who do not hear the inward voices replying: "Thou art the man!" They are conscious to themselves of interests which religion may affect to despise, but which are certainly pure and elevating. "What," they ask us, "do you make of the love of beauty and the passion for truth which have been quickened within us?" We are much more sure of the value of art and science, not merely as a means of the world's material progress, but of discipline and joy in our own life, than we are of the truth or efficacy of many of our dogmas, which seem so distantly or doubtfully related to our actual needs and experience. Do you want us to give up these worldly interests, or, if not, on what principle are we to keep them, and how are they related to the love of Christ, which you say is "the one thing needful?" It is to this state of mind I address myself; these are the questions I want to help you to answer.

Culture versus "Getting On."

Our first endeavour must be to come to a right understanding of the relation between these two interests, and religion.

The word generally employed to cover the newly-awakened pursuit of beauty in art, the new passion for truth in nature, is "culture." This is not a good designation, for in its widest sense it is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. But in a more restricted sense it has been defined as "the choice and pursuit of an ideal," and this definition sufficiently recalls the man of gentle life, of studious habits and lofty aspirations, and clearly distinguishes him from the low-thoughted devotee of wealth and amusement. What dissipated mind can doubt that such a man, whom may relegate to the ranks of the godless and irreligious, receives from the pure and ennobling pursuits of what is beautiful and true an ele-

vation of tone and character which marks him off, as obviously as religion itself, from the multitude who live sordid, despicable lives?

The New Testament idea of "the worldly man" is familiar to us all. Is it fair, is it reasonable, to include any sincere seekers after truth, or any worshippers at the shrine of an ideal beauty in art, in this category? The worldly man is one who cares nothing for the cultivation of mind and heart. His sole concern is for a livelihood. He treats himself as a mere animate body, and his life as the means of procuring as many pleasant sensations as possible. And for this sheer despotism of the world and its wealth, where will you look but to the past generations in England, with its worship of Mammon, its contempt of the ideal, and its religion which Emerson ascribed as "part of good breeding?" "When you see," he adds, "on the Continent the well-dressed Englishman come into his Ambassador's chapel, and put his face for silent prayer into his smooth brushed hat, one cannot help feeling how much national pride prays with him. So far is he from attaching any meaning to the words, that he believes himself to have done almost a generous thing, and that it is very condescending in him to pray to God." Before the days of the new Renaissance, the one idea an English lad had to start life with was to "get on." "Get on" to the bench, "get on" to the woollack, get into parliament, get into bishop's lawn. Whatever you do, get on to some pedestal, or in to some adornment which will make a man of you.

"Help yourself" was another way of putting the Philistine's "Whole duty of man." But help yourself to what? To gentle, modest, chivalrous manhood, an eye trained to see and rejoice in beauty, a well-stored mind, a generous heart? A wise apostle prayed that his friend might prosper even as his soul prospered, or in the measure of his capacity to make noble use of material possessions. But the mildest way of putting the faith of our fathers is that they believed in helping yourself to the most palpable blessings first. Therefore, for religion's sake I rejoice in the culture which has been magnified by some men into a substitute for religion. In modern England the way of the Lord has been prepared by the heralds of a higher civilization, which has literally awakened thousands to the recognition of their own spiritual nature, and which has meant for them a veritable baptism of the spirit.

In so far as culture implies passion for truth and beauty, which are their own reward; as it lifts men out of themselves in a "worship" which incapacitates the mind in the measure of its intensity and sincerity for mean ambitions and ignoble pleasures, it brings with it the dawn of a better day, and has, I believe, the promise, if not the potency, of the higher life of religion within it. But more than this. Culture is an imperfect religion. The love of what is true and good, which culture implies, cannot be satisfied except by the worship of God. A remark made by Mr. Forsyth in his work, *Religion in Recent Art*, has only too much truth in it. He says: "It never crosses the mind of most Christians that the principles underlying the inspirations of art have any real vital connection with those which rule the inspirations of religion. . . . We English take a foremost part in practical energy and in the development of the practical applications of Christianity. But we grieve the Spirit by our hard absorption in business; we seal our souls, without knowing or meaning it, against His finer revelations." This attitude of religious men reacts upon the votaries of culture, till they despise faith, and see in it nothing better than a narrow dogmatism which, in the attempt to grasp the stars, sacrifices the spiritual possibilities of the present. I honor the artist's love of the beautiful, and unspeakably the spirit of the true naturalist as he humbles himself to learn of his great mistress, and to seek painfully and curiously for the secrets she hides from the careless and vagrant eye.

