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The Basis of Morality.

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No thoughtful reader of recent journalistic literature can have failed to notice the growing insistence on the need of religious education in the interest of sound morals. The fact that of late so many of our criminals are youths, boys (and even girls) still in their teens, is forcing home the conviction that an education without religion does not offer a sound and stable basis of morality, that ethical theory alone will not insure upright living nor offer a firm foundation for family or state. In the early days of our Republic, Benjamin Franklin cautioned Thomas Paine against publishing a book tending to disprove the existence of God, since without a belief in God morals lacked foundation. In his *Autobiography* Franklin says: "I soon became a thorough Deist. My arguments perverted some others, particularly Collins and Ralph; but each of these having wronged me greatly without the least compunction and recalling Keith's conduct towards me (who was another freethinker) and my own towards Vernon and Miss Read, which at times gave me great trouble, I began to suspect that this doctrine, though it might be true, was not useful." George Washington, in his "Farewell Address," also felt constrained to lift up his voice against the rising irreligion. He said: "And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained apart from religion."

While hushed for a number of years, these sentiments have in recent years received increasingly emphatic expression. President Coolidge has again and again stated his conviction that the hope of the country is in religion. Speaking to the International Convention of the Y. M. C. A., Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover declared the indispensable requirement of our time to be "a measure of spiritual reenforcement," which can be "supplied only from the fountainhead of character — true religion, widely embraced, with its ethical values supported." Under the caption "Robbing the Child in

the Name of God" the *Literary Digest* of January 6, 1926, reported an address of Prof. Luther A. Weigle, of Yale, condemning Protestants, Catholics, and Jews for stripping the public schools of all religious instruction. In this practical exclusion of religion from our public schools, Professor Weigle sees great danger. The situation will, in time, he believes, imperil the future of religion in this country and, with religion, the future of the nation itself.

It goes without saying that spokesmen for the religious training of the American youth have in mind primarily some form of religion which claims to be Christian, *i. e.*, which recognizes Jesus at least as the greatest of all teachers and the Apostle of the loftiest code of morals. Religions of this type, however, fall into two classes, which at present confront each other in outspoken hostility — Fundamentalism and Modernism. If morality in America is to rest on religion, it will rest on some form of Protestant or Catholic Fundamentalism or on some form of Modernism. Do these forms of religion offer equally sound bases for morality? That, in its broadest aspects, is the question with which we are concerned in this essay.

In considering this question, we must not overlook the human factor in the problem. It is the nature of human beings to act from definite, though not always definitely conscious, motives. Not color, size, and physiognomy, but the varying motives and impulses that prompt, inhibit, guide, and direct action characterize human beings essentially. Kant indeed spoke of an absolute, unconditional, and unqualified claim to obedience of the Moral Law, which he called the categorical imperative. To be sure, a categorical imperative attaches to the Moral Law, and a divine curse besides; but neither the one nor the other has ever produced satisfactory results. Instead of stimulating obedience, a categorical imperative and a curse incite rebellion. Has a long code of laws ever produced a law-abiding people? Human beings do not act just to be a-doing but to attain goals and aims which they have set for themselves. To stand well with the people one loves, to realize ambition, to gratify hate, to satisfy desire — these are motives prompting to untiring activity; ease and comfort, fear of unpleasant consequences, on the other hand, inhibit activity. Every new situation confronting a man calls forth a new reaction, which is guided, directed, and controlled by some inner motive. While apparently legion in number, these motives can be summed up under two heads: motives of annoyance and motives of satis-

faction. That which satisfies him man does; that which pains him he avoids.

Religion will, accordingly, offer a secure basis for morality in so far as its teachings connect satisfaction with a moral life and annoyance with an immoral life. In appraising the bases of morality offered by Modernism and Fundamentalism, we must answer the question, What satisfaction with, and what annoyance to, moral or immoral living do these types of religion hold out?

