

The Bearing of Religious Ideals On Social Reconstruction by Annie Besant

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[Page 1] IN the Middle Ages beliefs were held to be of supreme importance, and a man might die in the odour of sanctity after having poisoned his surroundings with the ill-savor of an evil life. To accept the teachings of the Church was the one thing needful, and she smoothed the way to salvation for the repentant reprobate — repentant because he had no longer strength to sin, and because the fires of hell glowed luridly around his death-bed. So far was this apotheosis of belief carried that the heretic of pure life was regarded as more hateful, because more dangerous, than the evil-doer, as poisonous food would be rendered more attractive when “served up on a clean platter” — the phrase was used, if I remember rightly, in wrath against the heretic Melancthon's blameless life.

Then followed a re-action against this view, and in the days when we, who now are old, were young, [Page 2] it was loudly declared that rightness of life was the one important thing, and that it mattered little what a man believed provided that his life were pure. It was held that all was well with a man if he acted nobly, and that his beliefs were quite a secondary thing.

The first view — as to the supreme importance of Right Belief — is true; but the belief which is supremely important is that which the man really holds, not that which his lips profess. Bain rightly pointed out that the test of belief is conduct; if a man *believes* that murder and theft will lead him to hell, he will neither slay nor steal; but if he believes that he may murder and thieve in safety, provided that on his death-bed he profess contrition and belief in the articles of the Christian Faith, and that he will thus escape hell, then he will murder and thieve, if his taste leads him in that unpleasing direction. He will look forward to repentance on his death-bed. He may even risk not having a death-bed, if he believes of a brigand, shot as he was riding in one of his forays, that:

Between the saddle and the ground,
Mercy he sought, and mercy found.

Arrangements of this kind, enabling an unfortunate man to escape from the unending torture which was supposed to be the result of his temporary ill-doings, were quite necessary while people believed the immoral doctrine of everlasting punishment. The mistake of the Middle Age view was the making [Page 3] of what a man *said* he believed the important test, the test of salvation — not what he really believed. Long before Bain pointed to a man's conduct as the real criterion of the strength of his belief, an ancient scripture had said: “The man consists of his faith; that which his faith is, he is even that”. [*Bhagavad-Gītā*, xvii. 3] The original Samskrt phrase is very strong: “Faith-formed this man; whatever faith, that even he”.

This vital truth of the forming of character by belief is ignored in the modern view, which exalts character and takes no account of the source whence character springs. If we analyse the case of the Middle Age ruffian, brutal and licentious in his life and repentant on his death-bed, we shall see the utter truth of Shri Krishna's words; he believed that the pardon of the Church, voiced by one of her priests, could prevent him from "dying in mortal sin" and going to hell, no matter how vile his life had been. His conduct was shaped by this belief; he sinned wildly and brutally; he sought pardon on his death-bed; each course of action represented a side of his belief.

The true part of the modern view is the supreme importance of character, and the recognition that, in a universe of law, happiness must ultimately befall the righteous liver: "If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him". [*Dhammapada*, I, 2] In all worlds it is very well [Page 4] with the righteous man. "By good conduct man attains life. By good conduct he attains fair fame, here and hereafter". [*Mahābhārata*, Anushāsana Parva, CIV] "It is your own conduct which will lead you to reward or punishment, as if you had been destined therefor". [*The Sayings of Muhammad*, 116] In the modern view, what are regarded as mere differences of lip-belief are properly regarded as unimportant; it does not really deny the truth that high ideals of life affect character.

The full statement would be: A man's thoughts modify, may even re-create, his innate character, which is the outcome of his thoughts in previous lives; that which he thinks on he becomes. "Man is created by thought". Hence that which he believes, being part of his thought, affects his actions, and according to the strength of the belief and the extent to which it occupies his thoughts will be the effect upon his conduct.

