

## The Seat of Authority in Religion.

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The discussion of my subject, which is "The Seat of Authority in Religion," may be opened by attempting to define the terms "religion," "authority," and "seat," as used in this address. In his last and perhaps greatest work, Dr. A. M. Fairbairn, the distinguished principal of the Mansfield College, Oxford, says that "Religion is, subjectively, man's consciousness of relation to suprasensible Being; and objectively, the beliefs, the customs, the rites, and the institutions which express and incorporate this consciousness." To this he adds the following statement: "The consciousness which knows itself related to suprasensible Being represents not one faculty, but the whole exercised reason—the concrete spirit reaching upwards and outwards to a spirit as concrete as itself." "The God he thinks of is one who speaks to him as well as one who can be spoken to. The mutual relation is therefore conceived as a mutual activity; there is reciprocity between the related persons; man worships, but God hears, and sees, and responds. Man offers himself to God, God communicates himself to man" (p. 202). Thus, according to Fairbairn, subjective religion is in essence reciprocal action between God and man. And this is doubtless an adequate account of the matter, if subjective religion is to be defined from the point of view gained by looking intently at its personal constituents or causes in the simplest manner possible, for these are God and man working together, the former with perfect and the latter with imperfect intelligence. But I would prefer to lay greater emphasis on the quality of the human co-operation, and to say that true religion is, subjectively, man's consciousness of a friendly or filial relation to suprasensible Being. For God, as he is revealed in Jesus Christ, is the suprasensible Being dimly felt after and partially laid hold of by every religious person, that is to say, by every man who is actively and not merely potentially or inertly religious; and I would prefer to substitute "principles" for "beliefs" in his definition of objective religion, making it signify the principles, the customs, the rites, and the institutions which are concerned with producing and expressing religious consciousness. By "principles" are meant the cardinal verities of religion which call into being faith in what is unseen and eternal. For religion, objectively considered, is either a colossal delusion, or it consists of realities as certain as the fact of existence itself, and it will never satisfy the cravings of human nature unless it justifies a relation of conscious and loving devotion of the soul to God.

The other terms of my subject, namely, "authority" and "seat," require but a word of explanation. "Authority" is defined by Webster as "jurisdiction," or "right to command or to act" in a given sphere. Authority in religion must therefore be a right to command men what they should be and do in matters of religion, a right to lay down the law of their duty or life in relation to God and his universe. In seeking the "seat" of authority in religion, we must then strive to answer such questions as these: Who has the right to prescribe the character of man's normal relation to God? In whom, or in what shall we find the seat of authority for doing this? In God himself? In every man, as being a law unto himself in all that pertains to religion? In any prophet as the chosen mouthpiece of God? In any series of religious teachers? In any record of messages from the court of heaven? In all beings and things comprised in the vast universe known to mankind? or, in some unique and peerless revealer of the Divine will?

It may certainly be said, in the first place, that all authority in religion has God for its source. No rational theist will deny this. Back of every kind of energy or order in the wide world is God. Physical successions and moral obligations are alike dependent on his will and, in the last analysis, on his nature. For he is the primal Being, the Ground, if we do not say the Originator of every creature that has breath, of every soul that feels or thinks, and of every atom of matter, or vortex of energy, that has place in the linked and wondrous movements of the whole sum of existence. Whatever secondary or derivative seat of authority in religion there may be discovered here or there, all will concede that the primary seat of such authority is the bosom of God.

But God is a suprasensible Being, not revealed to us by means of the organs which connect us with one another. As a rule he approaches human souls through unrecognized channels. The late Dr. Brooks, of Colgate University, who possessed the faculty of religious insight in a high degree, once said that he "could not look at a film of protoplasm, through a microscope, without a feeling of awe, because just behind the film was God!" Just behind it! for the film was a veil, however thin, which hid while it touched the Supreme Reality! In spite of telescope and microscope, in spite of scales and reagents, in spite of spectrum analysis and the X-ray, in spite of hypnotism and telepathy, costly laboratories and endless experiments, there is still an unseen world

and a suprasensible God. I am glad of it. Anything like a visible presentation of himself would probably be incompatible with moral training. There is a strain of good sense, as well as of boldness, in "Blasphemous Apology," by Robert Browning (p. 355):

