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Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat
THE ESSENCE OF RELIGION

Bertrand Russell

The decay of traditional religious beliefs, bitterly bewailed by upholders of the Churches, welcomed with joy by those who regard the old creeds as mere superstition, is an undeniable fact. Yet when the dogmas have been rejected, the question of the place of religion in life is by no means decided. The dogmas have been valued, not so much on their own account, as because they were believed to facilitate a certain attitude towards the world, an habitual direction of our thoughts, a life in the whole, free from the finiteness of self and providing an escape from the tyranny of desire and daily cares. Such a life in the whole is possible without dogma, and ought not to perish through the indifference of those to whom the beliefs of former ages are no longer credible. Acts inspired by religion have some quality of infinity in them: they seem done in obedience to a command, and though they may achieve great ends, yet it is no clear knowledge of these ends that makes them seem imperative. The beliefs which underlie such acts are often so deep and so instinctive as to remain unknown to those whose lives are built upon them. Indeed, it may be not belief but feeling that makes religion: a feeling which, when brought into the sphere of belief, may involve the conviction that this or that is good, but may, if it remains untouched by intellect, be only a feeling and yet be dominant in action. It is the quality of infinity that makes religion, the selfless, untrammelled life in the whole which frees men from the prison house of eager wishes and little thoughts. This liberation from the prison is given by religion, but only by a religion without fettering dogmas; and dogmas become fettering as soon as assent to them becomes unnatural.

The soul of man is a strange mixture of God and brute, a battleground of two natures, the one particular, finite, self-centered, the other universal, infinite, and impartial. The finite life, which man shares with the brutes, is tied to the body, and views the world from the standpoint of the here and now. All those loves and hatreds which are based upon some service to the self belong to the finite life. The love of man and woman, and the love of parents and children, when they do not go beyond the promptings of instinct, are still part of the animal nature: they do not pass into the infinite life until they overcome instinct and cease to be subservient only to the purposes of the finite self. The hatred of enemies and the love of allies in battle are part of what man shares with other gregarious animals: they view the universe as grouped about one point, the single struggling self. Thus the finite part of our life contains all that makes the individual man essentially separate from other men and from the rest of the universe, all those thoughts and desires that cannot, in their nature, be shared by the inhabitant of a different body, all the distortions that make error, and all the insistent claims that lead to strife.

The infinite part of our life does not see the world from one point of view: it shines impartially, like the diffused light on a cloudy sea. Distant ages and remote regions of space are as real to it as what is present and near. In thought, it rises above the life of the senses, seeking always what is general and open to all men. In desire and will, it aims simply at the good, without regarding the good as mine or yours. In feeling, it gives love to all, not only to those who further the purposes of self. Unlike the finite life, it is impartial: its impartiality leads to truth in thought, justice in action, and universal love in feeling. Unlike the nature which man shares with the brutes, it has a life without barriers, embracing in its survey the whole universe of existence and essence; nothing in it is essentially private, but its thoughts and desires are such as all may share, since none depend upon the exclusiveness of here and now and me. Thus the infinite

Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat

nature is the principle of union in the world, as the finite nature is the principle of division. Between the infinite nature in one man and the infinite nature in another, there can be no essential conflict: if its embodiments are incomplete, they supplement each other; its division among different men is accidental to its character, and the infinite in all constitutes one universal nature. There is thus a union of all the infinite natures of different men in a sense in which there is no union of all the finite natures. In proportion as the infinite grows strong in us, we live more completely the life of that one universal nature which embraces what is infinite in each of us.

The finite self, impelled by the desire for self-preservation, builds prison walls round the infinite part of our nature, and endeavours to restrain it from that free life in the whole which constitutes its being. The finite self aims at dominion: it sees the world in concentric circles round the here and now, and itself as the God of that wished-for heaven. The universal soul mocks at this vision, but the finite self hopes always to make it true, and thus to quiet its troublesome critic. In many men, the finite self remains always the gaoler of the universal soul; in others, there is a rare and momentary escape; in a few, the prison walls are demolished wholly, and the universal soul remains free through life. It is the escape from prison that gives to some moments and some thoughts a quality of infinity, like light breaking through from some greater world beyond. Sudden beauty in the midst of strife, uncalculating love, or the night wind in the trees, seem to suggest the possibility of a life free from the conflicts and pettinesses of our everyday world, a life where there is peace which no misfortune can disturb. The things which have this quality of infinity seem to give an insight deeper than the piecemeal knowledge of our daily life. A life dominated by this insight, we feel, would be a life free from struggle, a life in harmony with the whole, outside the prison walls built by the instinctive desires of the finite self.

