

**ETHICAL ADDRESSES
AND ETHICAL RECORD,
SEVENTEENTH SERIES**

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SEVENTEENTH SERIES

PHILADELPHIA

THE AMERICAN ETHICAL UNION, 1415 LOCUST STREET

1910.



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“CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND PERSONAL RELIGION” *

BY STANTON COIT, PH. D.

OUR age is turning more and more away from the old-time habit of trust in intelligent beings other than man. But there is by no means a corresponding decline of the sense of individual frailty. On the contrary, never was the consciousness of duty left undone so deep and widespread. Not that men have become worse, but they have been facing themselves more unflinchingly. They have more carefully weighed themselves in the balances, with the result that they know better than before by how much they are wanting. And never was the need of regular means of inward discipline so strongly felt. Men realize the necessity of taking themselves in hand betimes. But the help they once expected from invisible and incorporeal agencies they are now demanding, with the enthusiasm of a new faith, from their fellow-mortals. Although each be blind and weak, it is felt that infinite is

*These pages are taken from the opening chapter of Dr. Coit's recent important book on "National Idealism and a State Church, a Constructive Essay in Religion." In view of Dr. Coit's approaching visit to this country (from October to December, 1909) it seems appropriate to print some product of his pen by way of reminder and herald of his approach. Many members of the New York and other ethical societies have a vivid recollection of Dr. Coit, but may not have followed his work and thought of late. Perhaps this taste of the first of his two recent volumes will serve both as an intimation of his present point of view and as a means of inducing members to read those volumes, which are of high importance for the Ethical Movement.

the help, both material and spiritual, which man collectively can give to man individually.

Among the morally intelligent, religion is accordingly ceasing to be looked upon as a merely private and individual concernment.

Until the last decade of the nineteenth century, those who had discarded communion with supernatural beings inclined to the belief that adequate consolation could be drawn by each person from the inner recesses of his own soul. The profounder life of the human spirit was supposed to be of such a nature that to attempt to communicate it was to expose it to degradation. "We descend to meet," said Emerson. To crave religious communion with one's fellow-mortals was thought to be a denial of the sufficiency of one's own inner store of spiritual wealth. Solitude and the vastness of isolation were the only immensities befitting the self-contained soul.

Those who discarded communion with supernatural beings thus withdrew into themselves. But whole classes in the community who have retained a belief in a personal Creator and in the traditional teachings of the Church have also inclined in recent years to count fellowship with other human beings in religious practices as superfluous. The very fact that they find the consolations of fellowship in communion with personal agencies outside of the social organism of mankind, has made them the more ready to dispense with religious communion with other men. Within the churches themselves church discipline has, except in special centres, been more and more falling into disrepute. Many have interpreted this tendency as indicating and involving a decline of religious conviction. But such an interpretation is incorrect. The religious life has become less social, but there is no corresponding decrease of ancient belief. Such a reaction upon inward convic-

tions would surely have followed in the course of time. But no one can have become acquainted, for instance, with the religious life of Germany during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and not have noticed that although, as compared with England and America, the Church has dwindled almost to the vanishing-point, there has not taken place anything like a corresponding decrease of belief in the existence of a personal Creator or in the divinity of Jesus Christ, or of reverence for the Bible. The truth is that the doctrine of individualism has been injuring the church life, yet has been having the effect temporarily of intensifying the religious devotion of those who already had attained an individualized spiritual consciousness of their own. It has injured church life in the same way that in politics it had been working against the full functioning of the State. By the year 1860 the doctrine of *laissez-faire* had caused the Government of England to restrict itself almost entirely to police duties. A century before, the Constitution of America had in similar manner been framed under such suspicion of State regulation that the Government was not given full powers of sovereignty. No wonder that the Church has similarly suffered. Nor is it a wonder that individuals pre-eminently religious by nature, accepting the doctrine of individualism, have interpreted religion as a merely private concern, and have therefore considered all corporate action, even when voluntary, as a violation of the religious spirit.

This idea has so prepossessed the mind of Professor William James that in his brilliantly suggestive book on *Varieties of Religious Experience* he begins his investigation of "personal religion" only after setting aside churches and all their works as irrelevant. He justifies this procedure on the ground that ecclesiastical organiza-