It is the especial pride and boast of Modernists that they have shifted the emphasis of religion from the abstract to the concrete, from theory to practise. Modernism, they claim, stresses deeds; Fundamentalism, creeds. "Up to the very recent past," says one of their number,¹⁾ "no one has questioned that the all-important thing in religion is the creed." Certainly a proud claim. Will an analysis of Modernist teachings bear it out?

To give even a fairly complete roster of the teachings of Modernism is no easy matter. They vary from one adherent to another, as there are all shades and degrees of Modernists. Around certain cardinal and essential points, however, all Modernists rally. Chief of these tenets is the refusal to accept the Bible or any other book as a definite, final, and conclusive revelation of God. The revelation of God's will, Modernists hold, is progressive and is to be found scattered in all the literatures of the various races, being made constantly more and more complete. Dean Inge, *e. g.*, believes "that in science has come the chief revelation of the will and purposes of God that has been made to our generation."²⁾ The god of Modernists is, furthermore, not the God of the Bible, who "hath done whatsoever He hath pleased," but a Supreme Being bound to observe the laws of nature and hence incapable of performing miracles. Neither has he Jehovah's sense of justice, which demands the punishment of the sinner. The existence of a hell and the reality of a personal devil are likewise denied. The danger of eternal punishment being removed, there is no need of a Savior. Jesus is therefore not represented as the Son of God in any distinctive sense. He is not virgin-born, but the natural son of Joseph and Mary, a great teacher, who proclaimed the loftiest and the noblest system of ethics and set a shining example for men to

1) Rev. John W. Herring, Secretary of the Federal Council of Churches' Committee on Good Will between Jews and Christians. *Literary Digest*, January 9, 1926, in "A Jewish-Christian Task."

2) *Yale Review*, January, 1926, p. 235.

follow. In harmony with such concepts, religion, to the Modernist, is not a body of doctrine by which he learns how to become acceptable to God, but simply, in the words attributed to Prof. A. E. Haydon, of Chicago University, "the cooperative quest of the good."

One thing appears at a glance — the awful doom of falling into the hands of an outraged God, which Fundamentalism holds before the sinner, — enough to make the stoutest quail, — under Modernistic teaching ceases to exercise its restraining influence. The only annoyance which Modernism attaches to immorality is limited to this life. Far be it from us to maintain that wrong-doing goes unpunished in this world. Nothing can be established more readily by many concrete instances than the fact that sin finds the sinner out here on earth. Still the fact remains that, as far as men can judge, many sins remain unpunished in this world, or, at least, never bring to the wrong-doer adequate punishment. To limit the annoyance incident upon immoral living to this life, therefore, means to remove also the sense of the inevitableness of annoyance and, since often years elapse between the commission of a crime and its punishment, the immediateness of the annoyance as well.

To rely on problematic and distant annoyance as a deterrent from desired action is unpsychological. Human beings react to motives whose results are immediate and certain. When probable and distant annoyance is balanced against immediate satisfaction, man will decide in favor of the latter. Says the wise Solomon: "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." Eccl. 8, 11. Certainly the annoyance incident upon immoral living is materially weakened under Modernistic teaching.

How does satisfaction arising from moral living fare? In answering the question, it is necessary to recall that to the Modernist, religion is no longer a code of teaching which informs a man how he may become acceptable to God and inherit heaven and its bliss, but merely "the cooperative quest of the good." Of course, under such a view the satisfaction arising from the knowledge that God accepts a man as His child, whom He finally receives into companionship with Himself, disappears; future reward no longer offers any great impetus to morality. To lead a moral life in the hope of gaining the good will of God presupposes a definite revelation of God's will and character, which Modernism denies. But the situation is still worse. By denying any definite

and concrete revelation of God's will, Modernism removes from morality its divine sanction. Right and wrong then become matters of convenience and custom, shifting and changing from time to time.