It is this experience of sudden wisdom which is the source of what is essential in religion. Mysticism interprets this experience as a contact with a deeper, truer, more unified world than that of our common beliefs. Behind a thin veil, it sees the glory of God, dimly as a rule, sometimes with dazzling brightness. All the evils of our daily world it regards as merely shadows on the veil, illusions, nothings, which vanish from the sight of those who see the splendour beyond. But in this interpretation mysticism diminishes the value of the experience upon which it is based. The quality of infinity, which we feel, is not to be accounted for by the perception of new objects, other than those that at most times seem finite; it is to be accounted for, rather, by a different way of regarding the same objects, a contemplation more impersonal, more vast, more filled with love, than the fragmentary, disquiet consideration we give to things when we view them as means to help or hinder our own purposes. It is not in some other world that that beauty and that peace are to be found; it is in this actual everyday world, in the midst of action and the business of life. But it is in the everyday world as viewed by the universal soul, and in the midst of action and business inspired by its vision. The evils and the smallnesses are not illusions, but the universal soul finds within itself a love to which imperfections are no barrier, and thus unifies the world by the unity of its own contemplation.

The transition from the life of the finite self to the infinite life in the whole requires a moment of absolute self-surrender, when all personal will seems to cease, and the soul feels itself in passive submission to the universe. After passionate struggle for some particular good, there comes some inward or outward necessity to abandon the pursuit of the object which has

Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat

absorbed all our desire, and no other desire is ready to replace the one that has been relinquished. Hence arises a state of suspension of the will, when the soul no longer seeks to impose itself upon the world, but is open to every impression that comes to it from the world. It is at such a time that the contemplative vision first comes into being, bringing with it universal love and universal worship. From universal worship comes joy, from universal love comes a new desire, and thence the birth of that seeking after universal good which constitutes the will of our infinite nature. Thus from the moment of self surrender, which to the finite self appears like death, a new life begins, with a larger vision, a new happiness, and wider hopes.

The self-surrender in which the infinite life is born may be made easier to some men by belief in an all-wise God to whom submission is a duty. But it is not in its essence dependent upon this belief or upon any other. The religions of the past, it is true, have all depended to a greater or less degree upon dogma, upon some theory as to the nature and the purpose of the universe. But the decay of traditional beliefs has made every religion that rests on dogma precarious, and even impossible, to many whose nature is strongly religious. Hence those who cannot accept the creeds of the past, and yet believe that a religious outlook requires dogma, lose what is infinite in life, and become limited in their thoughts to everyday matters; they lose consciousness of the life of the whole, they lose that inexplicable sense of union which gives rise to compassion and the unhesitating service of humanity. They do not see in beauty the adumbration of a glory which a richer vision would see in every common thing, or in love a gateway to that transfigured world in which our union with the universe is fulfilled. Thus their outlook is impoverished, and their life is rendered smaller even in its finite parts. For right action they are thrown back upon bare morality; and bare morality is very inadequate as a motive for those who hunger and thirst after the infinite. Thus it has become a matter of the first importance to preserve religion without any dependence upon dogmas to which an intellectually honest assent grows daily more difficult.

There are in Christianity three elements which it is desirable to preserve if possible: worship, acquiescence, and love. Worship is given by Christianity to God; acquiescence is given to the inevitable because it is the will of God; love is enjoined towards my neighbours, my enemies, and, in fact, towards all men. The love which Christianity enjoins, and indeed any love which is to be universal and yet strong, seems in some way dependent upon worship and acquiescence. Yet these, in the form in which they appear in Christianity, depend upon belief in God, and are therefore no longer possible to those who cannot entertain this belief. Something, in worship, must be lost when we lose belief in the existence of supreme goodness and power combined. But much can be preserved, and what can be preserved seems sufficient to constitute a very strong religious life. Acquiescence, also, is rendered more difficult by loss of belief in God, since it takes away the assurance that apparent evil in the constitution of the world is really good. But it is not rendered impossible; and in consequence of its greater difficulty it becomes, when achieved, nobler, deeper, more filled by self-surrender than any acquiescence which Christianity produces. In some ways, therefore, the religion which has no dogma is greater and more religious than one which rests upon the belief that in the end our ideals are fulfilled in the outer world.

