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The religion of Alfred Tennyson as expressed "In memoriam

The Religion of Alfred Tennyson as Expressed "In Memoriam."

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(Written under the direction of Professor Samuel J. MacWatters.)

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Memorandum of number of hours spent - eightyfive.

Tennyson was a man of Faith. It is of things invisable and eternal that he most nobly sings. Again and again we see Christian truth spring forth clothed in beauty and strength in a manner of which few can boast. He desires to write deeper in the minds and hearts of men the doctrines of prayer, faith, repentance, forgiveness, the new birth, immortality, Christ, God. He stands in awe before these sublime truths. He sees their universal application to man and their relation to each other. He then like other great minds seeks to fathom their depths.

His poetic instinct is Christian throughout. The Faith of the centuries is wrapt up in sermonic poems which bring peace and joy to a multitude of men and women for all the years to come. Without this faith human life to him would be bitter indeed and the story of mans struggles an unspeakable tragedy.

Tennyson's mental attitude on the question of religion may be conveniently divided into four periods.
At first we see him undisturbed by any doubts. He takes the Faith of his fathers as delivered unto him in all its purity and simplicity. The stress of sorrow and trouble had not as yet befallen him. In his fathers house, an English rectory, he had been subject to influences which make for

purity and simplicity of character. He had had little incentive for critical religious thinking.

Later we find his peace of mind quite disturbed with questionings and doubts. His reason is supreme and he desires to know the "Why" of things. He is in a state of vacillation between doubt and belief. Long and bitter was the struggle with his own questionings of soul. Noble was his endeavor to seeure a solid footing with regard to the Eternal Verities.

This personal struggle received a tremendous impulse through the death of his much beloved friend Arthur Henry Hallam, In his own words we have the tragic scene. "Like Paul with beasts I fought with death". This fight was because of doubts in the reality of God which death often brings. Throughout seventeen years, the period covered by the writing of In Memoriam he is concerned with such subjects as the meaning and worth of human life, the final destiny of the soul, the divine Fatherhood of God. During all this time we find him deeply meditating, manfully trying to beat back skepticism by patient earnest inquiry into reasonable grounds for believing that God exists, that he is essentially Justice and Love; that life with its love and duty has real worth and meaning. It was

a sublime struggle as the prologue to In Memoriam testifies.

In the third period he begins to see things in a clearer perspective. He is still groping in the sands to find a rock foundation. He realizes it is much easier to die but infinitely less noble. Life is not worth living if Love be wanting.

Science had raised many questions in the minds of thoughtful men. Organic Evolution was widely accepted; Darwin's theory of natural selection, involving a dread struggle for existence gave in the minds of many a deadening blow to faith in the justice and love of God. In many centers it was an age of positive denial. The tremendous advance of science was attended by the progress of materialism.

The religious world was also greatly disturbed by certain movements the tendency of which was to shake the confidence of many in the authority of the Scriptures, and the validity of the dogma handed down from century to century. Controversy especially if it be religious or theological is quite likely to fruitful of skepticism and doubt.

Science and philosophy had thrown doubt upon the so-called "Eternal Verities" with which the christian religion concerns itself. Some sought refuge in the authority of the church. But with the infallibility of the Holy Scriptures

and the Church impeached by the results of reverent christian scholarship the troubled and inquiring mind often fell back on Agnosticism. Tennyson knew well the age in which he lived. Few men understood it better. He decided it was his business as a poet to help men live the life which they ought to live. His whole being was stirred and there was aroused in him a most earnest consideration of "the reasons for the faith" which much of the science and philosophy of the time denied, desiring if possible to give some helpful message to his fellowmen. His love for the truth made him desirious of knowing it and proclaiming it. As he said of another which was lukewise true of himself," He would not make his judgment blind,

He faced the spectres of the mind".