Mere lip-beliefs, thoughtlessly accepted from outside and seldom thought about, do not strongly affect conduct; all religions teach the same fundamental principles of ethics, so differences in theological tenets need not much affect conduct. Differences in these are mostly on subjects which do not bear very directly on life, and these differences are, moreover, mostly superficial. Further, they do not largely occupy the mind of the ordinary man. Still, careless and inaccurate thought on these is injurious, and leads to slipshod thinking on other things. To escape this [Page 5] undesirable influence, a man should either form his theological beliefs with extreme care after assiduous study, or should not dwell upon them in his mind, for "that which he thinks upon that he becomes". Sooner or later, thought flows into action.

Hence the enormous importance of ideals, for according to the thoughts brooded over by the mind, cherished in the heart, will be the conduct of the outer life. *Action* is threefold, two parts being invisible and one part visible. Desire breeds it, thought shapes it, act manifests it. An ideal is a fixed idea; it is created by the mind; it is nourished by desire; it presses ever outwardly into the world of manifestation, seeking to express itself in action. And inasmuch as the religious ideal is that which comes closest to the heart and most dominates the brain, the bearing of the religious ideals of citizens on the society in which they live cannot safely be disregarded by those who guide such societies. Civilizations are built round a central religious ideal, and are moulded and shaped by the thoughts which flow from it. The ideal which dominated the ancient Âryan root-stock was Dharma; [Dharma is Duty, but far more than Duty. It implies that a man's Duty is shown by his circumstances and character, which are the outcome of his past evolution, and it indicates his best and easiest way of present evolution.] that which ruled in Egypt was Knowledge; that in Persia, Purity; that in Greece, Beauty; that in Rome, Law; that in Christendom, the

Value of the Individual and Self-sacrifice. Each of these ideals shaped a religion and made a type of [Page 6] civilisation, and the evolution of each type only becomes intelligible as this is seen.

In ancient India the central thought was the Family — the man, the woman, the child. Out of this, connoting the duty of each member of the trio to each other member, grew the social ideal of Hindûism — Dharma. The dominant thought of the whole social system is that of mutual obligation; these obligations bind human beings together into a social organism, and the State is a conglomeration of families. The family, not the individual, is the unit, and hence the profound difference between the social ideal of the Indian and of the European. A social system based on the family as the social unit must be a system of mutual obligations, of Duties. A social system based on the individual as the social unit must be a system of mutual contracts, of Rights. The latter is a modern ideal, while the former may be said to dominate the ancient world and the East of to-day, though the East is now being invaded by the western ideal. Throughout the East, Duties, not Rights, have been the central ideal, the basis of human society; on Duties were built up social systems in which each had his place, his work, his map of life. Looking at these, we realize that human life was once orderly, instead of anarchical; and we begin to see that while the social ideal is that of the struggle of wild beasts in a jungle, social organization can never rise to a high level.

In order to realize the effect of Religious Ideals on a Society growing up around them and dominated [Page 7] by them, we should carefully study the history of the past, bearing this in mind. Let us take for such study the Ideals of Christianity, and the development of European Society under their influence.

Two main Ideals appear to me to be presented by Christianity: (1) The Value of the Individual; (2) Self-sacrifice.

The first of these made the Individual, instead of the Family, the social unit, and, by emphasizing the value of the individual soul, evolved and strengthened the sense of Individuality in man. The immense stress laid on the life here as determining man's everlasting destiny; the submergence of the idea of reincarnation — universal in the ancient world — entailing the permanence of the after-death happiness or misery brought about by the use of that one life on earth, thus magnifying its importance beyond all measure; the substitution of this conception of the overwhelming value of earthly life with its accompanying heaven or hell for that of a continued life, repeatedly circling through the three worlds — physical, intermediate and heavenly — in a long evolutionary process by which, ultimately, perfection was attained; all this inevitably led to the emphasizing of the value of the individual possessed of this single chance of salvation; this one, short, span of earthly life linked to such gigantic outcome magnified the all-importance of the individual soul. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul ? or what shall a man give in [Page 8] exchange for his soul ?" The Christian teaching, based on the Hebraic ideas of the fixed earth with its revolving firmament studded with sun and moon and *the stars also*, made man as truly the center of life as was his earth of the universe. For man God descended upon earth, took birth in human flesh, and died; man's salvation was God's chief occupation; for man He rose, ascended into heaven, and thence would come again; man's behavior pleased or grieved Him, made Him content or jealous and wrathful; "God is angry with the wicked every day"; heaven was clouded by man's ill-behavior, and rejoiced over his contrition. Man's importance became enormous in this scheme of things, and his value rose to an unimaginable figure. If we contrast it with the previous conception of a continued life — with its quiet enduring of present wrong as the outcome of past ill-doing; with its patient striving to plant seeds of qualities which in the future would flower and bear fruit; with its gentle disregard

