

# MY RELIGION

by Helen Keller

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It is not a man who can enjoy the sun and flowers and music where there is nothing except darkness and silence who has proved the mystic sense—Helen Keller

WNU Service

(Conclusion.)

But Swedenborg also says that if a man with unlovely delights has the intellectual honesty to acknowledge them, and earnestly tries to lift up his heart to something worthy, he need not, he must not, despair. As fast as his old fascinations depart, pure happiness will rush into his soul as irresistibly as strong air currents which gladden a long shut-up dwelling, and the happier he becomes, the stronger he will be to remould outward circumstances to his desire. It is a mistake for him to entertain fears about the enemy finding a breach in his once broken ramparts. In place of each fear he can build a new delight and stay his mind upon it until the ordeal passes. That is what is meant by "a hobby" in modern thought, and it is wonderful to read how many unfortunate men and women are being thus helped out of seemingly hopeless evil tendencies into undreamed self-development, a heaven-given psychotherapy. Forgiveness for sin is nothing but the wellspring of joy from above that fills the bruised heart when one has driven out wrong desires and evil thoughts, and works in harmony with the power of good.

It is beyond a doubt that everyone should have time for some special delight, if only five minutes each day to seek out a lovely flower or cloud or star, or learn a verse or brighten another's dull task. What is the use of such terrible diligence as many tire themselves out with, if they always postpone their exchange of smiles with Beauty and Joy to cling to irksome duties and relations? Unless they admit these fair, fresh, and eternal presences into their lives as they can, they must needs shut themselves out of heaven, and a gray dust settles on all existence. The sky is brighter than the earth means little unless the earth itself is appreciated and enjoyed. Its beauty loved gives the right to aspire to the radiance of the sunrise and the stars.

Few people are saints or geniuses, but there is always this much of hope in all men—every pure delight they cherish is as "focus of good-will," and every lovely scene they dwell on, every harmony they listen to, every graceful or tender thing they touch with reverent hand starts on the wing a flock of sweet thoughts which neither care nor poverty nor pain can destroy. Joy is the voice of the love and faith that shall at last pronounce the word of eternal life—"Well done!"

Joy is inseparable from the doctrines set forth by Swedenborg. In that day his was a new branch of philosophy that seemed strange after the penances of the Middle Ages and the gloom of iron creeds. One of the surprises of his teaching is the universality of delight as a minister to life. His surfer faith in man's ability to augment the happiness of marriage and to make the life of childhood beautiful is still far ahead of the timid distrust, the low ideals, and the stupid methods of imparting knowledge which prevail among us. In a word, true life is the heart's capacity for joy fulfilled.

We are beginning to perceive the Divine Providence as Swedenborg describes it—in a circle of large, noble ideas which are consistent with its greatness. Heretofore it has been darkened by controversial dogmas, and often its meaning has degenerated into special provisions which imply special neglects. But in Swedenborg's teaching it is shown to be the government of God's Love and Wisdom and the creation of uses. Since His Life cannot be less in one being than another, or His Love manifested less fully in one thing than another, His Providence must needs be universal.

Out of the neglects which used to be pointed out was the exclusion of vast multitudes from the blessings of salvation through Jesus Christ. This idea, however, is giving way to a more generous understanding that God has "other sheep who hear His Voice and obey Him." He has provided religion of some kind everywhere, and it does not matter to what race or creed anyone belongs if he is faithful to his ideals of right living. The one principle to be remembered by all is that religion is to live a doctrine, not merely to believe one. It was of the Divine Providence that Mohammed arose to overthrow idol-worship. This great prophet taught a form of religion adapted to the peculiar genius of Orientals, and that explains the mighty influence for good this faith has exercised in many empires and kingdoms. The history of religious thought proclaims in trumpet tones that God has never left Himself without a witness.

Wherever, as is the tendency of conventional worship, the dogmas of a nation turn wicked, simple good peo-

ple abound who remain unharmed by them because they are far from the corruption in high places.

