

THE RELIGIOUS ELEMENT IN THE POETS.

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FIRST PAPER.

A YOUNG girl once went to visit the late Master of Balliol. She had with her a book. He asked her what she was reading. It was a book semi-theological. He suggested that Wordsworth would be more suitable reading. He meant to convey the simple truth that the religious element in poetry is often more potent for good than direct or formal theology. He was right. Theological treatises appeal to the speculative intellect; but they do not carry much nourishment to the soul. They are useful, but more from a rational than a spiritual point of view. They are valuable at times in clearing the mind, but they seldom feed the heart. There is another advantage in the religious influence of the poet. He is not, as a rule, self-conscious or intentional as the theological writer is. He does not irritate us by improving the occasion. If he is religious, he is spontaneously so, and therefore more truly spiritual. He does not insist on his science of thought; he breathes a spirit which kindles our responsiveness rather than challenges our adhesion. The religious element in poetry is a real force; and the religious element in the poets is our subject.

The very name of the subject will provoke discussion. There will be some who will deny that there is any religious element in poetry as such; and these will be opposed by others who would fain claim poetry as the handmaid of religion. Besides these there will be many who will feel that the subject needs defining. This is indeed true. When

we speak of the religious element in poetry we may mean many things. We may only mean that there are poems which reveal the deep religious feeling of the writer; or we may mean that the religious and poetical aspects of life are so inseparably intertwined that there is strong natural relation between religion and poetry. Again, we may mean that, as a matter of fact, apart from any theory on the one side or the other, there is a historical bond between them.

It is clearly, therefore, needful to define a little the position taken up in these papers. Perhaps if we were to say that we were about to enter on an investigation it would be the simplest way of clearing our thoughts. We might then entitle our subject, "The Religious Element in Poetry—an Inquiry." This would certainly more accord with the impartial spirit which I desire to observe. The only difficulty, however, is that such a title would sound a little too ambitious. Such an inquiry would demand more than a dozen papers in a monthly magazine, and more time than falls to the lot of a busy man. Shall we more modestly suggest that the title should stand: "The Religious Element in Poetry—Steps Towards an Inquiry?" We shall then avoid the vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself, and we shall at the same time preserve that impartial state of mind which is desirable.

To the question, "Is there any religious element in poetry?" we may say at once that, as far as facts are concerned, the question sounds