1. **Worship.**—Worship is not easily defined, because it grows and changes as the worshipper grows. In crude religions it may be inspired by fear alone, and given to whatever is powerful. This element lingers in the worship of God, which may consist

Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat

largely of fear and be given largely from respect for power. But the element of fear tends more and more to be banished by love and in all the best worship fear is wholly absent. As soon as the worship inspired by fear has been surpassed, worship brings joy in the contemplation of what is worshipped. But joy alone does not constitute worship: there must be also some reverence and sense of mystery not easy to define. These three things, contemplation with joy, reverence, and sense of mystery, seem essential to constitute any of the higher forms of worship.

Within worship in this very wide sense there are varieties which it is important to distinguish. There is a selective worship, which demands that its object shall be good, and admits an opposite attitude towards a bad object; and there is an impartial worship, which can be given to whatever exists, regardless of its goodness or badness. Besides this division, there is another, equally important. There is a worship which can only be given to an actually existing object, and another worship which can be given to what merely has its place in the world of ideals; these two kinds may be distinguished as worship of the actual and worship of the ideal. The two are combined in worship of God, since God is conceived as both actual and the complete embodiment of the ideal.

Worship of God is selective, since it depends upon God's goodness. So is all worship of great men or great deeds, and of everything of which the worship depends upon some pre-eminent quality which calls forth our admiration. Worship of this sort, though it can be given to much of what exists in the actual world, cannot be given unreservedly and so as to produce a religious attitude towards the universe as a whole, except by those who believe in an omnipotent Creator or in a pantheistic all-pervading spiritual unity. For those in whom there is no such belief, the selective worship finds its full object only in the ideal good which creative contemplation imagines. The ideal good forms an essential part of the religious life, since it supplies the motive to action by giving content to the desire for universal good which forms a part of universal love. Without the knowledge and worship of the ideal good, the love of man is blind, not knowing in what direction to seek the welfare of those whom it loves. Every embodiment of good in the actual world is imperfect, if only by its brevity. Only the ideal good can satisfy fully our hunger for perfection. Only the ideal good demands no surrender to power, no sacrifice of aspiration to possibility, and no slavery of thought to fact. Only the vision of the ideal good gives infinity to our pursuit, in action, of those fragments of good which the world permits us to create, but the worship of the ideal good, though it brings with it the joy that springs from the contemplation of what is perfect, brings with it also the pain that results from the imperfection of the actual world. When this worship stands alone, it produces a sense of exile in a world of shadows, of infinite solitude amid alien forces. Thus this worship, though necessary to all religious action, does not alone suffice, since it does not produce that sense of union with the actual world which compels us to descend from the world of contemplation and seek, with however little success, to realize what is possible of the good here on earth.

For this purpose we need the kind of worship which is only given to what exists. Such worship, where there is belief in God, can be selective, since God exists and is completely good. Where there is not belief in God, such worship may be selective in regard to great men and great deeds, but towards such objects selective worship is always hampered by their imperfection and their limitation of duration and extent. The worship which can be given to whatever exists must not be selective, it must not involve any judgement as to the goodness of what is worshipped, but

Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat

must be a direct impartial emotion. Such worship is given by the contemplative vision, which finds mystery and joy in all that exists, and brings with it love to all that has life. This impartial worship has been thought, wrongly, to require belief in God, since it has been thought to involve the judgement that whatever exists is good. In fact, however, it involves no judgement whatever; hence it cannot be intellectually mistaken, and cannot be in any way dependent upon dogma. Thus the combination of this worship with the ideal good gives a faith wholly independent of beliefs as to the nature of the actual world and therefore not assailable by the arguments which have destroyed the tenets of traditional religion.