But, rejoins the Modernist, there still remain the satisfaction and annoyance growing out of self-approval and self-condemnation, which are immediate and inevitable. When a man does what he knows to be right, conscience satisfies him with its approval; when he does what he knows to be wrong, conscience annoys him with censure. The rejoinder is specious. It reckons without the host. It overlooks an important trait of men, presupposing that men are guided by reason in deciding for or against any action. As a matter of fact, the fall of Adam corrupted the entire nature of man so that also his mental faculties no longer function in their pristine vigor and clarity. Though created a rational creature, man no longer acts as reason dictates, but as passion prompts. Shakespeare, with his deep insight into human nature, makes Macbeth, who is contemplating the murder of Duncan, say:—

But in these cases [*i. e.*, murder]
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th' inventor.

Accordingly, Macbeth's real reason for resolving to abstain from the crime is the fear of retribution. But this reason he dares not avow. It is a species of cowardice, and cowardice no man admits to himself. Macbeth therefore goes on and invents other reasons:—

He's here in double trust:
First as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife himself.

All of these are, of course, perfectly good reasons for not slaying Duncan, but the interesting thing is that Macbeth enumerates them to find a reason for a line of conduct determined upon from an entirely different reason. In his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin, with remarkable frankness, recounts an example of such rationalization in which he indulged to rid himself of inconvenient principles. At the time he believed it wrong to eat anything that had life, considering the catching of fish as a kind of unprovoked murder. "All this," he says, "seemed very reasonable. But I had been formerly a great lover of fish, and when it came out of the frying-pan, it smelled admirably well. I balanced some time

between principle and inclination, till, recollecting that when the fish were opened, I saw smaller fish taken out of their stomachs, then, thought I, 'If you eat one another, I don't see why we may not eat you'; so I dined upon cod very heartily and have since continued to eat as other people. . . . So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable creature*, since it enables one to make or find a *reason* for everything one has a mind to do." Psychologists also tell us that much of what we ordinarily call reasoning is nothing but rationalization of previously determined action. After examining a great number of subjects with a view of determining the reasons that led them to choose their occupations, Dr. Ernest Jones concludes: "External inducements and opportunities, . . . important as they may seem to the casual observer, are often but the pretext for the expression of some submerged primary craving." ³⁾ Thus the very apostles of Modernism rise to bear witness to this truth of the Scriptures: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?" ⁴⁾ What basis for morality can self-censure and self-approval offer when the heart of man cannot be trusted to pass rationally and dispassionately on questions of right and wrong?

In short, under Modernism, morality rests neither upon divine sanction nor upon the hope of satisfaction arising from communion with God nor upon the fear of annoyance from divine retribution for wickedness, nor even upon rational thought, but upon human convenience and custom, aye, upon human passion and prejudice. Its claim to offer a true basis for morality in self-approbation and self-censure is unscriptural and unpsychological. Its boast of stressing moral living falls to the ground.

Modernism failing, what basis does Fundamentalism offer for morality? Before analyzing the proposition, we must point out that Fundamentalist religions fall into two classes: religions in which man's acceptability to God depends at least in part on his own merits and the genuine Christian religion, which teaches that we become acceptable to God by grace, through faith, for Christ's sake. We are constrained to make this division because many Fundamentalists who teach the atonement of Jesus, teach also that man must eke out Christ's atonement with some work or at least with a favorable attitude toward grace, thus making salvation depend, in the last analysis, at least in part, upon man himself. Now, the

3) Quoted in Nunn, *Education: Data and First Principles*, p. 54.

4) Jer. 17, 9.

Epistle to the Galatians makes it perfectly clear that not the degree to which a man depends on his own works, but the mere fact that he does depend on them for his salvation, distinguishes between a religion of grace and a religion of merit. When the Galatians, under the influence of Judaizing teachers, were in danger of believing that the atonement of Christ had to be supplemented by the observing of circumcision, thus adding to Christ's merit only a bit of ritual, Paul wrote: "If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify to every man that is circumcised that he is a debtor to the whole Law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the Law; you are fallen from grace. . . . A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." Gal. 5, 1 sqq.

