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## TENNYSON'S RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

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Alfred Tennyson is the most representative English poet of the nineteenth century. For this reason the religious beliefs held by him and expressed in his poetry are of peculiar interest to any student of religious thought. But let us endeavor to understand what his beliefs were before undertaking to measure the significance of his holding and teaching them.

We turn first to one of his earliest poems, *The Palace of Art*. Opening with the statement,

"I built my soul a lordly pleasure-house,  
Wherein at ease for aye to dwell,"

he proceeds to describe this lordly pleasure-house of his soul as furnished with all the treasures of literature and art from all the ages. Then the soul in "Godlike isolation," separating herself from God and from men, whom she despises as "droves of swine," says at last:

"I take possession of man's mind and deed,  
I care not what the sects may brawl.  
I sit as God holding no form of creed,  
But contemplating all."

After her sitting thus alone for three years, in the fourth

“Deep dread and loathing of her solitude  
Fell on her, from which mood was born  
Scorn of herself.”

Vainly she strove against this growing dread and loathing.

“So when four years were wholly finished,  
She threw her royal robes away.  
‘Make me a cottage in the vale,’ she said;  
‘Where I may mourn and pray.  
‘Yet pull not down my palace towers, that are  
So lightly, beautifully built;  
Perchance I may return *with others* there  
When I have purged my guilt.’ ”

The meaning is, that the human soul cannot enjoy life outside the society of God and men, whatever best wealth of provision it may have in such isolation; that the soul must be united with its proper associates by faith and love, by creed and sympathy; and that only in religion and society are literature and art to be in the noblest sense enjoyed.

This early faith the poet kept through his life. When

“The goodliest fellowship of famous knights”

was ‘unsoldered’ and the last of them, Sir Badivere, cries to the departing Arthur,

“But now the whole ROUND TABLE is dissolved,  
Which was an image of the mighty world:  
And I, the last, go forth, companionless,”

Arthur answers him,

“The old order changeth, yielding place to new,  
And God fulfils himself in many ways,”

but the society of God and good men is never dissolved.

So in *Locksley Hall* the disappointed lover is saved from becoming a misanthrope and brought back to his "ancient founts of inspiration" by the thought of mingling in the life and strife of God's "great world."

In *The Vision of Sin*, sin shows its nature in such exclamations as

"Friendship!—to be two in one—  
Let the canting liar pack!  
Well I know when I am gone,  
How she mouths behind my back."

And the real nature of the punishment of sin is suggested in the couplet,

"And on the glimmering limit *far withdrawn*  
God made himself an awful rose of dawn."

This doctrine of the supreme worth of love pours through all that great poem, *In Memoriam*, in which the poet says to God concerning his friend:

"I trust he lives in thee, and there ..  
I find him worthier to be loved."

And in *Crossing the Bar*, among the poet's last utterances, this faith in personal communion with the Infinite is still singing itself:

"For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crossed the bar."

At the head of this society of friendship is God, who is working out, through all ages and changes, through good and ill, His plan—an all-embracing purpose worthy of the infinite Love and Wisdom.

This doctrine of Providence pervades Tennyson's poetry.  
It is in *Morte d'Arthur*, as in the line already quoted,

"And God fulfils himself in many ways."

It is plain in *Locksley Hall*, as in the line,

"Yet I doubt not thro' the ages one increasing purpose runs."

Hence we may look with hope into the future out of all present evils and failures; since

"Not in vain the distance beacons."

This doctrine of Providence receives, however, a significant form or coloring in the nineteenth century poet. Let us go back again to *Locksley Hall*:

"Science moves, but slowly, slowly, creeping on from point to point;  
"Slowly comes a hungry people, as a lion, creeping nigher,  
Glares at one that nods and winks behind a slowly-dying fire.  
"Yet I doubt not thro' the ages one *increasing* purpose runs,  
And the thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns.

"Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range,  
Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change.  
"Thro' the shadow of the globe we sweep into the younger day;  
Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay."

Here is the conception of progress through change, gradual change, growth. The universe is one, one that grows, passing from the bad, or immature, to the better through development. Yet in this development, this evolution, the one Supreme Intelligence is at work, realizing his purpose. We may call this conception a form of Theistic Evolution.

It receives its most remarkable expression in the epilogue to *In Memoriam*. Alluding to a certain wedding, he sings:

"A soul shall draw from out the vast  
And strike his being into bounds,

"And, moved through life of lower phase,  
Result in man, be born and think,  
And act and love, a closer link  
Betwixt us and the crowning race

"Of those that, eye to eye, shall look  
On knowledge; under whose command  
Is Earth and Earth's, and in their hand  
Is Nature like an open book;

"No longer half-akin to brute,  
For all we thought and loved and did,  
And hoped, and suffer'd, is but seed  
Of what in them is flower and fruit;

"Whereof the man, that with me trod  
This planet, was a noble type  
Appearing ere the times were ripe,  
That friend of mine who lives in God,

"That God, which ever lives and loves,  
One God, one law, one element,  
And one far-off divine event,  
To which the whole creation moves."

