

**VITAL RELIGION, OR,  
THE PERSONAL  
KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST**

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Vital religion, or, The personal knowledge of Christ by G. H. S. Walpole

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# VITAL RELIGION

OR

## THE PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST.

BY

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## PREFACE.

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WE believe, though we should hesitate in making a prediction, that the tendency to find a basis for faith in actual experience is likely to strengthen during the present century. The power of authority has sensibly weakened, and the reliance upon argument as being in itself adequate to sustain religious faith is not so constant as it was. More and more, serious men are being led to ask whether Religion is not largely a matter of personal experience. It is not that they feel authority can be discarded, or intellectual processes cast aside, but that, as Mr. Mellone asserts in his book on "Leaders of Religious Thought in the Nineteenth Century," experience is of first importance in religious belief. By this is not meant an isolated experience unshared by others, nor one the chief characteristic of which is feeling, but, on the contrary, one that is reasonable, continuous, sober, resting on sure foundations.

The word Religion itself, according to the popular conception of it, encourages this expectation, for it expresses the idea of an obligation by which man is bound to an invisible Lord.\* If that may be accepted as generally, if not etymologically, correct, then Vital Religion must mean our sense of that obligation. Or, to go further, if the Christian Religion may be defined as expressing the idea of a living union with a Living Lord, then Vital Christianity must mean our personal experience of that union. Or, again, if

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\* Lidson: *Elements of Religion*, p. 19.

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the cardinal truth of the Christian Religion is that this Living Lord is endowed with the fulness of a perfect human nature, like in all points to our own, sin only excepted, then it is difficult to see how the Life of our union with Him can be grounded in anything but a human experience. Of course, constituted as we are, there must be "outward joints and bands," but, however sacred and venerable these may be, and are, they can never be more than the channels and pledges of that Life which finds its true home in union with the human spirit.

But all this, it may be said, is admitted. Why labour it? Yes, admitted theoretically, but not practically. Many a man recognizes the obligations of Religion, looks upon it as a bulwark of morality and a stimulus to lofty thoughts and ambitions, confesses that it is often a great help to him, and that its services, when well conducted, have a beneficial effect, but if you speak of his relation to the Person to Whom the worship is offered, of the claims that Person makes upon his attention and affections, more intimate and pressing than those of mother, wife or sister, he is silent. He has never supposed it necessary to look into that, any more than a good patriot would regard it necessary to consider his personal relation to the sovereign. As patriotism consists in devotion to the country, so he would say religion in devotion to the Church. As patriotism is expressed in bearing the country's burdens, in obedience to its laws and in loyalty to its sovereign, so religion in supporting the Church's work, in obeying her laws, and in loyalty to her Sovereign Head. The loyalty in both cases is of a similar character, general rather than personal, occasional in expression rather than continuous. The Christian Religion, according to this conception, has very much the same character as the Jewish religion. It excites an interest in a great spiritual Society which has a thousand lofty

historical associations intertwined with it, which is more national than universal, and as political as it is religious. The Church, in both cases, occupies a larger place than its Sovereign Lord.

There is much to be said for this view of the question. Such a Religion certainly binds men together by an attachment to the greatest Society the world has known. It inspires them with devotion to the highest aims, moral and spiritual, that have ever been conceived. It stirs their enthusiasm by simple and moving ceremonial, by most solemn and deeply mysterious rites. It quickens their intelligence by divinely inspired narratives and instructions; but—and here lies the fatal defect—it leaves untouched the most powerful motive the world knows, and that, personal affection. As we turn from this conception to that of the New Testament, it is like passing from the crowded political meeting, where a national cause has been pleaded, to the yet more crowded streets, where the Queen is passing in her Jubilee procession. In the one case there is enthusiasm for a principle, in the other for the Person that embodies the principle. We need not say which is the more powerful, or which is predominant in the Gospels, Acts, and Epistles. Personal devotion to Christ is the keynote struck in every page of the New Testament. It is everywhere assumed that all Christians have it, and have it as a result of their own personal experience. The Church, her Sacraments, Worship, Morality are identified with Christ. As Canon Liddon writes, in a noble passage: “Christ is Christianity . . . Detach Christianity from Christ and it vanishes before your eyes into intellectual vapour. For it is of the essence of Christianity that day by day, hour by hour, the Christian should live in conscious, felt, sustained relationship to the ever-living Author of his creed and of his life. Christianity is non-existent apart from Christ; it