The question before us, therefore, is in reality twofold: What basis for morality can be found in a Fundamentalist religion of grace? and, What basis for morality can be found in a Fundamentalist religion of merit?

Self-evidently, any religion which teaches that the salvation of man depends even in the least degree on his own merit, effort, or proper attitude to grace provides, in the hope of blissful satisfaction which it holds out as well as in the doom with which it threatens the rebellious, powerful motives for moral living. But a morality born of the fear of retribution is no true morality. To be truly moral, virtuous actions must be genuine self-expression. Kindness toward one's neighbor is moral only when one feels kindly disposed toward him and not when it springs from a fear of the censure of the community. To act morally from the fear of consequences is essentially dishonest; it is of a cloth with the conduct of Uriah Heep, who put on a show of humility in order the more surely to humiliate his employer and exalt himself. The outwardly moral conduct engendered by fear covers inward antagonism, rebellion, and hate. "The Law worketh wrath." Morality engendered by fear is a whited sepulcher filled with dead men's bones. Hence the fear of punishment, of annoyance, which a religion of merit can instil offers no basis for morality. In the words of Herbert Spencer: "There is no alchemy for producing golden conduct out of leaden instincts."

There remains as a possible basis for morality under a religion of merit the hope of obtaining blissful satisfaction in the communion with God in heaven as a reward for moral conduct. However, when a man leads an upright life to get a reward, he is not

moral, but mercenary. Furthermore, to be moral for the purpose of obtaining a reward is not the honest expression of one's innermost feelings and desires. On examination it resolves itself into a species of hypocrisy, the obverse of the morality of fear.

We readily concede that the hope of obtaining satisfaction has some force in prompting to good works. The fear of damnation and the hope of reconciling God prompted the monk Luther to keep a most careful watch over his thoughts and actions. But the hope of obtaining satisfaction as a result of moral living offers no sound and stable basis for morality. In the first place, the satisfaction is remote. In the second place,—and this is much more serious,—the achievement of satisfaction by moral living or by keeping God's Law is beyond human reach. After many earnest trials, Luther declared that if salvation depended only on one entirely perfect repetition of the Lord's Prayer, it would be utterly out of man's reach. No matter how small the gap to be bridged by man's merit, any person who honestly examines himself will find that he did not span it. Like St. Paul, he must confess that he does those things which he does not allow.⁵⁾ Try as he will, he cannot achieve even the least jot or tittle of a righteousness which avails before God. Even after words and actions are fairly well under control, evil thoughts come and go, so that when a man casts up accounts honestly, he finds himself falling deeper and deeper into guilt and damnation. And once that realization forces itself home, there remains for him nothing but to despair, so that he is finally bound to conclude: "All efforts to reconcile God with myself being of no avail, common sense says, Let me eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow I die." That resolution, however, sweeps from under his feet the last vestige of a foundation for morality. It is vain, therefore, to look to a religion of merit for a firm and stable basis of morality.

What, then, about a religion of grace?

It is a well-known fact that Catholic writers have consistently maintained that Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone, without the addition of any human merit, is a most dangerous doctrine, which necessarily puts on end to all upright living.⁶⁾ What are the facts? According to the Christian religion of free grace, as revealed in the Bible, God's love moved Him to send His Son Jesus Christ into the world to redeem men who lay in the

5) Rom. 7, 15.

6) See Dau, *Luther Examined and Reexamined*, p. 111 f.

bondage of sin and who by their sins had merited temporal and eternal punishment. Because of this suffering of Christ the heavenly Father forgives to all believers in Christ all their sins. "Christ," says grace, "died for the ungodly." 7) "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God!" 8) "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them." 9) "In Christ we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace." 10) After thus setting forth the wonders of God's love, the religion of grace exhorts: "Be ye therefore reconciled to God!" "Let us love Him who first loved us!" 11) Instead of urging men to do good works in order to establish friendly relations with God and so obtain eternal salvation, the religion of grace announces good will toward men in Christ, who broke down the middle wall of partition and prepared for us once more free access to God the Father, secured for us the favor of God, and made us (who were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, who had no hope and were without God in the world) to be nigh to God and brought to us the adoption of sons. 12) In short, instead of urging us to do good works in order to make overtures of reconciliation to God, grace proclaims that all this has been accomplished by Christ and that God is now making overtures for friendly relations with us.

