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What Is Religion?

Religion has been well defined as the sum of all the ties that bind us to God. That there should be religion arises from the nature of our being. Just as there are necessary ties between parent and child, so there are necessary ties between Creator and creature. Filial piety is the virtue which determines the relation of a child to its parents; religion is the virtue which binds the creature to his Creator.

When these relationships are determined entirely by reason the virtue is called natural religion. Man studies his state, the nature of his being, and discovers that he exists, but he did not bring himself into being. Beyond his parents as the proximate source of his being, he goes back through a long series of parents who were in their time children to an Uncreated Being who gave existence to his first parents - the beginning of the human race. This First Cause is a necessary postulate because he cannot conceive of an infinite series of created beings. Nothing that comes under his experience, personal or racial, had the power to bring itself into being, so that all creation must have an outside, uncaused cause, an Infinite Being, without beginning or end.

This has been the universal thought of mankind. The fact that here and there isolated groups, even fairly large groups at times, have professed themselves skeptics, have denied the existence of a Supreme Being, does not affect the validity of the argument that all men of all times have believed in a Supreme Being, and that therefore, according to the common sense of mankind, there is such a Being. (Various individuals and groups of individuals have believed that they would not die; their belief is no argument against the fact, agreed to by the common sense of mankind, that all men are mortal, all men will die. --- There have been various notions regarding the nature of this Supreme Being. This disagreement does not affect the fact of His existence, any more than errors regarding the nature of electricity affect the fact of its existence.)

Given, then, the fact of God's existence as the First Cause, we have a necessary relationship with Him. Looking into this relationship, we find that men have at all times recognized these obligations to God: 1. Adoration or praise; 2. Thanksgiving; 3. Propitiation or reparation; and 4. Impetration or Petition. These four ends of sacrifice and prayer are found in pagan sacrifices and prayers - not all four in all of them, but all four in some of them, and some of the four in all of them. This evidence from history shows what reason gives as the basic principle of natural religion.

Reason can also arrive at a law - a definite code of conduct which determines the actions of the individual and of society towards God, towards one's neighbor, and towards oneself. This is the law of nature, the law of conscience. We see its primary principles in the codes of the crudest savages; we see its secondary principles, and some of its tertiary principles in the most enlightened codes of antiquity and in the reasoning of the best of the Greek and Roman philosophers before Christ; we find it in its fulness, however, only in the teachings of Christianity - and this brings us out of the field of purely natural religion into the field of the supernatural.

Revealed religion, or supernatural religion, goes beyond what the unaided mind can reach, and is based on revelation - a definite message from God to man. There have been, at various times, men who have claimed to give to the rest of us a message direct from God. Some of these so-called messages have been silly, ludicrous, or vile; others have been lofty and pure in content, and calculated to better mankind. When these latter have been accompanied by miracles - visible things that only God could do, they have been reasonably accepted as authentic messages from God. The highest revelation, the most perfect system of morals, was given by One who claimed to be the Son of God, and supported His claim by the prophecy and the miracle of His Resurrection from the dead. Christianity is the religion of those who accept His claims and His teaching.