of the fate of a single life which bulked but small in the face of a life everlasting, stretching through a long vista of births and deaths, — if we contrast these two conceptions, we shall realise the impetus given to Individuality by the Christian religion, the magnifying of the individual man.

Hence we have, in the West, Individualism as the basis of Society; Man stands alone, isolated, a congeries of inherent, inborn Rights. The apotheosis of the Individual is seen in the assertion of the Rights of [Page 9] Man, and the necessary corollary of a competitive Society; the individual man asserts himself and fights against his fellows; the individual classes struggle with each other; the individual nations war with each other. Each fights for his own hand; each seeks to win by his own individual strength of body or brain that which he desires to possess; competitors in trade carry on cut-throat competition; capitalist and workman fight by lock-out and strike; rival kingdoms seek the bloody arbitrament of war; the weaker nations are exploited for the enriching of the stronger; trade-expansion is forced by conical shot, and markets are opened by the sword; Society becomes a weltering chaos of struggling interests; might is right; the hand of the strong is on the throat of the weak; the helpless is trampled under foot.

Is it, then, ill with the world ? Is this cockpit civilisation the result of the teaching of the Gentlest, the most Compassionate, of the Lover of men ? Nay, be a little patient, O critic of a great work of art while still half-hewn from the stone. All is very well, despite the outward seeming, for this strong Son of God, who is Man, is but evolving the forces which are necessary for the work which shall be done by Him when the strength which now crushes the weak shall be yoked to their service, and each seed of their pain shall blossom into the splendid flowers of their joy.

For the second Ideal of Christianity, shaped less by ecclesiastical doctrine than by the all-compelling [Page 10] power of a Perfect Life, is that of Self-sacrifice, whereof the Cross is the ever-inspiring symbol;

.... the Cross of Christ
Is more to us than all His miracles.

The piteous figure of the dying Christ, thorn-crowned and scourged, nail-pierced and naked, was lifted to the heights of unsurpassable command when o'er its pathetic weakness brooded the curbed omnipotence of a God, voluntarily bowing an Immortal Life to a shameful death, and permitting the strong hands which upheld the universe to be nailed by His creatures to the cross. Such was the Figure which silently stood over against Christendom — silently indeed, but there was magic in the silence. Through the storm and the turmoil, through the struggle and the anguish, a voice was ever softly breathing: "Forasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me". From the eyes of angry men and weeping women and hungry children shone out the dumb appeal of the eyes of the suffering Christ. Strength was shamed in the moment of its triumph; ruth was stirred when greed should have slept, full-fed. In some wondrous way weakness was seen as being stronger than strength, and pain as sweeter than joy. And then there came to the heart of Christendom the meaning of the forgotten words spoken by its Lord: "He that is greater among you, let him become as the younger, and he that is chief as he that doth serve ... I am among you as he that doth serve". Then rang out the words of His servant Paul: "We that are strong ought [Page 11] to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves". More and more is this Ideal of Self-sacrifice asserting itself in the Christendom of today, the Ideal of yoking strength to Service, of recognizing the measure of power as the measure of responsibility, of the joy and the glory of voluntary renunciation. That is the Ideal to which the younger

generation of the wealthy and the highly placed is stretching out hands aching to serve, is offering up hearts aflame with passionate devotion to man. And that is the Ideal which shall triumph, and shall turn the strength which has been gained in struggle to the uplifting of the trampled, which shall consecrate that strength to the performance of duties instead of to the assertion of rights.