Once these wonderful truths penetrate the heart of man, they awaken boundless gratitude. If God has not spared His only-begotten Son, how, then, can the believer withhold anything from God? "We love Him," says St. John, "because He first loved us." 13) Thus gratitude motivates the keeping of the first table of the Law. But to love God truly implies that a man love also his fellow-men. "If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another." "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his neighbor, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God, whom he hath not seen?" 14) That man will love his enemies, bless those that curse him, thereby approving himself a child of his Father in heaven. 15) Thus gratitude motivates also the keeping of the second table of the Law. The Christian religion of the grace of God in Christ blends the love of God and the love of man.

7) Rom. 5, 6.

10) Eph. 1, 7.

13) 1 John 4, 19.

8) 1 John 3, 1.

11) 2 Cor. 5, 19; 1 John 4, 19.

14) 1 John 4, 11. 20.

9) 2 Cor. 5, 19.

12) Eph. 1, 12. 13; Gal. 4, 5.

15) Matt. 5, 44. 45.

And the gratitude which the love of God engenders in the hearts of believers offers a stable basis of morality. It strengthens the motives of satisfaction and annoyance governing human action. The satisfaction which a Christian derives from doing good works is instant and immediate. It does not depend on eternity. Giving a gift to one beloved is a reward in itself. Living by the Law of God, doing the will of his Father in heaven, gives to the Christian his sweetest pleasure. By living a moral life, by doing all manner of good works, and never wearying of well-doing, the Christian gives his gratitude an outlet. His moral life is but the expression of his gratitude. Knowing full well that God has freely given him eternal life in Christ Jesus, the Christian does not do good works in order to have them rewarded in heaven. No deferred satisfaction prompts him to righteous living. Even if his good works would be entirely forgotten in eternity, he would still be constrained to lead a God-fearing life, since that life is the natural expression of his gratitude and of his regenerate heart. "Oh, this faith," says Luther, "is a lively, active, busy, mighty thing! It is impossible for this faith to be active without ceasing. Faith does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question has been asked, it has accomplished good works; yes, it is always engaged in doing good works."¹⁶⁾

Equally immediate is also the annoyance which in a Christian accompanies wrong-doing. To be sure, the annoyance a Christian fears is not eternal damnation. That penalty Christ has paid for him; those consequences of his sins are daily and richly forgiven by his gracious God. Still, a Christian feels direct and bitter annoyance whenever he deviates from the path of righteousness, since his conduct is at odds with the leading motive of his life. Finding himself doing those things which he does not allow, he exclaims: "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"¹⁷⁾ When a Christian sins, he experiences bitter contrition and sorrow because he must again confess that he has repaid with evil the Savior who died that he might live.

It is therefore evident that grace alone perfectly furnishes the man of God unto all good works. Only that morality which rests on the grace of God revealed in Christ Jesus has a sound and

16) Translation by Dr. Dau in *Luther Examined and Reexamined*, p. 118.

17) Rom. 7, 24.

stable basis. Just this doctrine, which the world despises, which it considers base and quixotic, is precious. The stone which ethical builders reject is the corner-stone of morality. To insure a stable basis for morality, it is not sufficient that schools teach the great principles of religion and morals upon which all sects and denominations agree, as is so frequently advocated to-day, but the old Gospel of which Paul was not ashamed, the Gospel of Christ Crucified, a stumbling-block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, the power of God and the wisdom of God.¹⁸⁾ If men sincerely seek the kingdom of God, "these things," which include moral living, will be added to them. Godliness will always possess the promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.