If we view the Divine Providence from the heaven in our minds, past experiences yield up to us precious lessons of wisdom and helpfulness, and we feel the harmony of life; but if we look at God's ways from a world of accident, chance, and discord, we misunderstand them utterly. We regard Him as an arbitrary dispenser of rewards and punishments, partial to favorites and vengeful to adversaries. We presume upon His immensity with our petty patriotisms and pray to Him for victory. We turn to warring sects—and where is He? It has even been said to me, "If there were a God, would He not have created man so that he could never sin?" As if anybody wished him to be an automaton. Not to be able to sin could satisfy only a despot; does not the spirit shiver at such a concept? In fact, all denials of God are found at last to be denials of freedom and humanity. The living value of a belief depends not on our own limited experience but on its benefit to mankind; and an overruling Benevolence is the only teaching that ultimately justifies our knowledge or gives dignity to civilization. It includes many gifts, but above all the power of going out of oneself and appreciating whatever is noble in man and wonderful in the universe.

Swedenborg's "Divine Providence" is a powerfully personal testimony to the truth that God created the universe because of the infinite need of His nature to give life and joy. The futility and hollowness of belief in a remote, unapproachable Deity is shown in many a passage of that comforting work. The author declares that "It is the essence of God's Love to love others, to desire to be one with them, and from Himself to make them happy." That is the whole of the Divine Providence, and we must let ourselves be borne along by it as by a current if we wish to accomplish our part in His Work of spiritual rehabilitation.

Therefore in the vicissitudes of our lives the Divine Providence looks, not to temporal blessings only, but chiefly to our eternal welfare and happiness. The million little things that drop into our hands, the small opportunities each day brings He leaves us free to use or abuse and goes unchanging along His silent way; yet always He guards the right of everyone to act in freedom according to reason. For liberty and rationality are tokens of His gift of immortality to humankind.

Since we are all too prone to live selfishly, it is necessary that there should be something within us to offset this tendency. The choice of a better life which we are to make involves some previous knowledge of such a life. What could save us from becoming more and more like animals, if there were not present with us

other tendencies of a nobler kind? We cannot freely and wisely choose the right way for ourselves unless we know both good and evil.

This is all said to explain Swedenborg's doctrine of "reliquiae" as a powerful factor in moulding life. That word, often translated "remains," signifies the lasting impressions of love and truth and beauty left in us from the days of our childhood. At birth we are passive. Our inherited evil tendencies are as yet quiescent. That is why the little child is so near to heaven, and we so often feel that the angels are ministering to him. "Their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven." Truly, the child comes in "trailing clouds of glory," with characteristics and potentialities different from any other human being. He receives capabilities of goodness and wisdom from the Lord alone, and in a very real sense heaven enshines him like the sunshine. This is the way Swedenborg accounts for the beautiful innocence and trust of the little child. We never completely lost this innocence and trust. Our stored-up capabilities are the holy places where we feel our kinship with the Divine. These are the places of sacrifice, the meeting-ground of mortal and immortal, the tents of trial where are waged the great spiritual combats of man's life. Here are the tears and agonies and the bloody sweat of Gethsemane. Happy the man who can say to himself, "Here, too, was the victory!" Here is the shrine of the life we have chosen.

## CHAPTER VIII

Once affliction was looked upon as a punishment from God—a burden to be borne passively and piously. The only idea of helping the victims of misfortune was to shelter them and leave them to meditate and live as contentedly as possible in the valley of the shadow. But now we understand that a sequestered life without aspiration enfeebles the spirit. It is exactly the same as with the body. The muscles must be used, or they lose their strength. If we do not go out of our limited experience somehow and use our memory, understanding, and sympathy, they become inactive. It is by fighting the limitations, temptations, and failures of the world that we reach our highest possibilities. That is what Swedenborg calls renouncing the world and worshipping God.

Sick or well, blind or seeing, bond or free, we are here for a purpose and however we are situated, we please God better with useful deeds than with many prayers or pious resignation. The temple or church is empty unless the good of life fills it. It is not the stone walls that make it small or large, but the brave soul's

light shining round about. The altar is holy if only it represents the altar of our heart upon which we offer the only sacrifices ever commanded—the love that is stronger than hate and the faith that overcome doubt.