This is the permanent Ideal, while the other is temporary, and shall pass away, having served its purpose, and shall be looked back upon as marking one of the many stages through which man has climbed from savagery to civilisation; it will be seen clearly in the future — as some already see it today — that Society could not endure as a constant battle-field of warring interests, but that there must come a great reconstruction, in which the needs of all shall be reconsidered, the happiness of all shall be aimed at, the extent of possession shall measure the duty of service.

That is the Ideal which, in many different forms, is making its way among the nations of the West. Sometimes it appears in the fierce shape of democratic Socialism, with class-hatred as its inspiration; but hate [Page 12] is a disintegrating force; it cannot construct; and every effort that springs from hatred is doomed to exhaust itself in failure. Side by side with this is another form — a Socialism of love, which aims at giving, but does not exhort to spoliation. It is the noble longing of the happy to bring happiness to the unhappy, of the educated to bring knowledge to the uneducated, of those who have leisure to bring leisure and diminution of toil to those who labour. It is the feeling we call *the social conscience* — a feeling which has its roots in love and sympathy, and which is therefore constructive. For the forces born of love are those which join together, and only a Society which is built on love, and cemented by love, can endure through the ages of the future.

Let us consider what religious Ideal will now serve us as a basis for the reconstruction of Society. What Ideal will suffice to breathe into men's hearts the necessary inspiration for action ? Can such an Ideal be presented in a way so precise, clear, intelligible and rational, that it will command the brains of men as well as attract their hearts, that it will give to the social conscience the force of a natural law ? Unless this can be done, our labours will largely fail, for we cannot rely for social reconstruction only on the generous impulses of the noblest and most spiritual men and women. It is necessary that all people should feel that a law exists, accord with which means happiness, and disregard of which brings ruin — slowly or swiftly, but inevitably. For there is nothing which so compels human reason [Page 13] as the sense of an inviolable natural law, working around us, below, above us, a law from which we cannot escape, and to which we must conform ourselves — or suffer. In Society, as in religion and in morals, we must appeal to the reason, we must justify our proposals before the bar of the intellect; only thus can we bring those whose instincts — growing out of the past — are anti-social, to realise that they cannot wisely satisfy those instincts, because such satisfaction would result in a common ruin, in which they, as well as others, would be engulfed.

What religious Ideals, then, are there which may serve as a basis for Society, and may be seen as rooted in natural law, unchangeable and inviolable ? First: the One Life. We must realise that we all share a common Life, are rooted in that Life, so that nothing that injures another can be permanently good for any one of us; that the health of the body politic, as much as of the body individual, depends on the healthy working of every part, that if one part is diseased the whole of the body suffers.

On this point science and religion teach the same truth. We can show, from a book on physiology, how

the scientific man builds up, in ever more complicated fashion, that which he calls an individual. He recognises that each of our bodies is built up of myriad individuals, each of which lives its own life, was born, grew, died and decayed; it is huge communities of these individuals which make our bodies — plastids or cells he calls them as they are walled or unwalled — whether actively moving about [Page 14] in the blood, or comparatively stable; these form the lowest grade of individuals. Then when these are joined together we have the second grade of individuals — tissues. Tissues, joined together, give us the third grade of individuals — organs. Organs joined together make the fourth grade of individuals — plant, animal and human bodies. Bodies joined together make the fifth grade of individuals—communities. Communities joined together make the sixth grade of individuals — nations. Nations joined together, make the seventh grade — Humanity. This is not the teaching of the poet, of the dreamer, of the man fond of allegory, simile, symbol. It is the dry presentment of fact in the physiological handbook. For science, out of the study of diversity, has realised the underlying unity, as religion, beginning with the unity, has divided gradually that unity in training the State, the Family, the Individual. The scientific man regards humanity as an organism, and religion recognises the same idea. Only where science sees one universal Life, religion sees also one universal Consciousness, and calls that Consciousness — GOD. Religion teaches the Immanence of God: One Life in many forms, One Consciousness in many consciousnesses, One Spirit in many spirits —The ONE individualised for love's sake, for bringing “many sons unto glory”.