At last we behold him risen above the doubts and questionings of life to a clear calm faith. In the conclusion of In Memotiam it seems that Tennyson has ended his conflict with such problems and feels the assurance of the immortality of the soul and sees in Christ the revelation of truth to mankind. He maintained that there need be no conflict between the fact of natural law and religious belief. The law is perhaps only one exprrssion of Gods way of working. In the face of a materialistic world

he urged that the test of science or logic could not apply to religion. The experience of the soul is valid for the soul. The philosophical teaching of Tennyson was based on such experience. He believed with Paul that "we see as through a glass darkly"; tho we cannot understand God as we would like to yet it is possible for all to hold communion with him.

"Speak to him for he hears,
And spirit with spirit can meet,
Closer is he than breathing
And nearer than hands and feet."

In "Locksley Hall Sixty Years Later" the belief is expressed that to take away the hope of a future life would be to rob the human character of such virtues as truth, justice goodness. After fighting doubts for more than fifty years Tennyson arrived at a calm clear faith for himself. God was not a part of science but a truth attested. Through processes of evolution he believed mans conflicts would prove his enlargement in character and spirituality.

It is in that wonderful producton of InMemoriam that we can best study how the grear poet grappled with the deepest themes, the mysteries of sorrow suffering and death. Herein we find a tenderness and yearning hitherto unknown in the realm of literature. It is the effort

of a great soul seeking to express itself and to give rational account to itself of the facts of sin, pain, and grief and to reconcile them with the belief in God. It is not a theological discussion; the poet does not reach his conclusions merely by argument. He rather asserts most luminously the intuitions of the soul, the conviction that there is divine order in the universe and that this order is the result of love:

"If these brief lays of sorrow born
Were taken to be such as closed
Grave doubts and questions here proposed,
Then these were such as men might scorn.

Her care is not to part and prove;
She takes, when harsher moods remit,
What slender shade of doubt may flit,
And makes it vassal unto love."

It is extremely difficult to put into words the value of a poem that demonstrates to the universal heart the divinity and immortality of love.

Many have regarded In Memoriam as the greatest poetical production of the last one hundred years, both for substance and for form. It is truly the most representative poem of the age. Let us look into it at closer range.

This Elegy is dedicated to that Unseen Love which he believes is at the heart of all things in which we live and move and have our being. Forgiveness is desired of this Higher Power for any weakness which his song of suffering and pain betrays. He longs again to meet his friend made perfct in love.

He then proceeds to boldly tell us that it is possible to outlive and verily profit by the errors of the past. Though he fails to see as yet how the bitterness of bereavement can be used to good account. He beholds the gloomy immmorial yew in the churchyard and longs to exchange his feverish being for a like passionless immobility and thus longing he almost fancies that indeed some such petrifaction is stealing over him.

So deceiving is the lip of sorrow that he doubts that he should trust her at all .All nature is clothed in her mourning garb. She hides the truth and no doubt it would be well if she could be stifled instead of cherished.

Night after night he is haunted by his nameless burden of sorrow; he suffers scarce knowing why in sleep. Morning appears with some gleams of new resolve and hope.

The commonplace expressions of comdolence such as "other friends remains"to him" and that loss is common" and the like l

are of no avail. In his loneliness the poet likens himself to a lover who when he finds the home of his beloved empty of her presence feels his heart grow sick. In her garden he might find a flower she once loved, he would treasure this and cherish it for her sake. Thus will he cherish that flower of song which his friend once delighted in. Though it should be worth but little it shall be consecrated to him. His imagination plays around the vessel which is bringing home to England his dead friend Arthur. He prays the winds and waves to bear gently back his more than brother.

Hardly can he realise his great loss. As a carrier pigeon bearing a mournful message he pictures himself. Between sleep and waking he scarce believes his loved one dead; like one who ever misses and is forever weeping his late espoused saint. He trusts that time and the years may teach him that it is real and not a meloncholy dream.

