



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

Reel
150

Box
53

Folder
283

What is religion?, 1927.

"WHAT IS RELIGION?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

MAY 1, 1927, CLEVELAND, O.

WRHS



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

I find it quite difficult, friends, as others have, to give you a concise and satisfying definition of what is religion. Perhaps it would be best to begin by stating just what religion is not, and through a negative approach we might be paving the way for a positive approach later on. At the outset, then, let us say that religion is not a set of dogmas or a creed. All religions, just as all science and all arts, will sooner or later express themselves in some set of formulas. That is inevitable. These formulae are condensations which are serviceable for purposes of instruction, for pedagogy, for guiding us. But one must always bear in mind that a definition of a thing is not the thing itself. A creed, after all, represents the best thought of an age. That best thought may be superseded by another age. So that creeds may change without in the least affecting the essence of the thing which the creed aims to revise. The trouble has been from the beginning of time that the creed sooner or later takes on the sacrosanct character which belongs to the thing itself, and the creed refuses to change, thereby saddling the thing itself with antiquated notions and superstition which do not belong to the essence of the reality which the creed seeks to define.

I trust that I have made myself clear on the point, because very often there is a sad confusion in the

minds of people between religion and the temporary definitions of religion given in various ages. You take polytheism, for example,--idolatry. At one period say in the history of the great Greek people, polytheism and mythology defined exactly the religious beliefs and concepts of the Greeks. But the Greek mind advanced beyond polytheism; but the creed had become so hardened and incrustrated that it refused to yield and to change, so that religion fell into disrepute with the thinking Greeks and religion ceased to be a compelling factor in the life and in the civilization of the Greeks.

You take the dogma about the infallibility of the Bible. At a certain given period in the history of our people and of other peoples, the Bible was looked upon as possessing absolute perfection and infallibility, as being the literal word of God. As Biblical science developed and the thinking men discovered that the Bible is the work of human beings, possessing all the greatness but also all the limitations of human beings, they sought to change the old creed and dogma about the Bible; but the creed had become sacrosanct, hallowed by age, and therefore invincible, and the creed proved a stumbling block in the way of progressive religion.

And so it is with the dogma about the divinity of Jesus in Christianity. That, too, at a certain period in the history of Christianity represented the best thought of the people, but as mankind developed to raise

to higher levels of understanding and truth, that creed no longer represented the best thought of Christendom, but that dogma, too, has refused to yield and thereby has become a hindrance to real religion.

So that in the first place, I would say that religion is not dogma or creed,--though be it remembered that religion in every age will seek to express itself in some form of dogma. In the second place, I would say that religion is not the church or the temple or the cult or the ritual, although all human ideas will seek to embody themselves after a while in something concrete and visible to the eye. Ideas express themselves in action, and group ideas express themselves in group action, and ritual is a significant group action, a symbolic group activity. And so it is inevitable that all vital religion will before long bring with itself institution of religious habits which we call cult or ritual. But it must always be remembered that they are only temporary manifestations of religion. They, too, change with the changing times. They are undoubtedly desirable, but, after all, they are only the outer and the external expressions or accoutrements of the religious ideas. And thirdly, it should be remembered that religion is not synonymous with morality. A man can be moral without being religious. I know many atheists and agnostics who are moral people. I may suspect that their morality is not well grounded; I may suspect that their morality has no philosophic basis; I may think of

their morality as only a matter of habit, or perhaps fear of public opinion, or a matter of give and take in business. I may have all kinds of suspicion as to the source ~~and~~ the wherefores of their moral conduct, but I cannot for a moment doubt that irreligious people may be moral. The fact that a man is charitable and honorable does not make him religious any more than the fact that a man that goes to church makes him moral.

I emphasize this thought because here again there is a vast confusion in the minds of people. Morality is concerned with the relations of man to his fellowmen. Religion is concerned with the relations of man to the universe and to ultimate reality. Morality is a question of conduct; religion is a question of basic convictions touching the ultimate verities of life. Morality aims to establish the most perfect order of society for human beings living upon this earth, an order of society which will be based on peace and justice and good will. But religion aims to answer certain questions which men have asked and which men will continue to ask even under the most perfect conditions of society; the questions of why? Whence? Whither? The questions which come into the minds of all thinking people,--why was this world created? Who created it? What is the destiny of man upon this earth? Whence come our ideals and our yearnings after perfection? What follows the breakup and the dissolution of our mortal frames? These questions

and multitudinous other questions the mind of man has asked himself from the first day when he emerged from his primitive life, and these questions the mind of man will seek to find a solution and an answer for until the end of time.