Thus this idea of One Life in us and in all, One Life expressing itself in countless individuals, is expressed alike by religion and by science. It matters not whether we climb up to a truth [Page 15] from below by countless observations — the Method of Science, or descend into matter from the heights of Spirit — the Method of Religion; both ultimately proclaim the same reality, and this unity of Life, and therefore of Humanity, may be accepted from either. The recognition of that common life is the only sure basis for the building up of Society in the multiplex individuals that we call nations.

Let us suppose that this thought becomes the dominant thought in all minds; will they not inevitably begin to realise that the health of the whole must depend on the health of the parts ? Put poison into the mouth, and the whole body suffers. Inject it into a vein, and the whole body is sick. Allow poverty, misery, ignorance, to spread abroad in your body politic, and the whole body politic becomes diseased, and there is no sound health in it. A belief in the Immanence of God compels the recognition of the Solidarity of Man: “There is one Spirit *and One Body*”. The second truth is only the earth-side of the first. Hence any scheme of social reconstruction that is to endure must be based on the practical recognition of a common Life in which all are sharers. That means that there must be no slums, and no plague-spots of vice in our cities; it means the disappearance of the frightful poverty which gnaws at the life of millions of our fellow-beings. It means such a recognition, such a realisation, of the common Life, that we who are cultured and comfortable shall feel diseased and tortured unless we are doing our utmost [Page 16] to relieve our brothers and sisters from suffering; a realized common Life cannot rest content while there is so much agony unregarded.

This is felt in blood-relationship. There is no need of law to compel a brother to assist a brother; the law of love in the heart negates the need for any other law, and compels us to carry help to a suffering member of the family. And it is true that “God hath made of one blood” all the children of men; and until we feel for those outside the blood-family as we feel for those within, until for us all form one family, until — in the phrase of an old Hindû scripture — we regard all the elders as our parents, the contemporaries as our brothers and sisters, the youngers as our children, we have not really risen to the *human* point of

view at all. For in true men and women, the sense of love, compassion and sympathy — of Service, in a word — stretches over earth, through death, and back to earth again, and just in proportion as we have evolved this quality in far-reaching benevolence are we truly Man.

As this truth becomes generally recognized, all who suffer will have an indefeasible claim on all who are able to help, by the mere *fact* of their suffering; instead of running away from the sight of suffering, and trying to forget it, as so many do today, we shall allow the suffering to wring our hearts until we have removed it from another. We shall live out the exquisite words of that gem of literature, *The Voice of the Silence*, given to us by H. P. Blavatsky: “Let not the fierce sun dry one tear of pain before [Page 17] thyself hast wiped it from the sufferer's eye. But let each burning human tear drop on thy heart and there remain; nor ever brush it off until the pain that caused it is removed”. And it is written: “To live to benefit mankind is *the first step*”

As this Ideal begins to rule, the sense of true Solidarity will arise, and Society will be built in full recognition of the law that social health depends on the health of every individual in Society, that it is not enough that some should be successful, but that all must have their share of happy life. Without this, Society perishes. The law of the common Life, the expression of which is Brotherhood, is woven into the very substance of the human race. There have been many Empires, many Kingdoms in the past, and they have all broken up when they denied the law of Brotherhood. Where Brotherhood is ignored, it breaks that which ignores it. Empires have been built by King-Initiates, and have lasted for thousands of years in happiness and prosperity; but when, in later days, selfishness grasped the sceptre, the Empire slowly crumbled into dust.

The first Ideal, then, which is necessary for Social Reconstruction, is the Unity of Life — we are all one. None can suffer in the body politic without the happiness of all being tainted; success and failure are common for the whole of us; while to ignore the law may for a brief time bring success, in the long run it inevitably brings destruction. A man takes advantage of his fellow man, builds up his own business [Page 18] by the destruction of the businesses of his neighbours, gathers together money by injuring, not by serving, those around him. Perhaps as a lawyer he is unjust, unfair, and wins his cases and fame and fortune by unjust and unfair pleadings in our Courts. The result is that the standard of morality of the nation is lowered. Commerce and trade become rotten, and no man can really trust his neighbour; for the tricks of business and trade are played, and people know it. As mistrust gradually spreads through the people, prosperity sinks lower and lower; and the children and grandchildren of the successful but dishonest man share in the degradation of the whole nation. For the poison that he put into the veins of the nation has gradually spread through the whole body, and the whole is sick and degraded: the national life becomes polluted and devitalised, and every one suffers. The wealth he gained by wrong is scattered, and the family, for which he cheated and saved, sinks down in the general national decay.