He wonders at his strange alternations of mood the strange balancing between calm despair and wild unrest. He sees that no earthly joys are perfect, the sun itself has specks of darkness upon its surface, perhaps this human friendship was not so flawless after all. His present gloom may have made it appear to ideal or mere distance may have lent to friendship the glamour that ever surrounds things past.

Again he muses and realizes that after all it was the pathway of life with its chances and changes, its cares and crosses and its many trials. Indeed it was no rosy pathway; that which had made it seem so was love. This had lightened every burden dividing it between the one beloved. It is now his noblest wish to prove his love eternal. Inconstancy to the dead he scorns. Even in his darkest hours he does not wish his love had never been. There is a peace that is born of want and he prefers his pain.

It is the Christmas time, the first after the death of Arthur. He listens to the bells of the village churches near by at first sounding loudly then dying away into silence. He had almost wished that he might never hear again their Christmas message of "Peace and goodwill." By it his sorrow is touched with the sacred joy years gone by. The garlands are hung and the Christmas games begun; but the shadow of death is in the midst and laughter rings hollow and hearts are heavy wwith sorrow.

Then the poets thoughts turn to the story of Lazarus. He wishes more had been revealed, that we might know more a about the abscence of the spirit from the body. Perhaps Mary in her rapture to behold again her brother restored ~~again~~ to life failed to question the Master on these points.

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Though difficult to do, no doubt it is best to leave all curious doubts and questionings aside, and merely pray, trust, and love. However the poet falls into those sad questionings which Mary knew not. Is there any future Life? IN his anguish one thing only is apparent that without a future life the present life is nought and nothing is really worth while.

But is not life worth living even for loves sake? Suppose there were no other life, would'nt love make this one sweet? It is an idle question. Love would not have been were it not for the instinct of Immortality. Otherwise there had been nothing but a mockery of love; mere careless fellowship, or brutish passion.

His thoughts return to the figure of the Christ in tender adoration. He was indeed the Word that all could understand. Even the most humble toilers of the earth recognize the simple grandeur of his perfect human life. He recalls that his friend Arthur often spoke of things divine so he to would fain mingle some whisper of them in his song. He visits the old churchyard in the spring time, he sees the tender green shoots on the old yew tree whose stubborn hardihood he so recently envied. He wonders if such a sweet awakening which comes to all will come to him.

How pleasant it would be if one could look on the departed as on a maiden who exchanges her parent's for her husbands home, who is not lost, but removed to a higher sphere, witth other duties, othe r aims, and new responsibilities. She may return, tidings may come of her, but the beloved dead pursue their high appointed tasks in undiscovered lands. We can no longer follow as we would here the steps by which they mount upward.

As Arthur was ever first and helped and guided in the past likewise he may so continue. There is no sweeter thing than for love to be taught of love which is also of wisdom. If death be indeed sleep as some say, if the spirit slumber as in a trance, until the last awakening, then will he lose nothing. Then will the love of yore be returned unto him.

The Poet does not accept those theories of a future state which deny the continuance of individual being. A vague nirvana, in which the personal soul is merged in the general soul can never satisfy the desires of love which seeks not merely to meet again but to know again those gone before. The desire for a future existence where the threads of this life may again be taken up is most divine in all of us.

Again he seeks some image of his love for his friend, he compares it to that of a poor village girl for one in a higher station than her own. As such a one would pine in restless solitude while her love mingled with his peers likewise he frets and doubts and weeps half jealously as he compares the baseness of his state with the gloriousness of that which is Arthurs. Yet it may be that in his present state he holds daily converse with the mighty dead such as Plato, Dante, Shakespeare. If such should be the case, how dwarfed must he himself be in Arthurs sight. Yet he longs to be remembered for love is love and even the great of olden times could not love him as does his former earthly friend. However if to remember him could in any manner trouble Arthur's joy he would choose to have his love forgotten or recalled only as some foolish first love is recalled by one who lives to wed an equal mind.