Religion, therefore, results from the combination of two different kinds of worship—the selective, which is given to the good on account of its goodness, and the impartial, which is given to everything that exists. The former is the source of the belief in theism, the latter of the belief in pantheism, but in neither case is such a belief necessary for the worship which gives rise to it. The object of the selective worship is the ideal good, which belongs to the world of universals. Owing to oblivion of the world of universals, men have supposed that the ideal good could not have being or be worshipped unless it formed part of the actual world; hence they have believed that without God this worship could not survive. But the study of the world of universals shows that this was an error: the object of this worship need not exist, though it will be an essential part of the worship to wish it to exist as fully as possible. The object of the impartial worship, on the other hand, is whatever exists; in this case, though the object is known to exist, it is not known to be good, but it is an essential part of the worship to wish that it may be as good as possible. Pantheism, from the contemplative joy of impartial worship, and from the unity of its outlook on the universe, infers, mistakenly, that such worship involves the belief that the universe is good and is one. This belief is no more necessary to the impartial worship than the belief in God is to the selective worship. The two worships subsist side by side, without any dogma: the one involving the goodness but not the existence of its object, the other involving the existence but not the goodness of its object. Religious action is a continual endeavour to bridge the gulf between the objects of these two worships, by making better exist and more of existence good. Only in the complete union of the two could the soul find permanent rest.

1. Acquiescence.—Although, in a world where much evil exists and much good does not exist, no religion which is true can give permanent rest or free the soul from the need for action, yet religion can give acquiescence in evil which it is not within our power to cure. Christianity effects this by the belief that, since the apparent evil is in accordance with the will of God, it cannot really be evil. This view, however, demands a falsification of our standard of good and evil, since much that exists is evil to any unbiased consideration. Moreover, if pursued to a conclusion, it destroys all motive to action, since the reason given for acquiescence, namely, that whatever happens must be for the best, is a reason which renders our efforts after the best superfluous. If, to avoid this consequence, we limit either the omnipotence or the goodness of God, acquiescence can no longer be urged on the same ground, since what happens may be either not in accordance with the will of God, or not good in spite of being in accordance with His will. For these reasons, though Christianity is in fact often effective both in causing acquiescence and in providing a religious motive for action, yet this effectiveness is due to a confusion of thought, and tends to cease as men grow more clear-sighted.

The problem we have to deal with is more difficult than the Christian's problem. We have



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to learn to acquiesce in the inevitable without judging that the inevitable must be good, to keep the feeling which prompts Christians to say, 'Thy will be done', while yet admitting that what is done may be evil.

Acquiescence, whatever our religion may be, must always require a large element of moral discipline. But this discipline may be made easier and more visibly worth the pain which it involves, by religious considerations. There are two different though closely related kinds of acquiescence, the one in our private griefs, the other in the fundamental evils of the world. Acquiescence in our private griefs comes in the moment of submission which brings about the birth of the impartial will. Our private life, when it absorbs our thoughts and wishes, becomes a prison, from which, in times of grief, there is no escape but by submission. By submission our thoughts are freed, and our will is led to new aims which, before, had been hidden by the personal goods which had been uselessly desired. A large contemplation, or the growth of universal love, will produce a certain shame of absorption in our own life; hence the will is led away from protest against the inevitable, towards the pursuit of more general goods which are not wholly unattainable. Thus acquiescence in private griefs is an essential element in the growth of universal love and the impartial will.

Acquiescence does not consist in judging that things are not bad when in fact they are so. It consists in freedom from anger and indignation and preoccupied regret. Anger and indignation against those who cause our griefs will not be felt if universal love is strong; preoccupied regret will be avoided where the desire of contemplative freedom exists. The man to whom a large contemplation has become habitual will not readily allow himself to be long turned aside from the thoughts which give breadth to his life: in the absence of such thoughts he will feel something small and unworthy, bondage of the infinite to the finite. In this way both contemplation and universal love will promote acquiescence so far as our own sorrows are concerned.

It is possible, however, to emerge from private protest, not into complete acquiescence, but into a Promethean indignation against the universe. Contemplation may only universalize our griefs; it may show us all life as a tragedy, so full of pain as to make us wish that consciousness could vanish wholly from the world. The belief that this would be desirable if it were possible is one which cannot be refuted, though it also cannot be shown to be true. But even this belief is not incompatible with acquiescence. What is incompatible is indignation, and a preoccupation with evils which makes goods invisible or only partially visible. Indignation seems scarcely possible in regard to evils for which no one is responsible; those who feel indignation in regard to the fundamental evils of the universe feel it against God or the Devil or an imaginatively personified Fate. When it is realized that the fundamental evils are due to the blind empire of matter, and are the wholly necessary effects of forces which have no consciousness and are therefore neither good nor bad in themselves, indignation becomes absurd, like Xerxes chastising the Hellespont. Thus the realization of necessity is the liberation from indignation. This alone, however, will not prevent an undue preoccupation with evil. It is obvious that some things that exist are good, some bad, and we have no means of knowing whether the good or the bad preponderate. In action, it is essential to have knowledge of good and evil; thus in all the matters subject to our will, the question what is good and what bad must be borne in mind. But in matters which lie outside our power, the question of good or bad, though knowledge about it, like all knowledge, is worth acquiring, has not that fundamental religious importance which has been assigned to it in

Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat

discussions of theism and optimism. The dualism of good and bad, when it is too strongly present to our minds, prevents impartial contemplation and interferes with universal love and worship. There is, in fact, something finite and unduly human about the practice of emphasizing good and bad in regard to matters with which action is not concerned. Thus acquiescence in fundamental evils, like acquiescence in personal griefs, is furthered by the impartiality of contemplation and universal love and worship, and must already exist to some extent before these become possible. Acquiescence is at once a cause and an effect of faith, in much the same way when faith dispenses with dogma as when it rests upon a belief in God. In so far as acquiescence is a cause of faith, it rests upon moral discipline, a suppression of self and its demands, which is necessary to any life in harmony with the universe, and to any emergence from the finite into the infinite. This discipline is more severe in the absence of all optimistic dogma, but in proportion as it is more severe its outcome is greater, more unshakable, and more capable of so enlarging the bounds of self as to make it welcome with love whatever of good or evil may come before it.

2. Love.—Love is of two kinds, the selective earthly love, which is given to what is delightful, beautiful, or good, and the impartial heavenly love, which is given to all indifferently. The earthly love is balanced by an opposing hatred: to friends are opposed foes; to saints, sinners; to God, the Devil. Thus this love introduces disunion into the world, with hostile camps and a doubtful warfare. But the heavenly love does not demand that its object shall be delightful, beautiful, or good; it can be given to everything that has life, to the best and the worst, to the greatest and to the least. It is not merely compassion, since it does not merely wish to relieve misfortune, but finds joy in what it loves, and is given to the fortunate as well as to the unfortunate. Though it includes benevolence, it is greater than benevolence: it is contemplative as well as active, and can be given where there is no possibility of benefiting the object. It is love, contemplative in origin, but becoming active wherever action is possible; and it is a kind of love to which there is no opposing hatred.

To the divine love, the division of the world into good and bad, though it remains true, seems lacking in depth; it seems finite and limited in comparison with the boundlessness of love. The division into two hostile camps seems unreal; what is felt to be real is the oneness of the world in love.

It is in the birth of divine love that the life of feeling begins for love Universal soul. What contemplation is to the intellect of the universal soul, divine love is to its emotions. More than anything else, divine love frees the soul from its prison and breaks down the walls of self that prevent its union with the world. Where it is strong, duties become easy, and all service is filled with joy. Sorrow, it is true, remains, perhaps deeper and wider than before, since the lives of most human beings are largely tragic. But the bitterness of personal defeat is avoided, and aims become so wide that no complete overthrow of all hopes is possible. The loves of the natural life survive, but harmonized with universal love, and no longer setting up walls of division between the loved and the unloved. And above all, through the bond of universal love the soul escapes from the separate loneliness in which it is born, and from which no permanent deliverance is possible while it remains within the walls of its prison. Christianity enjoins love of God and love of man as the two great commandments. Love of God differs, however, from love of man, since we cannot benefit God, while we

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cannot regard man as wholly good. Thus love of God is more contemplative and full of worship, while love of man is more active and full of service. In a religion which is not theistic, love of God is replaced by worship of the ideal good. As in Christianity, this worship is quite as necessary as love of man, since without it love of man is left without guidance in its wish to create the good in human lives. The worship of good is indeed the greater of the two commandments, since it leads us to know that love of man is good, and this knowledge helps us to feel the love of man. Moreover, it makes us conscious of what human life might be, and of the gulf between what it might be and what it is; hence springs an infinite compassion, which is a large part of love of man, and is apt to cause the whole. Acquiescence, also, greatly furthers love of man, since in its absence anger and indignation and strife come between the soul and the world, preventing the union in which love of man has its birth. The three elements of religion, namely worship, acquiescence, and love, are intimately interconnected; each helps to produce the others, and all three together form a unity in which it is impossible to say which comes first, which last. All three can exist without dogma, in a form which is capable of dominating life and of giving infinity to action and thought and feeling; and life in the infinite, which is the combination of the three, contains all that is essential to religion, in spite of its absence of dogmatic beliefs.