A simple, childlike faith in a Divine Friend solves all the problems that come to us by land or sea. Difficulties meet us at every turn. They are the accompaniment of life. They result from combinations of character and individual idiosyncrasies. The surest way to meet them is to assume that we are immortal, and that we have a Friend who "slumbers not, nor sleeps," and who watches over us and guides us—if we but let Him. With this thought strongly entrenched in our inmost being, we can do almost anything we wish and need not limit the things we think. We may help ourselves to all the beauty of the universe that we can hold. For every hurt there is recompense of tender sympathy. Out of pain grow the violets of patience and sweetness, the vision of the Holy Fire that touched the lips of Isaiah and kindled his life into spirit, and the contentment that comes with the evening star. The marvellous richness of human experience would lose something of rewarding joy if there were no limitations to overcome. The hilltop hour would not be half so wonderful if there were no dark valley to traverse.

I have never believed that my limitations were in any sense punishments or accidents. If I had held such a view, I could never have exerted the strength to overcome them. It has always seemed to me that there is a very special significance in the words of the "Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews": "If we are chastened, God dealth with us as with sons." Swedenborg's teachings bear me out in this view. He defines the greatly misunderstood word chastening or chastisement, not as punishment, but as training, discipline, refinement of the soul.

The "True Christian Religion" is full of stimuli for faith in our God-given powers and self-activity. The chapters "Faith" and "Free-will" are a powerful declaration that we should never surrender to misfortunes or circumstances of even to our faults hopelessly, passively—as if we were but carved images with our hands hanging down, waiting for God's Grace to put us into motion. We should give no quarter to spiritual slavery. We should take the initiative, look into ourselves fearlessly, search out new ideas of what to do, and ways to develop our will-power. Then God will give us enough light and love for all our needs.

Now, limitations of all kinds are forms of chastening to encourage self-development and true freedom. They are tools put into our hands to hew away the stone and flint which keep the higher gifts hidden away in our being. They tear away the

bandage of indifference from our eyes, and we behold the burdens others are carrying, and we learn to help them by yielding to the dictator of a pitying heart.

The example of the newly blinded man is so concrete, I wish to use it as a type for all life-training. When he first loses his sight, he thinks there is nothing left for him but heartache and despair. He feels shut out from all that is human. Life to him is like the ashes on a cold hearth. The fire of ambition is quenched. The light of hope is gone out. The objects in which he once took delight seem to thrust out sharp edges at him as he gropes his way about. Even those who love him act unwittingly as an irritant to his feelings because he can no longer give them the support of his labor. Then comes some wise teacher and friend and assures him he can work with his hands and to a considerable degree train his hearing to take the place of sight. Often the stricken man does not believe it, and in his despair interprets it as a mockery. Like a drowning person he strikes blindly at anyone that tries to save him. Nevertheless, the sufferer must be urged onward in spite of himself, and when he once realizes that he can put himself again in connection with the world, and fulfill tasks worthy of a man, a being he did not dream of before unfolds itself within him. If he is wise, he discovers at last that happiness has very little to do with outward circumstances, and he treads his dark way with a firmer will than he ever felt in the light.

Likewise those who have been mentally blinded "in the gradual furnace of the world" can, and must, be pressed to look for new capabilities within themselves and work out new ways to happiness. They may even resent faith that expects nobler things from them. They say in effect, "I will be content if you take me for what I am—dull, or mean, or hard, or selfish." But it is an affront to them and to the eternal dignity of man so to acquiesce. How often it comes over us that there is much in us which our nearest friends cannot know—more than we dare or care or are able to lay bare, more of feeling, more of power, more of manhood. How little we know ourselves! We need limitations and temptations to open our inner selves, dispel our ignorance, tear off disguises, throw down old idols, and destroy false standards. Only by such rude awakenings can we be led to dwell in a place where we are less cramped, less hindered by the ever-insistent External. Only then do we discover a new capacity and appreciation of goodness and beauty and truth.

From such experience we may gain a wonderful interpretation of the Lord's words: "Verily, verily, I say

unto you, he that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth me." We may know that in every limitation we overcome and in the higher ideals we thus attain the whole kingdom of Love and Wisdom is present. In this way we learn that the real way to grow is by aspiring beyond our limitations, by wishing sublimely for great things and striving to achieve them. We grow in our increasing consciousness of the deeper meaning of the outer life in which we have always lived.