Religion is concerned with these questions, with these elements, with these mysteries, if you will, of life. Now, there are just two sets of answers that can be given to these questions. The one is the naturalistic and the other is the religious. The one replies the universe is a machine; everything in the universe can be explained by the laws of physics or chemistry. It is blind and unheeding; it has no soul or spirit or purpose or any particular meaning, and therefore all these questions are meaningless. You are asking questions of a sphynx which never can answer them. That is the mechanistic interpretation of the universe.

Now, the other interpretation of the universe and the other answer is the religious one. Not every one will accept that answer, but the heart of humanity has accepted that answer and has found in it a comfort, a strength, a highhold. And what is the answer which religion gives? Religion says that the universe is not a machine but a personality; that the universe is not physical but at bottom spiritual; that the universe is the dwellingplace of God and supreme wisdom and goodness, who created the universe, whose might upholds the

universe, and whose purpose guides it. And from this mighty postulate all answers to all questions may be had; and only that man who accepts that answer which religion gives, and lives as if the universe was spiritual and purposeful and meaningful, the dwellingplace of personality, and who organizes his life and his future around this focal, central thought, only that man is religious in the truest sense of the word.

Religion, then, friends, if I would now seek to define it a little more positively, is a special mental attitude towards the universe, a sort of knowledge of reality. People have given various definitions of religion. The great German philosopher Kant said that religion is belief in the reality and in the sovereignty of the moral order of things. Another German philosopher defined religion as piety which derives from our sense of dependence, our helplessness. Others have defined religion as intellectual exaltation as the mind moves into the spheres of eternal truth.

Now, whether religion be a matter of will or feeling or reason, it is clear that it is something more than mere morality; that it is something more than mere performance of our duties in society. Now these convictions of which I have spoken touching the nature and the quality of the universe lead to certain definite attitudes on the part of man, which attitudes we call religious; and the first attitude is that of reverence.

The religious man is reverent because the religious man feels himself standing all the time in the presence of God. Everything about him is God; everything about him speaks of God; everything about him breathes intimations of divine splendor, and he therefore stands in the presence of every manifestation of nature, rapt in adoration and reverent spirit.

The great English poet Wordsworth caught the spirit of reverence which is an attribute of the religious man admirably when he wrote: "A presence that disturbs me with a joy of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean, and the living air, and the blue sky, and in the mind of man a motion and a spirit that impels all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rose through all things."

The religious man therefore stands in the presence of divinity all the time, and his reaction is that of Moses when he stood before God revealing himself in the burning bush. "Remove the sandals from off thy feet, for the place where thou dost stand is holy ground." Everything is holy to the religious man. For it is the foot prints of God in the grass. The winds are the messengers of God. His spirit rides the storm. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory." This is the first attitude of the

religious mind.

And the second attitude of the religious mind, friends, is that the spirit of man, conscious that all about him is a living, throbbing, breathing, mystic personality, which is God, seeks to get into touch with it, to commune with it, to identify itself with it. And that is prayer. The religious man prays. The religious man prays not always with his lips but always with his heart. The religious man seeks to commune with that soul which is everything and in everything. The religious man seeks to express his gratitude and thanksgiving for the privilege of life, for being alive in this world of teeming, throbbing life, in this world of divine splendor.

The religious man very often in his supreme moments of ecstasy or exaltation, or in his darkest moments of sorrow and confusion and sadness will kneel and adore. That is the second quality of the truly religious man. And the third attribute, friends, is this: that the religious man feels that his soul is holy; that he must imitate the holiness which is God. Therefore, to the religious man the mere observance of the moral code is not enough. The mere performance of one's duties to society is not enough. The religious man seeks to sanctify his life, to cleanse and purge every crease and fold in his soul and in his mind, so that he will not only not hurt but that he will not wish to hurt; he will not only not lust after things but he will not even wish to

lust after things; so that he will not only not hate but he will love. The religious man therefore has a transfigured code of morality which is more than legal morality, which is more than customary morality. It is a morality guided by the principle of the imitation of God.