Such men are surely not to be numbered among those of whom an apostle tells us, even weeping, "who mind earthly things, whose god is the belly, and whose end is destruction!" We do not overstep the limits justified by experience in according this distinction to a noble culture, that it imparts a spiritual tone and substitutes spiritual for sensual passion. It is the distinction of the poet to see beneath the outward shows, to feel and to reveal to others the life, of what appears to the dull eye of sense a dead world. Nature is to him just the garment, fine and clinging, which discovers the breathing beauty beneath it.

The Harmonies of Sense and Spirit.

"Shakespeare," says the great Idealist, "possesses the power of subordinating nature for the purposes of expression beyond all other poets. His imperial muse tosses the creation like a bauble from hand to hand, and uses it to embody the thought uppermost in his mind." Should we not say rather that the greatest of poets is aptest to discern the abiding harmonies of sense and spirit? It was no mere whim or caprice of the poet's which linked the tempest in Lear's heart to the tempest of the elements. When "fair is foul and foul is fair," such spiritual confusions "hover through the fog and filthy air," and are uttered on "a blasted heath." Macbeth appeals to night to aid his crime, and as the hour of Banquo's murder draws near, "good things of day begin to droop and drowse," Thus to Elijah—the poet prophet, in the darkness of his Horeb cave, wind and fire and earthquake voice forth the vengeance for which he prayed.

Again, man of science, not less than the imaginative poet (and let me include under this designation not only the pioneer who has learnt to scale the heights where fellow travellers are few and far between, but every earnest young student who has learnt to see in nature something more than "heaps of stupid stone, and masses of aqueous drops," every lad who has realised the unity and order of its forces and the method of its progress)—every naturalist

has escaped the tyranny of the senses. The world is no longer to him the mextricable medley of unrelated phenomena which it seemed at first.

And it is not the function of religion to perfect the inevitable tendency of every ennobling study by the final deliverance of a man's life from the tyranny of sense? Every man worthy the Christian name "walks by faith and not by sight." I may summarise this brief indication of the relation between culture, worldliness, and religion thus.

To the sensualist the world is a trough and a tomb. To the poet it is a sacrament of ineffable beauty. The spirit of his deep desire woos him on every green hill, in deep recesses of the woodland, in the light of setting suns. But though he dip his pen or brush in the deep crimson of his heart passion, neither poet nor artist ever yet expressed the infinite sweetness and pathos of his mistress' smile. "How can I ever be satisfied till feeling is deadened?" he cries. "I strive and strive, and cannot produce what I want." It is with him as with the man of Christian faith: strength and insight are matured by a worship whose law is one of self-renunciation. "There is no escape from pain except by perverting or mutilating one's nature."

To the naturalist the world is a system of ideas, and we may apply to his purpose and character the language of religion. It is his distinction to sacrifice all things to the majesty of truth. He has discarded the right of private judgment, and by patience in self-suppression has learnt not to prescribe but to transcribe. In the prosecution of that worship, in devotion to what the carnal eye of sense regards as that dim, cold abstraction, "truth," he is ready for the microscope, in the use of the microscope, in the cultivation of the poison germs of disease, limbs, eyesight, life itself he counts not dear.

To the Christian, whose entire being is abandoned to the rule of faith, the whole of life is seen in the light of God. He cannot be content with truths, he must know Him who is true. He rejoices not less in the beauty of earth, and sea, and sky than the artist and the poet; but his life is a great longing for the uncreated Light. His ideal is that of perfect humanity—the eternal truth and beauty revealed in Jesus Christ. We believe in the human heart of things, that God is our God. No poorer aspiration than that we may be filled with all the fulness of God can satisfy us, for "in Him are all our springs."

The Quest For Truth in Religion.

The principle that the passion for truth and beauty can only be satisfied by religion, the worship of the Spirit of Truth, leads to a practical conclusion for two classes of hearers.

(1) Many of the young men and women before me have, to their credit and lasting happiness, followed up some branch of an art or science, music, drawing, history, botany, or kindred subject, which is to them an ever-deepening delight. But you fight shy of religion. The reason some of you would give is that theologians have taught so much that is neither good nor true. I have no time even to mention now those medieval conceptions of God as a revengeful tyrant who requires to be complimented by being called merciful, of Christianity as a mercantile transaction by which a few souls have been rescued out of the hideous ruin of creation. There is no time now to reproduce that effigy of the religion of Jesus which Mr. Cotter Morrison has constructed out of all the silliest, wickedest refuse of ecclesiastical history, which it is so easy to make fun of and to destroy.