The eye grows by learning to see more in particular objects. To man's physical sight the earth looks flat, and the stars are the same to us that they were to the ancients. Yet science has opened up infinite new wonders and glories in these phenomena! A child sees in the things about him only what he wants or does not want, but when a Newton recognizes the falling of the apple as the expression of a universal force in Nature, he sees far beyond ordinary sight. It is the same with our spirits. We grow as we discern more fully the possibilities of new life wrapped up in daily contacts. But when we forget or ignore this vital fact, the senses lead us astray. That is why limitations are necessary to bring before us the greatness of inner life offered us in the circumstances of our lives, and show us our God-given opportunities.

The constant service of Swedenborg lies in such thoughts as these. He shows us that in every event and every limitation we have a choice, and that to choose is to create. We can decide to let our trials crush us, or we can convert them to new forces of good. We can drift along with general opinion and tradition, or we can throw ourselves upon the guidance of the soul within and steer courageously toward truth. We cannot tell from the outside whether our experiences are really blessings or not. They are cups of poison, or cups of healthful life, according to what we ourselves put into them. The choices offered us are never so much between what we may or may not do, as between the principles from which we act when we are thwarted and limited. Earth is not intended to be an altogether delightful abode any more than it is to be a place of wrath. Since the soil brings forth thistles, and roses have thorns, why should man's life not have its trials? It is not strange, or cruel. It is the urge of God that impels us to enlarge our lives and keep strong for that higher destiny which cannot be accomplished within the limits of earth. Only by striving for what is beyond us do we win expansion and joy. Let us, then, take up that limitation which each one has, and follow the example of Him who bore upon his frail human shoulders the cross of the world, that He might become a

luminous and inspiring influence, communicating life-giving thoughts and desires to the weak, the tempted, and the despondent.

I do not know if it is the "mystic" sense I possess; but certainly it is perceptive. It is the faculty that brings distant objects within the cognizance of the blind so that even the stars seem to be at our very door. This sense relates me to the spiritual world. It surveys the limited experience I gain from an imperfect touch with the world, and presents it to my mind for spiritualization. This sense reveals the Divine to the human in me, it forms a bond between earth and the Great Beyond, between now and eternity, between God and man. It is speculative, intuitive, reminiscent. There is not only an objective physical world, but also an objective spiritual world. The spiritual has an outside as well as an inside, just as the physical has an inside and an outside. Each has an own phase of reality. There is no antagonism between these two planes of life, except when the material is used without regard to the spiritual which lies within and above it. The distinction between them is explained by Swedenborg in his theory of discrete degrees. He illustrates this by saying that the physical world is perceived by a sensory apparatus that is of the same substance as the physical world, while the spiritual world is perceived by a sensory apparatus that is of the same substance as that of the spiritual world.

My life is so complicated by a triple handicap of blindness, deafness, and imperfect speech that I cannot do the simplest thing without thought and effort to rationalize my experiences. If I employed this mystic sense constantly without trying to understand the outside world, my progress would be checked, and everything would fall about me in chaos. It is easy for me to mix up dreams and reality, the spiritual and the physical which I have not properly visualized, and without the inner sense I could not keep them apart. So even if I commit errors in forming concepts of color, sound, light, and intangible phenomena, I must always try to preserve equilibrium between my outer and inner life. Neither can I use my sense of touch without regard to the experience of others and respect for it. I should otherwise go astray or else go round and round in a blind circle. I have always been especially helped by this sentence from Swedenborg's "Arcana Coelestia":

"It is the interior man that sees and perceives what goes on without him, and from this interior source the sense-experience has its life; for from no other than this subjective source is there any faculty of feeling or sensation. But the fallacy that the sense comes from without is of such a nature and so common that the natural mind cannot rid itself of

it, nor even the rational mind, until it can think abstractly from sense."