And the fourth characteristic attribute of the religious mind is this: that just as it regards itself as something holy, being part and parcel of the all-encompassing holiness of the universe, so does it regard every other human being as something infinitely sacred and holy, and in the presence of every other human being the soul of man stands reverent.

So that the religious mind has always been the most exacting in its demands for social justice, on the basis of the inviolability of every human being and of every human soul. This poor man, this sinner, this prostitute, this outcast, why, he is a child of God, made in God's image; holiness dwells in him and therefore he must revere him. He must seek to guide him into the way of the greater truth because he is of God as I am of God. So that our great prophets, who knew God, who were the noblest spokesmen of the ideals of social justice, said that justice wells up as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream, and they proclaimed their message and they hurled defiance in the teeth of the exploiters and the oppressors of mankind, and they served in self-sacrifice because God spoke through them; God was about them and God

was everywhere. "Love thy neighbor as thyself, for I am the Lord."

And lastly, there is a quality which the religious mind possesses which is something of the nature of timelessness. The religious mind possesses a strange sense of the oneness of all things and the continuity of all things and the indestructibility of all things. To the truly religious man there is no death. There is no death! Everything lives, for everything is God!

And so the religious man feels deeply and profoundly not on the basis of spiritual knowledge but on the basis of profound intuitions, that his personality will never be destroyed any more than his work and the influence of his actions will ever be destroyed. The universe is an integrated oneness and everything in it belongs, and every act in it counts, every word, every thought, every impulse, every achievement, is engraved and remains, and every human soul abides because all things endure in the eternal duration of God.

And so the truly religious man can say with the Psalmist, "Thou wilt not allow Thy faithful one to see the pit of destruction."

Now these five qualities, I believe, are characteristic of the religious mind. One may have them and be a religious man, and one may not have them and not be a religious man. Now, you may say that these are all superstitions and delusions, that science contradicts them,

and in saying that you will be stating popular notions of uninformed or misinformed minds. Science has not ruled God out of the universe. Science has not ruled spirit out of the universe, nor the creative mind. Science has not explained the universe. Science has not given an answer to the why and the whence and the whither. Nor can it. Science after all can only select certain facts in the universe and isolate them and analyze them, and thereby giving us useful and helpful information. But science cannot give us the complete picture of life; nor can science give us any more of objective truth than religion can, because science, too, is a product of the human mind, and the quality of the human mind is inevitably, indelibly printed upon what we choose to call objective and scientific truth.

No, science has not destroyed the right of man to believe in the spiritual quality of the universe. And in these convictions of which I have spoken man finds-- what? Why do we preach religion? Why do we urge upon people to take on the religious mood and attitude? Why do we teach little children to worship? Why, because we believe that religion alone will give man that sense of dignity which he requires in life. "What is man that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that Thou rememberst him?" What is man but a handful of corruption, a bundle of weaknesses and passions which are of the moment and cease to be? What is man, subject to all the accidents of

of time and of place, to disease and to suffering and to pain and to death and to decay? "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" "And yet Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor." Ah, if the universe is a personality, if there is in it a purpose, if there is in it a creative thought, a wisdom, and man is part of it, then man is a co-worker in a constantly growing and evolving universe, and man performs a wondrously, marvelously beautiful task in the universe shaping worlds, and man is crowned with honor and glory, and it is only the deep religious conviction that can give man a sense of dignity, a sense of oneness, a sense of confidence. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil." For there is a friend by my side, a kinsman always there, always ready to help me. I am not alone in a cold, heedless universe. I am in the loving presence of a kind and passionate Father. The Lord is near me; I need not fear. That is why the religious men have always been ready to be immolated,--to be burnt at the stake, to be crucified, to be tortured, to give up all the things that men hold dear for the sake of their God.

And religion gives us hope. "Blessed is the man who puts his hope in Thee." For hoping in Thee, believing in Thee as the eternal and the enduring spirit of the universe, he can do no wrong. He can stand beside

an open grave and not give way to the sorrows of my heart. I can see a dear one fast slipping away into the dark shadows, and I can endure in steadfast faith and believing that, whether here or there, that dear one is in the protecting mercy of one who is everywhere and in everything.

This, then, is what religion really is. A few strong convictions concerning the ultimate facts of the universe, which convictions give us a few strong attitudes, and which also give us a few satisfying feelings--a feeling of dignity, of confidence, of courage, of hope. That is religion.