Continuing to brood on all the possible relations of his lost friend to the life and the love that he has left he compares him to some genius of lowly birth who should leave his obscure home to rise to the highest offices of state, and should sometimes in the midst of his greatness remember as in a dream the dear scenes of old, and, it may be, the humble villager who was his chosen playmate.

One may have thought the poet warped with sorrow and surprised to behold him frequently gay among the gay. Though the sense of his privaton is ever near him he feels gently to all; he is embittered toward none; he is as one blind yet remaining cheerful throughout..

He laments that his friend was "too early lost for public fame", but he then recalls what a vain thing fame is at the best, in a vast universe composed of many worlds and as immeasurable in duration as in extent. A mans true crown of rejoicing is not in any fading renown that he may win but in that divine inward force which, whether it come to full fruition here or not is his best possession.

Christmas comes again. Its joyousness proceeds as usual there are no external marks of distress. He wonders if the grief which is love has become deadened with time? His heart answers - no. He decides that such grief becomes a part of us an element in our complex being, and it lives on the spirit's depth for all our tears are dry.

With solemn emphasis he repudiates the thought that could the beloved dead return to us, after howsoever long an interval after whatsoever changes in our lives and in our homes their presence could be welcomeless to us

He turns hither and thither ,he sees his love reflected in all the universe. The second anniversary of Arthur's death arrives. The dawn is calm and beautiful with the beauty of early autumn. On awaking the Poet ponders on all the myriad souls to whom this balmy morning will bring memories of bridal, birth, and death. With all those fellow creatures, who think this day upon their dead; he feels himself in mystic sympathy.-

It is the anniversary of Anthurs birth, a winters day of piercing cold and gloom;he desires to have it kept with festal honours. The songs which he once loved shall be sung; Yule logs shall blaze and cheery talk shall be as though he were by.

He is fast becoming convinced that if sorrow is indeed to bear the peaceable fruit of righteousness in him, he must no longer brood over it in solitude. Only among our kind in human sympathy and fellowship and human striving can sorrow turn to profit.

It is spring again with all its Dovely sights and sounds His heart beats faster in responsive harmony to the world without. However there is yet much of regret, But it is not an unmixed regret. The vivid impulsee of spring do not all

bring sadness. Rather the joyous resurrection of Life around re-awakens hope and trust. It is to a future tie of lasting blessedness with Arthur instead of the severed chain of by-gone days that his quickened yearning points. He becomes enraptured in the thought that the very separation will make the meeting sweeter when that new bond shall be entered into. Perhaps the very purpose of these days apart is to ehance the delight of the nearness that shall be later theirs. One cannot think of the wonderful formation of the earth out of a sea of fire and at last man the crowning work of time and believe for a moment in man's annihilation. IN that case the whole mystery of evolution would be without meaning. Indeed the dead live and work, and it is for us who remain to typify, each one in his own person, the grand scheme of nature ever striving upward, ever seeking to subdue the lower to the higher.

Once more the poet stands before the house that was Arthurs home. It is not now in blank dismay and gloom that he beholds it. He would say that there is no essential change in him. His love is there and his lonliness; and the "deep relations" of his grief are ever the same. Yet

there is a fresh phase. All healthy and joyous impulses of the morning awake in him once more, and death is swallowed up in life.

Though everything in the material universe is changing and all is in a state of flux of perpetual disintegration there is one thing fixed and abiding, it is that which we call spirit and, amid all uncertainty, one truth is certain that to a loving human soul a parting which shall be eternal is unthinkable.

We see throughout the long lament for Arthur, despite some surface bitterness some troubled, jarring notes, the Poet's song has been inspired by hope and love. Though sometimes disguised they were ever there. Whether sad or sweet or strong, the strain, Love breathed it, the Love that shall sustain unto the end. Though the poet dwells only in his earthly court yet even here come heavenly messengers with tidings of the friend who has reached that other court with sweet assurances that all is well. Indeed all is well not for him only not for Arthur only but for all mankind for all the world. Nations are seeking good, all classes of society are shaken and though turmoil be everywhere yet a deeper voice is heard that prophecies a happy end, and over all the blessed dead watched Knowing all is well.