When the sun of consciousness first shone upon me, behold a miracle! The stock of my young life which had perished, steeped in the waters of knowledge grew again, budded again, was sweet again with the blossoms of childhood! Down in the depths of my being I cried, "It is good to be alive!" I held out two trembling hands to life, and in vain silence would impose dumbness upon me henceforth! The world to which I awoke was still mysterious; but there were hope and love and God in it, and nothing else mattered. Is it not possible that our entrance into heaven may be like this experience of mine?

Several years later my life enlarged when I learned to speak. I can never cease to marvel and be excited by that event of thirty-six years ago, it stands out so isolated, miraculous, baffling. Think of transforming mute, soulless air into speech in the midst of midnight silence. Literally, I had no concepts of speech, and my touch did not suffice to convey to me the thousand fine vibrations of spoken words. Without physical hearing I had to exert the utmost thought of which I was capable until I succeeded in making myself not only heard but understood! It is only by sheer force of mind even now that I keep my speech anywhere near intelligible. When I speak best, I am at a loss to fix that degree of perfection because I cannot fully sense the tones going forth from my lips. What surprises me is not that I fail, but that the subconscious part or the spirit enters so often into my clumsy speech, and my friends say earnestly, "Why can you not talk as well as that always?" If I could develop that psychic power more fully, I feel sure that my victory would be complete. The pain and disappointment I have endured are incalculable; but they are a price worth paying for the joy I have in being able to keep this living bond between the outer world and myself. As I learned to articulate and to put feeling into what I said I sensed more and more the miracle of all time and eternity—the reality of thought! Thought, out of which are wrought books, philosophies, sciences, civilizations, and the joy and the woe of the human race! Even if the lonely blind man who has traveled many years in midnight gloom should suddenly stumble upon the sun and all the glories of a sunlit world, so it was with me when the light of understanding flooded my mind, and I realized that words were precious symbols of knowledge, thought, and happiness. The normal human being is familiar with the use of words, and he cannot remember when he first began to use them. I have had a different experience. I was nearly seven years old when I began to acquire language, and I re-

member distinctly the feelings I experienced. I learned each word as a hand-sensation years before I learned the sound of it. Did most people the sound and the perception of the meanings of the word are, I suppose, simultaneous. The significance of thought-symbols came to me suddenly.

My teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, had been with me nearly a month, and she had taught me the names of a number of objects. She put them into my hand, spelled their names on her fingers and helped me to form the letters; but I had not the faintest idea what I was doing. I do not know what I thought. I have only a tactual memory of my fingers going through those motions, and changing from one position to another. One day she handed me a cup and spelled the word. Then she poured some liquid into the cup and formed the letters w-a-t-e-r. She says I looked puzzled, and persisted in confusing the two words, spelling cup for water and water for cup. Finally I became angry because Miss Sullivan kept repeating the words over and over again. In despair she led me out to the ivy-covered pump-house and made me hold the cup under the spout while she pumped. With her other hand she spelled w-a-t-e-r emphatically. I stood still, my whole body's attention fixed on the motions of her fingers as the cool stream flowed over my hand. All at once there was a strange air within me—a misty consciousness, a sense of something remembered. It was as if I had come back to life after being dead! I understood that what my teacher was doing with her fingers meant that cold something that was rushing over my hand, and that it was possible for me to communicate with other people by these signs. It was a wonderful day never to be forgotten! Thoughts that ran forward and backward came to me quickly—thoughts that seemed to start in my brain and spread all over me. Now I see it was my mental awakening. I think it was an experience somewhat in the nature of a revelation. I showed immediately in many ways that a great change had taken place in me. I wanted to learn the name of every object I touched, and before night I had mastered thirty words. Nothing was blotted out! I felt joyous, strong, equal to my limitations! Delicious sensations rippled through me, and sweet, strange things that were locked up in my heart began to sing. That first revelation was worth all those years I had spent in dark, soundless imprisonment. That word "water" dropped into my mind like the sun in a frozen winter world. Before that supreme event there was nothing in me except the instinct to eat drink and sleep. My days were a blank without past, present, or future, without hope or anticipation, without interest or joy.

It was not night—it was not day. But vacancy absorbing space, And fixated, without a place: There were no stars—no earth—no time—No check—no change—no good—no crime.