A preacher might be forgiven a little righteous indignation at that temper of mind which is never discouraged by the fact that science is perpetually throwing aside the faulty observations and imperfect generalisations of past days, or by the disagreement of scientists today on many fundamental questions, but which lightly abandons theology, the profoundest of sciences, and religion, "the chief end of man," because of the superstitions which have turned the truth of God into a lie. The fact that truth has been perverted, and that the task of reconstruction is great and onerous, constitutes an imperative summons, and a binding obligation to every truly scientific mind.

But the present aloofness of many educated men from our church life may, I think, be more kindly and quite as reasonably explained. The fact that a large proportion of young men are shy of spiritual personal religion is beyond question. So many come only to be lost as units of a large congregation, rather as onlookers than disciples.

I cannot think that the difficulty with some of you may be of this nature, that having seen your way to discard many false notions associated with religion, you do not see clearly the relation of Christian truth to that higher life of thought which is already yours. I ask, then, that you will consider if the view of religion I have indicated is not consistent with the culture you prize? Are you not actually engaged in studies and disciplines which must lead inevitably (while you remain faithful to your own deepest aspirations, and to the indications these studies afford of the true use of life) to that religion which consecrates the entire manhood, which is, indeed, the divine education of mind and heart? I summon you to no dubious enterprise, I appeal to instincts that are already strong within you. I point you to higher reaches of those paths of progress on which you already tread, and to those highest revelations of truth and beauty which have been given to the world in Jesus Christ.

(2) But as the greater includes the less, this line of thought involves culture in religion. If the mere naturalist lacks "the one thing needful," the servant of God who brings an untrained, ill-furnished mind to His service is like a raw recruit who enters the field with a blunt sword. If by "the necessity of religion" we understand, not that all men are religious, but that no limits can be placed upon the upward, onward movement of his spiritual life, then all knowledge and discipline are included in his quest, and are consecrated to his service.

Culture in Religion.

The claims of culture are pitched too low, if they are not radically misconceived, when men admit that a Christian may unbend to the relaxations of art, or that he is not the worse for a literary or scientific hobby. The break implied between culture and religion, between the love of the beautiful things that are made and the

worship of Him who makes, does not exist.

God forbid that I should say one word to disparage the untroubled faith of the man of God, to whom all books but one are an unknown realm. I admit that God can do without our knowledge. I only plead that He can do still better without our ignorance. Ignorance has been the fruitful mother of superstition and persecution, and has a very dangerous strength of its own. It is a common saying, remarks George Eliot, "that knowledge is power, but who hath duly considered and set forth the power of ignorance? Knowledge slowly builds what ignorance in an hour pulls down. Ignorance it is which has weighted the faith with the superstitions which have enfeebled it, and with the brittle temper and impatient zeal which seek to advance truth by persecution and detraction, which, blind to the tenderness and complexities of the human spirit, has estranged from God countless seekers after truth, whom it has repelled by its crude and loveless dogmatism."

No man is able fully to appreciate the loveliness of creation, or fully to prize the possession of knowledge, until every tiny flower is fraught with the mystery of God, and every fresh truth quick with Divine significance. Blind enthusiasm must always fail to carry to fruitful issues the Divine work it undertakes. And who of us but knows of men attracted by sincere faith to look farther into the truth of religion, lost to Christ by the fact that "holiness simplicity" dreads and denounces light of Reason. I was much impressed by a remark made by General Booth "that many a London cabman who had received a good education, and who formerly had occupied a different position, asked questions and felt difficulties that their salvation army workers could not tackle. To my surprise he added, leaning over the table: 'We want birth—breeding—education!' It is not only General Booth who wants them—Christ wants them. It is for His sake that I plead with you who know the one thing needful, and who have found the more excellent way, to covet earnestly the best gifts, for every good gift and every perfect boon is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights."

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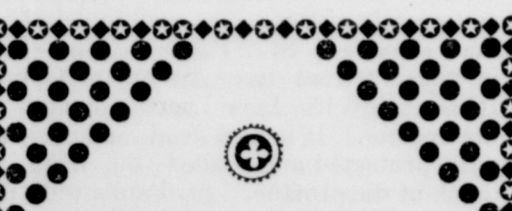
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