Religion derives its power from the sense of union with the universe which it is able to give. Formerly, union was achieved by assimilating the universe to our own conception of the good; union with God was easy since God was love. But the decay of traditional belief has made this way of union no longer one which can be relied upon: we must find a mode of union which asks nothing of the world and depends only upon ourselves. Such a mode of union is possible through impartial worship and universal love, which ignore the difference of good and bad and are given to all alike. In order to free religion from all dependence upon dogma, it is necessary to abstain from any demand that the world shall conform to our standards. Every such demand is an endeavour to impose self upon the world. From this endeavour the religion which can survive the decay of dogma must be freed. And in being freed from this endeavour, religion is freed from an element extraneous to its spirit and not compatible with its unhampered development. Religion seeks union with the universe by subordination of the demands of self; but this subordination is not complete if it depends upon a belief that the universe satisfies some at least of the demands of self. Hence for the sake of religion itself, as well as because such a belief appears unfounded, it is important to discover a form of union with the universe which is independent of all beliefs as to the nature of the universe. By life in the infinite, such a form of union is rendered possible; and to those who achieve it, it gives nearly all, and in some ways more than all, that has been given by the religions of the past.

The essence of religion, then, lies in subordination of the finite part of our life to the infinite part. Of the two natures in man, the particular or animal being lives in instinct, and seeks the welfare of the body and its descendants, while the universal or divine being seeks union with the universe, and desires freedom from all that impedes its seeking. The animal being is neither good nor bad in itself; it is good or bad solely as it helps or hinders the divine being in its search for union with the world. In union with the world the soul finds its freedom. There are three kinds of union: union in thought, union in feeling, union in will. Union in thought is knowledge, union in feeling is love, and union in will is service. There are three kinds of disunion: error, hatred, and

Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat

strife. What promotes disunion is insistent instinct, which is of the animal part of man: what promotes union is the combination of knowledge, love, and consequent service which is wisdom, the supreme good of man.

The life of instinct views the world as a means for the ends of instinct; thus it makes the world of less account than self. It confines knowledge to what is useful, love to allies in conflict of rival instincts, service to those with whom there is some instinctive tie. The world in which it finds a home is a narrow world, surrounded by alien and probably hostile forces; it is prisoned in a beleaguered fortress, knowing that ultimate surrender is inevitable.

The life of wisdom seeks an impartial end, in which there is no rivalry, no essential enmity. The union which it seeks has no boundaries: it wishes to know all, to love all, and to serve all. Thus it finds its home everywhere: no lines of circumvallation bar its progress. In knowledge it makes no division of useful and useless, in love it makes no division of friend and foe; in service it makes no division of deserving and undeserving.

The animal part of man, knowing that the individual life is brief and impotent, is appalled by the fact of death, and, unwilling to admit the hopelessness of the struggle, it postulates a prolongation in which its failures shall be turned into triumphs. The divine part of man, feeling the individual to be but of small account, thinks little of death, and finds its hopes independent of personal continuance.

The animal part of man, being filled with the importance of its own desires, finds it intolerable to suppose that the universe is less aware of this importance; a blank indifference to its hopes and fears is too painful to contemplate, and is therefore not regarded as admissible. The divine part of man does not demand that the world shall conform to a pattern: it accepts the world, and finds in wisdom a union which demands nothing of the world. Its energy is not checked by what seems hostile, but interpenetrates it and becomes one with it. It is not the strength of our ideals, but their weakness, that makes us dread the admission that they are ours, not the worlds. We with our ideals must stand alone, and conquer, inwardly, the world's indifference. It is instinct, not wisdom that finds this difficult and shivers at the solitude it seems to entail. Wisdom does not feel this solitude, because it can achieve union even with what seems most alien. The insistent demand that our ideals shall be already realized in the world is the last prison from which wisdom must be freed. Every demand is a prison, and wisdom is only free when it asks nothing.