The meaning is: the human race is gradually improving; the next generation will be wiser and better than we, and so on to the consummation; my friend Hallam was an anticipation of that better type of man; and he and I shall yet find each other in that final society of God and His into which the Immanent God is evolving the universe.

Does not this verge on pantheism? Notice in the last stanza above that Tennyson uses the non-personal relative "which," referring to God, instead of the personal "who." This would seem to indicate that God is here so conceived that somehow, if the distinction between person and thing is pressed, God is rather thing than person. Yet he says that this God "lives and loves."

Let us go with this question to *The Higher Pantheism*:

"The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the hills and the plains,—  
Are not these, O Soul, the Vision of Him who reigns?

"Is not the Vision He, tho' He be not that which He seems?"

Here he stops short of strict pantheism, refusing to identify God with the visible things which are "sign and symbol of" the soul's "division from Him." Except the soul, God is all, the visible things not being realities in the deeper sense in which God and the soul are realities. Things are visible shadows of invisible realities, which are spirits. So the poet says to his soul:

"Speak to Him, thou, for He hears, and Spirit with Spirit can meet—  
Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."

This is the doctrine of the divine immanence pushed to the verge of ideal pantheism, but stopping in time to save the personality of God and the soul, and the distinction of the two. To this agrees also what he says to the flower which he has plucked out of the crannied wall:

'If I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is."

The "is" shows that "God and man" are conceived as one, yet this one is the flower. This takes us right up to the verge of pantheism; but, allowing for poetic emphasis, we cannot say that Tennyson means to teach pantheism, perilously near as he comes to doing so.

What holds him back from going the whole way into ideal pantheism? It is love, which cannot be except between distinct personalities. This doctrine of love palpitates throughout his poetry; let it suffice to quote one passage from *In Memoriam*:

"That which we dare invoke to bless;  
Our dearest faith; our ghastliest doubt;  
He, They, One, All; within, without;  
The Power in darkness whom we guess,—

"I found Him not in world or sun,  
Or eagle's wing, or insect's eye,  
Nor thro' the questions men may try,  
The petty cobwebs we have spun.

"If e'er when faith had fallen asleep,  
I heard a voice, 'believe no more,'  
And heard an ever-breaking shore  
That tumbled in the Godless deep,

"A warmth within the breast would melt  
The freezing reason's colder part,  
And like a man in wrath the heart  
Stood up and answer'd, 'I have felt.'"

Tennyson is therefore able to distinguish in Deity the Son of God from God. Witness the adoration he gives to the Son in the prologue to *In Memoriam*:

"Strong Son of God, immortal Love,  
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,  
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,  
Believing where we cannot prove;

"Thine are those orbs of light and shade.  
Thou madest Life in man and brute;  
Thou madest Death . . . .

"Thou seemest human and divine,  
The highest, holiest manhood, thou,  
Our wills are ours, we know not how,  
Our wills are ours, to make them thine.

"Forgive what seem'd my sin in me,  
What seem'd my worth since I began;  
For merit lives from man to man,  
And not from man, O Lord, to thee."

The man who says this from the heart is worshipping Christ as God. And when we put the second line of this beside the last stanza of *Crossing the Bar*, we can not mistake whom he means when he says:

"I hope to see my Pilot face to face."

This faith in Christ pervades *In Memoriam*, little as the poet speaks of particulars. Incidentally he shows that, as a matter of course, he believes that our Lord raised Lazarus from the dead, which carries with it his general acceptance of the gospels as history.

Yet he shrank from definite credal statement:

"Our little systems have their day,  
They have their day and cease to be;  
They are but broken lights of thee,  
And thou, O Lord, art more than they."

This timidity of definite statement is partly from a sense that the realities to be believed are greater than definite formulas can express; but it seems to be also partly from the poet's inner conflict of doubt and belief. For instance, he says:

. . . . "one indeed I knew  
In many a subtle question versed,  
Who touched a jarring lyre at first,  
But ever strove to make it true:

"Perplexed in faith, but pure in deeds,  
At last he beat his music out.  
There lives more faith in honest doubt,  
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

"He fought his doubts and gather'd strength,  
He would not make his judgment blind,  
He faced the spectres of the mind  
And laid them; thus he came at length

"To find a stronger faith his own."

We have already seen how, while certainly holding to the essentials of our Christian faith, he went beyond orthodox limits in his evolutionary conception of providence and in his quasi-panteistic conception of God and man. We are now to see whether he let his love-emphasizing tendency carry him too far in his optimistic view of the future. We turn again to his great poem:



"O, yet we trust that somehow good  
Will be the final goal of ill,  
To pangs of nature, sins of will,  
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;

"That nothing walks with aimless feet;  
That not one life shall be destroyed,  
Or cast as rubbish to the void,  
When God hath made the pile complete;

"So runs my dream; but what am I?  
An infant crying in the night,  
An infant crying for the light,  
And with no language but a cry.

"I falter where I firmly trod,  
And falling with my weight of cares  
Upon the great world's altar stairs  
That slope thro' darkness up to God.