"Naked belief in God, the Omnipotent,  
Omniscient, Omnipresent, sears too much  
The sense of conscious creatures to be borne.  
It was the seeing him no flesh will dare.  
Some think creation's meant to show him forth;  
I say it's meant to hide him all it can.  
And that's what all the blessed evils for.  
It's use in time is to environ us,  
Our breath, our drop of dew, with shield enough  
Against that sight till we can bear its stress"  
"The sum of all is—yea, my doubt is great,  
My faith's still greater, then my faith's enough."

Our quest must therefore be, in the second place, for seat of proximate and derivative authority in religion; a seat which can be approached so near that its voice can be distinctly heard.

### A MAN'S OWN SOUL IS NOT THIS SEAT.

In this quest it will appear (1) that the soul of man is itself a seat of derivative authority in religion. For every human being is rational, moral, and religious, potentially. Created, as we have reason to believe, in the image of God, every man has, at least in germ, the reason, conscience and aptency for worship, which suggest and commend to him some elementary truths of religion, among which are the existence of God and the duty of having respect to his will. Yet, on the other hand, no one can show that the soul of every man is, even for himself, the only seat of authority in religion. Almost every one instinctively looks beyond himself for the supreme authority in religion. In his most sane and lucid moments, when he looks backward and forward with the strongest desire to comprehend the universe to which he belongs, man seeks for some objective authority which he can rationally accept as valid in the domain of religious thought. He feels, indeed, that he must test, judge, and approve all things pertaining to this great matter; but he does not feel that his own mind is competent to furnish the data or determine the character, or compass the issues of religion. It is easier to weigh facts presented to the mind than to discover them, to test an invention than to make it, to perceive the soundness of an argument than to construct the argument *de novo*. The function of a judge is different from that of a legislator. And so, while every one may be easily convinced that, as a rational being, he must be able to judge for himself as to the firmness of the grounds of his religious credenda, he cannot easily be convinced of his power to discover, unaided, the cardinal verities of religion. His brain is not a spider capable of spinning out of itself the marvellous web in which, as in a palace, it will be content to disport itself forever.

Yet it may be admitted that the religious outfit of man is ample enough to predispose him at times to some sort of religious belief. In serious moments he may go out of himself spontaneously in search of an object of worship, a reality that will explain the mystery of being and satisfy the soul's longing for the suprasensible and adorable. But only a few persons in all the generations of mankind have ventured to propound, deliberately, a new religion, and these have been either speculative dreamers, mistaking theory for fact, or a part for the whole—therefore "wells without water," "clouds without rain," or else, in some cases, deliberate impostors.

Confucius did not profess to make known any new religious truth. He merely collected and expounded the ancient lore of his people and taught the ethical principles which should guide men in the various relations of life. Gautama ignored any divine Being in the proper sense of the word, though his adherents in process of time came to pay him a sort of religious worship, quite consistent, however, with idolatry. Mohammed pretended to have received the words of the Koran through an angel from heaven, and his followers were taught to look upon him as pre-eminently the mouthpiece of Allah. In a somewhat similar spirit Emanuel Swedenborg, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young were careful not to arrogate the honor of being, in virtue of their human powers, seats of authority in religion. Mrs. Eddy, and Alexander Dowle are equally modest. They claim to be no more than specially endowed interpreters of the Christian records. For the good sense of mankind has thus far repudiated the assumption that the soul of man is the seat of authority in religion.

I think at this time of but three eminent men who have had the temerity to propound, on the authority of their individual reason, a religion supposed by them to be worthy of confidence, namely, Auguste Le Comte, Herbert Spencer and Ernst Haeckel, and neither of these is likely to have his religious authority recognized by any considerable number of thoughtful men. Their scientific position is creditable, but their religious authority, nil.

