

INTERPRETATIONS OF POETRY AND RELIGION

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Interpretations of Poetry and Religion by George Santayana

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GEORGE SANTAYANA

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GEORGE SANTAYANA



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PREFACE

THE following volume is composed of a number of papers written at various times and already partially printed; they are now revised and gathered together in the hope that they may lead the reader, from somewhat different points of approach, to a single idea. This idea is that religion and poetry are identical in essence, and differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry.

It would naturally follow from this conception that religious doctrines would do well to withdraw their pretension to be dealing with matters of fact. That pretension is not only the source of the conflicts of religion with science and of the vain and bitter controversies of sects; it is also the cause of the impurity and incoherence of religion in the soul, when it seeks its sanctions in the sphere of reality, and forgets that its proper concern is to express the ideal. For the dignity of religion, like that of poetry and of every moral ideal, lies precisely in its ideal adequacy, in its fit rendering of

the meanings and values of life, in its anticipation of perfection; so that the excellence of religion is due to an idealization of experience which, while making religion noble if treated as poetry, makes it necessarily false if treated as science. Its function is rather to draw from reality materials for an image of that ideal to which reality ought to conform, and to make us citizens, by anticipation, in the world we crave.

It also follows from our general conception that poetry has a universal and a moral function. Its rudimentary essays in the region of fancy and pleasant sound, as well as its idealization of episodes in human existence, are only partial exercises in an art that has all time and all experience for its natural subject-matter and all the possibilities of being for its ultimate theme. As religion is deflected from its course when it is confused with a record of facts or of natural laws, so poetry is arrested in its development if it remains an unmeaning play of fancy without relevance to the ideals and purposes of life. In that relevance lies its highest power. As its elementary pleasantness comes from its response to the demands of the ear, so its deepest beauty comes from its response to the ultimate demands of the soul.

This theory can hardly hope for much commendation either from the apologists of theology or from its critics. The mass of mankind is divided

into two classes, the Sancho Panzas who have a sense for reality, but no ideals, and the Don Quixotes with a sense for ideals, but mad. The expedient of recognizing facts as facts and accepting ideals as ideals,—and this is all we propose,—although apparently simple enough, seems to elude the normal human power of discrimination. If, therefore, the champion of any orthodoxy should be offended at our conception, which would reduce his artful cosmos to an allegory, all that could be said to mitigate his displeasure would be that our view is even less favourable to his opponents than to himself.

The liberal school that attempts to fortify religion by minimizing its expression, both theoretic and devotional, seems from this point of view to be merely impoverishing religious symbols and vulgarizing religious aims; it subtracts from faith that imagination by which faith becomes an interpretation and idealization of human life, and retains only a stark and superfluous principle of superstition. For meagre and abstract as may be the content of such a religion, it contains all the venom of absolute pretensions; it is no less cursed than the more developed systems with a controversial unrest and with a consequent undertone of constraint and suspicion. It tortures itself with the same circular proofs in its mistaken ambition to enter the plane of vulgar reality and escape its