"I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,  
And gather dust and chaff, and call  
To what I feel is Lord of all,  
And faintly trust the larger hope."

Here again we have not a definite creed, but a hope; for elsewhere he says:

"At last I heard a voice upon the slope  
Cry to the summit, 'Is there any hope?'  
To which an answer pealed from that high land,  
But in a tongue no man could understand;  
And on the glimmering limit far withdrawn  
God made himself an awful rose of dawn."

If we say that Tennyson has a positive creed on the question of universal salvation, it is that no clear answer has been revealed, but that there is ground for the largest hope, though only a hope.

While in these three directions he goes beyond the bounds of orthodoxy, towards universalism, evolutionism, and pantheism, how about the practical side of the Christian life?

He lays the greatest emphasis upon altruistic service of mankind. He calls each one to labor. He is one in whom

"Love took up the harp of Life, and smote on all the chords with might,  
Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, past in music out of sight."

Thence he toils on, expecting,

"Till the war-drum throb no longer, and the battle-flags be furl'd  
In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world,"—

till the hope that waits through all his music be fulfilled:

"Ring out the old, ring in the new,

Ring out the false, ring in the true.

"Ring out old shapes of foul disease;  
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;  
Ring out the thousand years of old,  
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

"Ring in the vallant man and free,  
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;  
Ring out the darkness of the land,  
Ring in the Christ that is to be."

He lays an equal emphasis on one's own character, seeing in personal purity the first qualification for usefulness to others. The language of his *Sir Galahad* is the language of Tennyson himself:

"My strength is as the strength of ten,  
Because my heart is pure."

But personal purity and beneficence combined would not mark a man as in the best sense religious; to these he must add the practice of prayer. Here Tennyson failed not. The sentiment of his *Arthur* is his own sentiment and practice:

"For what are men better than sheep or goats,  
That nourish a blind life within the brain,  
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer  
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?  
For so the whole round earth is every way  
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God."

That Tennyson entertained "the larger hope," that he pushed the divine immanence to the very verge of a form of pantheistic theology, and that in his conceptions of providence and progress he took evolutionary forms, while holding theoretically and practically to the essentials of the Christian faith, is evidence how pervasive and strong are those beliefs and tendencies in the thought of his and our age, even in its best thought.

That such a mind as Tennyson was so powerfully affected by these ideas demands for them respect and attention. Attention they should have, as thus shown to be distinctive ideas of the time. For there can be no better index to the thought of a time than the utterances of its great interpretative poets. And they also are thus shown to deserve respect. If they are extreme and erroneous, they yet must have in them some kinship to truth, either as protests against the opposite extremes or as imperfect efforts to grasp and express truths.

On the other hand, the very fact that so Christian a mind as Tennyson, naturally hospitable to such ideas, did not go all the length in these directions, indicates that there is something in these now prevalent views or tendencies that is in opposition to Christian truth. It is just in these three great questions, of natural evolution to the exclusion of divine providence, of a divine immanence that loses the Person in the all, and of a universalism that denies or minimizes guilt and its final punishment, it is just here that our Christianity is most liable to receive dangerous wounds. Our God must be Creator, Person and Judge.

Again, that Tennyson, so at home in the philosophy and science of his time, and so hospitable to this scientific thought and habit, in a word, so thoroughly scientific in his mental habit, was also so thoroughly Christian, shows that the scientific man may

love and adore Christ, that there is no contradiction between science and Christian faith.

And the argument is all the stronger because Tennyson was a poet and not a mere scientist. It is conceivable that a mere scientist, having his attention centred on problems of mere science, as chemistry or geology, might continue to hold his childhood faith for the lack of questioning its basis. But here is a man conversant with the index facts of science, and thoroughly scientific in training and habit of mind, whose attention is centered on the problems of life and religion, and who wrestles with the questions that lie at the basis of the Christian faith; and all the while his faith in Christ strengthens and matures. Here is, then, an experimental test, proving that faith and science can live together in the same mind.

Finally, Tennyson is the demonstration that personal communion with Christ is not unfavorable to the highest art. Under cover of the maxim, Art for art's sake, some would exclude moral purpose from all art, and would even maintain that the highest success in art is not possible to a life restricted by conscience toward Christ.

This is a false reasoning. A life out of communion with Christ is a restricted life. If in a palace of art one admires only the building from without, the architectural ornamentation of the outer courts and ante-rooms, and such pictures and statuary as are placed in the entrances, this man is free to range as he will, and has little need of a guide; and yet he is restricted and shut out from the treasures of art within. But he who is admitted within, and, under the guidance and inspiration of the Master, is brought face to face with the best treasures, he has the largest opportunity and lives the richest life. Christ does not restrict; he directs. He guides into the larger and better vision. He reveals the superior world.

And Tennyson excels, take him all in all, every poet of the century, unless Browning, who is also a Christian mind. And we cannot conceive how Tennyson could have produced nobler creations and have won a larger appreciation, if he had been less in communion with the Light of life, and had been less in love with the Pilot out of its darkness.