### THE COMMON BELIEF OF MEN IS NOT THIS SEAT.

Holding then, as we surely must, that the original seat of authority in religion is God himself, a suprasensible Being, and that men need an accessible or proximate seat of such authority, but have it not, each one

for himself in his spiritual nature, we may inquire (2) whether or not this desiderated seat can be discovered in the common belief of mankind, the *consensus gentium*? During my theological studies in this seminary I was brought into friendly relations with a German professor, Doctor —, who advocated this solution of the problem before us with no small ardor. He averred that it was only necessary to compare the creeds of mankind, Eastern, Western, Southern, civilized and barbaric, ancient and modern, in order to discover the radical elements of a religion worthy of all acceptance. This eclectic creep would, he opined, be true and sufficient. It might have no rites or usages or institutions, but it would comprise the essential principles of goodness and satisfy the race in its life on earth. But my impression is the longer he argued in favor of his position the weaker it seemed to be, until my really learned friend, who held the laboring oar all the time (it being my part to ask questions), became more than half convinced that his view was indefensible, since only a few ethical commonplaces would survive the eliminating process, honestly applied, and all that deserves to be called religion would be set aside as worthless. My friend was not really prepared to surrender all, save and except the habit of recognizing in some indefinable way, the existence of unseen powers which are able to harm or to help mankind. The vast influence of religion in the world could not be accounted for by so meagre a residuum of reality as this hypothesis appeared to leave.

Yet a close study of the religious history of mankind proves the existence of qualities in their nature which make religion indispensable to their well-being. Hence these qualities must somehow be embraced in the seat of authority for religion. Nor is this at all surprising to any one who believed in God and supposes him to be the original but unseen author of the well-ordered universe. If the likeness to God in human nature accounts for any part or degree of religious faith in individuals, it must have been a factor in the vast religious movements of the world, moulding the life of the noblest souls in many nations and during many ages. Multitudinous pillars sustain the temple of truth. It may have a Chief Corner Stone, and at the same time a hundred foundation stones.

No theory as to the seat of authority in religion can be correct which sets aside any actual facts which support religion or any truth of religion. For, be it remembered that our present quest is not for the original seat of such authority but for the proximate seat, the one most accessible to us. There is a sense in which every atom or combination of matter, every movement of air or ether, every living being above or beneath the surface of the earth, every step in the progress of evolution, every advance in the civilization of humanity has its place in forming what has been called the seat of authority in religion. Under God and representing the mind of God, all these speak with authority, declaring in some way his character and our relation to him. If all the worlds with their contents living and lifeless, and all the ages with their generations, historic and prehistoric, in so far as they are accessible in the slightest degree to human consciousness, are interrelated and interdependent, an orderly and intelligible system, they do undeniably testify of a suprasensible, intelligent, and mighty cause, and one may fitly apply to them the fluent lines of Addison:

What though no real voice nor sound  
Amid their radiant orbs be found,  
In Reason's ear they all rejoice,  
And utter forth a glorious voice,  
Forever singing as they shine,  
The hand that made us is divine.

—The Watchman.

(Concluded next week.)

## The Christian's Wealth.

BY REV. THODORE L. CUYLER.

The servants of Christ have a different arithmetic from the worldling. He counts his gains by the earthly possessions that he accumulates. The Christian often gains by the losses of earthly things. "He that loses for my sake finds" is an assurance full of good cheer to many a tired and afflicted child of God. Grasping after earthly wealth or honor costs very often a sad loss of grace and godliness. It is not what we take up, but what we are ready to give up, that makes us spiritually rich. Giving up for the sake of our Master honors him, and adds to our treasures in heaven.

It is impossible to compute what treasures every faithful Christian may be storing away for that celestial storehouse. There is a constant accumulation. There is a "laying up" day by day. A "book of remembrance" is kept, and God will give to everyone as his work shall be. The record on high will read very differently from the assessor's tax-books in this world. Plutus and Midas are assessed in New York or London as millionaires. Up yonder a "certain poor widow" will outshine many of these colossal money-mongers because she put into the Lord's treasury the two mites that were all her living. The box of alabaster which Mary broke over the feet of her Master will not lose its fragrance in heaven. Every act of self-denial for Christ is an invest-