

# Morals and Religion

BY

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WHY DO SO many people cling to religion today? The contradictions involved in religious dogmas are obvious: the problems they raise are insoluble. Modern knowledge has shown that many of the beliefs demanded by all churches can be nothing but nonsense. And yet educated, intelligent men and women, able to detect and reject false arguments in daily life, will swallow absurdities whole in the sphere of religion. Why?

No two human beings are altogether alike. There are as many slightly different answers as there are believing individuals. But the root cause, the most powerful force which keeps their congregations in the churches, is a sincere belief that only his religion keeps a man from falling into sin.

It is because of this that so many feel that their faith must be maintained at all costs, locked away, never to be examined or doubted. Begin to regard it in a critical light and where shall we end? For most of us, in the depths of our hearts, feel that truth is less important than virtue.

This feeling is therefore very important. Every day the churches pour out propaganda designed to spread or to strengthen it. Yet it needs very little knowledge of history to show us that it cannot possibly be true. In two thousand years Christianity has failed to make Christians good. They themselves seem to believe that they are better than other men, but the facts do not bear this out. The ages of universal faith in Europe, for instance, were ages of violence, treachery, cruelty and treason. If anyone doubts this let him read the history of two markedly religious countries, Spain, and Scotland before the Union. They appal.

Why then cling to a system of sanctions for securing goodness which is so demonstrably ineffectual?

Partly because children are taught that the system is all-important and that it is a sin to doubt this. Partly because the churches have usually—not always—considered themselves the arbiters of morality. They have preached it, shown us fine examples of it, and toiled to bring sinners to repentance. That does not stand in doubt, and to the efforts of innumerable preachers and teachers we are all indebted. But the point that is at issue here is the part that was played in what success they had by the supernatural dogmas which have accompanied the moral training. Are the beliefs in gods, heavens, hells, necessary or even helpful in the great task of subduing man's

anti-social impulses? Or are they, taken as a whole, an actual disadvantage? I believe them to be in many ways a substantial disadvantage.

To begin with the religious man is building on the sands of delusion. He prays desperately for help and the Heavens are silent. There is in fact no God who answers prayer. This can be terrifying, especially for children. Are they then too wicked for God's mercy? The brooding over one's sins which sometimes follows, the states of despair and frantic repentance, can lead to such self-centred misery that it becomes almost impossible to form friendly relations with others. And to feel friendly towards one's neighbour is a very great help towards doing one's duty to him.

Again, to realise that one's prayers have no result may throw doubt upon the wisdom and truthfulness of parents. This too can be shattering.

And, as we all know, those who have been taught that morality is the performance of God's will, may in fact be in danger of losing their hold upon virtue once they have been driven to the conclusion that there is no personal god.

Next, many religious doctrines are obviously irrational. The problem of evil is the outstanding example. To believe that the suffering and wickedness which we see around us can have proceeded out of perfect goodness and love is to fly in the face of reason. To try to believe it is to injure the mind in a very serious way. The desire to believe what one wants to believe instead of facing facts is one of the outstanding faults of human beings. To give way to it is always dangerous. And never more so than when morals are in question. For men when they do wrong almost invariably seek to cover up their sins with false excuses. And once reason has been discarded as a guide, the door is opened to every sort of nonsense. Heaven can be bribed by masses for the dead. The elect—of whom I am one—will go to heaven however they behave. "It is everyone for himself in this world, and I have a right to whatever I can grab." "Morality is for the weak—the common herd—I am above it."

One may add to these all the everyday excuses: "If he did not want it stolen he should not have left it lying about." "Borrowing is not stealing and I am going to repay this money. But if I paid it back now it would not be fair on the other people from whom I have borrowed." "All the others steal only they are not found out." "What she doesn't know won't hurt her." "Nobody has ever loved as we do!" etc., etc., etc.

Weaken reason, and you weaken virtue's surest shield.

Yet again, psychiatrists have found that to be required to satisfy a being who is absolutely and infinitely good has a destructive effect upon many minds. "Be ye perfect even as He is perfect!" has driven thousands to mental illness. The tasks imposed upon human beings should be capable of fulfilment not impossible. Otherwise unstable types may be cast into states of morbid despair. Others will argue that since reasonably good behaviour is useless they may as well enjoy themselves while they can and chance eternity. And as an extreme case we have the religious maniac who believes that God has commanded her to have sexual intercourse with the doctors in the asylum, or to kill his enemy because he is also the enemy of God.

Lastly, all religions add to those moral duties which are socially necessary a number of purely religious tasks such as church attendance, prayer and fasting. These may constitute a heavy drain upon the individual's powers of self-discipline. And they may therefore be performed at the expense of ordinary good behaviour. "Having spent an hour upon my knees underlining the prophecies in the Scriptures in red ink, surely I must be better than other people!" When such mortification of the flesh is demanded as complete abstinence from all forms of sexual activity, the effect upon mental health may be extremely serious.

In any case, each new discipline creates frustration, whether this is realised or not. And all frustration creates resentment. It is the immense strength of this accumulated resentment which is largely responsible for the appalling cruelties which have stained the histories of so many churches.

Church people are in error when they maintain that it is their religion which keeps them good. They are merely attributing to an invalid system conduct which has really very little to do with it. And they are hampered at every turn by the fact that their dogmas are often inconsistent, sometimes silly, and sometimes, to the impartial thinker, downright immoral. The unbeliever is less haunted by irrational fears, not weighed down by artificial sins, not torn by conflict between his common sense and his desperate longing to preserve his faith. It is he therefore who is free to govern his life by the light of reason and in a spirit of good-will towards his neighbour.

*(Summary of a lecture delivered on May 8.)*