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centres in Christ; it radiates now, as at the first, from Christ. Christ is the quickening Spirit of Christian humanity. He lives in Christians. He thinks in Christians. He acts through Christians and with Christians. He is indissolubly associated with every movement of the Christian's deepest life.\*

It is this old truth, experienced as a fact and not imagined, that the author has endeavoured to present in the pages that follow. He believes it to be needed. There is no question that the general attitude towards Religion is unsatisfactory. Not that there is hostility, carping criticism, or even dull indifference, but life is too full for its serious consideration. The opportunities in work and recreation have enormously increased. In the one, the man is less and less the machine; in the other, he has almost infinite variety. Papers, magazines, cheap novels are constantly engaging the mind, so that it scarcely ever finds time to realize its own deep needs, and, when they do assert themselves and produce their inevitable consequence, depression, it is not difficult even for the artizan to get sufficient change of scene by train, tram, or bicycle to lift the cloud. And in the last resort there are stimulants. The excitement aroused by sport may be maintained for a time by gambling; the exhaustion that follows laborious work and recreation may be momentarily relieved by drugs or intoxicants. So it is possible for a man to go on for many years absorbed in his work and pleasures, and to regard with amused contempt the friend who suggests that there are claims of tremendous importance which will one day make themselves felt, and which can only be satisfied by Religion.

For this state of things the popular conception of Religion is largely to blame. Religion has lost its romance. Men see it embodied in a huge social organization, apparently

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\* Liddon; *Our Lord's Divinity*, p. 127.

cold, formal and mechanical. They believe it "makes for righteousness" and upholds moral order, is worthy of a moderate support and occasional consideration, but it very distinctly lacks interest. They have no doubt that on the whole it is a good thing, but then it is in competition with other good things which prove their power to interest more quickly. Its demands, too, are somewhat imperative. They have seen it presented as man's best friend, but always either as an exacting friend or a friend conscious of being slighted. It is not the laughing, pleasant friend that Pleasure is, who cries, "You may have me or not, as you please." "But what is to be done?" cries the devoted member of the organization. "You cannot make Religion as attractive as Pleasure. No amount of dressing up will do that. Look at the Gospel presentation of it. Is it not, as one of its preachers declares, as offensive as possible? No artist can make the Cross an object to be embraced. No; the fault, if fault there is, is in not making the disciplinary side plainer and more severe. Let the contrast with the world's offer be as sharp as possible. Make your rules and take care that they are kept, and you will have religious force even if it is restricted."

The answer is plain. It is true the Gospel comes to us in the shape of a Cross, but never apart from its Founder. Christ can make, as He has made, even the Cross attractive; and He can make, as He has made, Religion attractive in spite of the world's tempting offers. His service, if properly understood, is "perfect freedom." If I can tell my pleasure-loving companion that all the opportunities he values are mine as freely as they are his, but that in my Religion I have found a Friend Who makes them much more attractive and more permanently interesting; One Who doubles my enjoyment in work, and will never, if I follow His advice, allow me to spend a dull hour; One Who

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quickens the imagination, stimulates the intellect and braces the will; One Who throws over nature and art, over the world and man, a subtle, inexplicable charm; One Who, in spite of His position as King of kings, has shewn by word and act a strange regard for me, and a still stranger desire for my regard for Him; One Who is present in indefinable ways in every act of worship, so that the Church to the man with eyes open is "at home with God"; One Who is to my friend all that He is to me:—if I can make this clear, then I have dethroned the formidable rival, made it my King's willing slave, and shewn my friend that in spite of his full and interesting life he has yet to learn the romance of living. This I conceive to be Vital Religion, for it means Life: Life emotional and intellectual, Life more and more abundant, Life that is proved to be Life in the market place as well as in the Church, in Society as well as in the secret chamber, Life that never fails, that is really eternal, for it flows out of Perfect Love into the Ocean of the Love of God. And so we use this day's Collect with great hope: "O Almighty God, Whom truly to know is everlasting life; grant us perfectly to know Thy Son Jesus Christ to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life; that, following the steps of Thy holy Apostles, Saint Philip and Saint James, we may stedfastly walk in the way that leadeth to eternal life; through the same Thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord."

*S. Phillip and S. James.*

*May 1, 1902.*