It was but a step for me from the wonders of nature to the wonders of the spirit. When Swedenborg's message was revealed to me, it was another precious gift added to life. I will try to clothe my emotion in words. It was as if light came where there had been no light before, the intangible world became a shining certainty. The horizons of my mind widened to bright destinies where the race would still be swift, the battle strong.

Heaven, as Swedenborg portrays it, is not a mere collection of radiant ideas, but a practical, liveable world. It should never be forgotten that death is not the end of life, but only one of its most important experiences. In the great silence of my thoughts all those whom I have loved on earth, whether near or far, living or dead, live and have their own individuality, their own dear ways and charm. At any moment I can bring them around me to cheer my loneliness. It would break my heart if any barrier could prevent them from coming to me. But I know there are two worlds—one we can measure with line and rule, and the other we can feel with our hearts and intuitions. Swedenborg makes the future life not only conceivable, but desirable. His message to the living who meet the night of death with its attendant separation and sorrow sweeps across the heart of humanity like some sweet breath from God's Presence. We can now meet death as Nature does, in a blaze of glory, marching to the grave with a gay step, wearing our brightest thoughts and most brilliant anticipations, as Nature arrays herself in garments of gold, emerald, and scarlet, as if defying death to rob her of immortality.

The difficulty man has in believing this arises not so much from the unprovableness of it as from his own incredulous attitude. His egoistic desires tend to overwhelm his spiritual strivings, or, perhaps, it is nearer the truth to say, his inner faculties have not yet reached the point of conscious experience. They are still too feeble to function effectively. He is unable to realize the pernicious influence of acquiescence upon his character. He does not understand the true significance of his spiritual being. He believes that only material things are real. Our civilization is a failure in the degree to which we are indifferent to the teachings of philosophers like Swedenborg and the visions of the great thinkers of the world.

With thoughts wide as the universe, deliberate, with wisdom in his hands,

Swedenborg tells us how angels led him from realm to realm of the spirit-world, showed him the life that comes after death and the reality of things immortal. Angels were his teachers, his guides. He lodged his soul in heaven; he sensed the magnitude of the Divine Providence, the tremendous circumstance of life eternal. He was permitted to walk the sky and the winding course of stars.

I am aware that some learned critics will break me on the wheel of their disdain. They will try to mend my poor philosophy on the anvil of their keen mirth with the hammer of reasons culled from science. "All creation crowns itself in this invisible atom of matter. It is the beginning and the end." Perhaps; but there is still a dewdrop in the lily's cup; there is fragrance in the heart of the rose, and under a leaf a bird folds its wings! I cannot understand the poor faith that fears to look into the eyes of death. Faith that is vulnerable in the presence of death is a frail reed to lean upon. With steadfast thought, I follow sight beyond all seeing, until my soul stands up in spiritual light and cries, "Life and death are one." When I review my life, it seems to me that my precious obligations are to those whom I have never seen. My dearest intimacies are those of the mind, my most loyal and helpful friends are those of the spirit. I cannot imagine myself without religion. I could as easily fancy a living boy without a heart. To one who is deaf and blind, the spiritual world offers no difficulty. Nearly everything in the natural world is as vague, as remote from my senses as spiritual things seem to the minds of most people. I plunge my hands deep into my large Braille volumes containing Swedenborg's teachings, and withdraw them full of the secrets of the spiritual world. The inner, or "mystic," sense, if you like, gives me vision of the unseen. My mystic world is lovely with trees and clouds and stars and eddying streams I have never "seen." I am often conscious of beautiful flowers and birds and laughing children where to my seeing associates there is nothing. They seem to declare that I see "light that never was on sea or land." But I know that their mystic sense is dormant, and that is why there are so many barren places in their lives. They prefer "facts" to vision. They want a scientific demonstration and they can have it. They prefer "facts" to thought-life and inner vision. They want demonstration—a scientific exegesis. To such people our Lord said, "Ye seek a sign, and ye shall find none." I love life with its mysteries, its "illusions," its invincible need of temples not made with hands! Swedenborg's books are an inexhaustible well-spring of satisfaction to those who live the life of the mind.

Science meets spirit as life meets death, and life and death are one.

THE END.