Another religious Ideal, needed especially for the actual work of Social Reconstruction, is the joy and glory of Sacrifice. This again is beautifully seen in the family. No compulsion is there needed. Where food goes short, the youngest children are the first to be fed. The baby is the last to be neglected, when pressure comes upon the family resources: for, instinctively, the elders feel that the burden must not fall on the weaker shoulders, while they are there to bear it in their stead. Sacrifice is seen not [Page 19] to be sorrow, but a healthy instinct of the true human heart, and wherever it meets weakness there comes the impulse to serve.

And if this were carried out in the reconstruction of Society, what would be the result ? No longer then would most be expected from the weakest, nor would the bearing of the heaviest burdens be put on the shoulders least fitted to sustain them. Who, in our Society, are those who most need something of the ease of life — good food, good clothing, good shelter, and leisure that will truly recreate ? Surely it is those who toil —those who are giving their strength to production, and who for long hours labor for the common helping. And yet those, under our present system, are the worst fed, worst clothed, worst housed. It is far harder for a man, exhausted by eight, nine, ten hours of labor, to go home to a slum where the air is foul and the surroundings repulsive, than it would be for one less exhausted. It may be said that he feels it less than would one accustomed to other life. That is true, for habit dulls. But is not this the heaviest condemnation of our social system, that we have crushed our workers down to the point where they do *not* feel sufficiently acutely the evil conditions of their lives ? We force them to be less than human, and then plead their lack of refined humanity as an excuse for leaving them as they are.

Modern civilisation has failed to make the masses of the people happy. Look at the faces of the poor; they are the faces of a saddened and weary people, [Page 20] weary with the burden of life. Until the people are happy, we have no right to talk of *Society*; there is only a weltering chaos of social units, with no social organisation. But gradually we shall take the social question in hand, and aim at the realisation of the splendid phrase: "*From each according to his capacity; to each according to his needs*". That is the Law of the Family, and one day it will be the Law of the State; for it is the true social law. As the truth of reincarnation becomes accepted once more, the duty of the elders to the youngers, the claim of the youngers on the elders, will be recognised; help, protection and training will be gladly rendered by the elders, and the evolution of the youngers will be quickened.

This can only come about by religious effort and the religious spirit. Not out of the Ideal of material prosperity but out of the religious Ideal must spring the Sacrifice that is joy, because it is the conscious expression of the common life; only out of the religious Ideal can come the Brotherhood which exists in all its splendour in the spiritual world, and, in time, shall surely spread to us in this mortal sphere. It is the spiritual sight which is the true vision; and the testimony of the spiritual consciousness, which has been so ignored in the West, is beginning to be seen as an asset human Society. That spiritual consciousness always speaks for Unity, for Brotherhood, for Service and for Sacrifice; as it unfolds, it will bring the materials for a nobler social State. [Page 21]

The Immanence of God; the duty of the strong to serve and to protect; the linking together of power and responsibility; the realisation that the higher and stronger should put forward no rights — that rights belong to the weaker and the more helpless; these Ideals, as they are recognised, will regenerate Society, and will stimulate the noblest emotions of the human heart to love, to help and to serve. There will be no need of confiscatory legislation, for the heart full of love will be the law of life; it will be a question of giving not of taking, of voluntary help not of compelled drudgery. Then will the danger of warfare pass away, and peace, which is the fruit of love, will spread over the lands. In the unity realized by religion, the apparently conflicting interests of men on the material plane will disappear, and as the Spirit of Love dominates, the discords caused by hatred will pass away.