

**FROM BONDAGE TO
LIBERTY IN
RELIGION: A SPIRITUAL
AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

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From Bondage to Liberty in Religion: A Spiritual Autobiography by George T. Ashley

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GEORGE T. ASHLEY

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FOREWORD

The substance of what is written in this book has been given on several occasions during the past five years in the form of sermons or lectures. On each occasion they met with such hearty commendation, and so many requests that they be written and published in book form that they might have a wider circulation, that I have been induced to undertake it. This volume is the result.

It is in no sense a treatise on controverted theological questions; altho some of these are incidentally treated, but only as they entered as factors into my own religious life and experience. This book is simply the story of my own religious life from my early childhood to the present time, in its various transitions from the narrowest orthodoxy to a broad, liberal, rational religious faith. It necessarily deals to some extent with certain theological problems that from time to time confronted me, the way in which I solved them, the conclusions I finally reached, and why I reached them. But these have been treated in mere outline only. The temptation has been very great

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Foreword

to treat, some of these at least, more elaborately; but I have been compelled to content myself often with the bare statement of my views, with few or no detailed arguments to support them. But as my object has been, not so much to try to solve these problems for others, as to point the way thereto, and stimulate the reader to further inquiry and deeper investigation of the subjects treated, if I have succeeded in this, my main object has been accomplished.

No one is more sensible of the many defects in this work than I am. It makes no pretension to any literary merit, nor to any scholarly erudition. I am not a "professional writer." I have simply tried to tell my story in a simple way and make it "readable" if possible. My sole purpose in writing these pages has been to try to help others who may still be in the fetters of ecclesiastical bondage, or wandering in the quagmires of agnosticism—and I know there are many such—to find the way to light and liberty in a rational religious faith. If I can accomplish this, even in a small degree, I shall feel abundantly repaid for the time and labor spent in reviewing the story of my own religious evolution.

INTRODUCTION

When the traveller, bent on some important quest, makes a prolonged and perilous journey and returns in safety to his friends and neighbors, instinctively those who have known him in former years realize that he is, and he is not, the same person who had dwelt among them. He has seen unfamiliar peoples, traversed strange lands, encountered unexpected dangers. Old prepossessions have been effaced, erroneous opinions have been corrected, new habits of thought have taken the place of old ones and the narrow world of youth has expanded on every side. Naturally, what has happened to him becomes a matter of curiosity and enquiry, and the hero of a great achievement is expected to relate the story of his adventures.

The man who, in these revolutionary days, takes religion seriously—there are many who do not—must make a journey which is fraught with as many surprises and filled with as many anxieties—especially if it be a pilgrimage from

Introduction

orthodoxy to personal independence—as that which the explorer encounters in a voyage to the North Pole or the jungles of Africa. At every turning of the way he must be prepared for disillusion and the discovery of facts and errors which call for unlimited courage and boundless faith. Religion is not simply a matter of the emotions, its very perpetuity depends upon that sane and persistent activity of the intellect without which the emotions are tyrannous and fateful. Emotion in religion is the driving force by which religion may be applied to human welfare, but if emotion be not governed and directed by the well-trained intellect, informed by patient thought and the use of all the evidence available from those who are entitled to be summoned as witnesses, the result inevitably is merely a matter of superstition, or a spineless acquiescence in old and futile beliefs. To continue all the while to believe in *religion* while one is pursuing a course of reasoning which is bound to shatter many of the interpretations of it which one has previously accepted, requires the kind of intellectual endurance and the quality of faith which characterize the inventor, or the scientific explorer.

Introduction

When the author of this volume, as an unquestioning disciple of his ancestral fellowship, earnestly sought to pledge all that he was and all that he hoped to become to the salvation of those who he believed stood in peril of everlasting torment, it was the unadulterated spirit of religion which prompted him. But he was at that time unaware of that fact. Religion was with him when it moved him to give himself for others, but to him religion was itself something entirely different. He was urged and commanded by a force, old as mankind, and it took him, as the reader of these pages will see, many years of heart-breaking endeavor, to learn that what most he desired was what most he possessed. His quest was a long and weary one, and the reality of it and the importance of it to him are proven by the thoroughness and the eloquence with which his spiritual experience is recalled and set down in these pages. Only one who had begun in earnest, proceeded in anxiety and continued to the end, as if he absolutely believed in the integrity of the human reason and the intimate friendliness of a supreme Guidance, could have emerged at last triumphantly and with the ability to tell the tale.

Introduction

To him who thinks of religion only as a matter of course, or as an affair of the church, or as a medium of social advantage; or to him who identifies religion with the ravings of half-witted fanatics and regards it with patronizing contempt, this book will make no appeal. But to the man or woman who has learned that religion is one thing and theology another, and at whatever cost, is willing to share with the author in his struggle to know the truth about it and be at peace, these pages will command undivided attention; for they relate not only the story of mental perplexity ending in a great personal solution, but they likewise have the charm of a real romance of the soul.

LEWIS G. WILSON.