Akin to that faith, called love by the poet, that fought with death and conquered is this faith which grapples with the temptation to despair of human progress. Frequently socalled progress appears but fruitless change and under other names old errors and follies reappear. Yet as a whole he sees all things working together for good; the people are striving upward. These two kinds of faith are more than akin they are identical. It is one love one faith which clings to Arthur and which hungers for a nobler race a happier world. It is when the Poets hopes and aspirations for his kind rise highest then is his friend most intimately near him, and that dear image mingles with every dream of good. Arthur has become for him a part of the very universe itself. He seems to him a part of Gods world he is even nearer than before and ever dearer. It is with joyous exultation that the Poet triumphs in the thought that throughout his life as well as after death that they are and will be one.

It is in solemn aspiration that the Poet's prayer ascends to that Eternal Power which is over all and through all and in us all that we may be purified and faithful to our appointed task and strong in self control, that we may to the end, abide in Him, believing where we cannot prove.

The Poem fitly closes with a marriage song.. His gloom is changed to hope his weeping into tranquil joy. There is no more of regret, love abounds, holy memories and the desire to labor in behalf of men. In the union of a beloved sister with a dear friend the Poet finds a bright, harmonious note on which to end his singing. Indeed a marriage of this kind is the type of hope and of all things fair and bright and good, seeming to bring us nearer to the consumatin for which we pray-that crowning race, that Christ that is to be. This perfected manhood towards which we strive was foreshadowed in him to whom the Poet sings-that friend who lives and loves in God for ever.

Thus closes our interpretation of the immortal monument Written by Tennyson to the memory of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam. Throughout it is a poem of spiritualized reflections. It is a series of detached elegies, a group of separate lyrics of wondrous beauty.

Like as a tree adds fiber to itself year after year and grows even in the face of the stormy blast and stands forth in all its strength and beauty on the mountain top so In Memoriam grows throughout those seventeen years until it becomes the greatest poem of the nineteenth century. It grew out of heart breaking grief; a wailing into the

dark unknown after vanished love. His own expression of the writing is -

"Short swallow-flights of song, that dip
Their wings in tears and skim away".

"The different moods of sorrow as in a drama are dramatically given, and my conviction that fear, doubts, and suffering will find answer and relief only through Faith in a God of Love."

It has been called the "greatest English Classic on the love of Immortality and the Immortality of Love".

"It is the most exquisite, the grandest structure ever reared above a human grave."

The death of his friend put a new soul into his poetry and hence forth he wrote not as one who is a lover of art for art's sake but as one who is a lover of mankind; as one whose genius is consecrated to the uplift of the world.

He deals with the great questions of philosophy and religion as the eternal verities of the deep human experiences of personal loss and growth. It is full of passionate religious emotion. Religious [illegible] are the very basis of the poem. It is metaphysical and full of philosophic thought. The doctrines of faith, reason God and immortality are supreme.

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The poet feels that God has kindled a certain deathless something within his own bosom ; he feels this mount toward the upper skies which is its home, the force from which it comes; it burns within him like a deathless fire. Though all about him seems so perishable and transitory, he will believe that man is imperishable and immortal . Should the processes of reason fail ; the demonstration be impossible, and proof be of no avail yet would he cling to his faith, he must believe.

"My own dim life should teach me this,
That life shall live for evermore,
Else earth is darkness at the core,
And dust and ashes all that is;

This round of green, this orb of flame,
Fantastic beauty; such as lurks
In some wild poet as he works
Without a conscience or a aim".

He argues that the deepest instincts of our being find expression in Christ's doctrine of immortality. From thoughts on death he passes to that larger higher life into which his friend has entered through death's pathway and to the thoughts of nobler duties and grander activities

which now engage his attention. Death does not divide friendship; it does not sever affection. The friends, the loved ones who go brfore us into the other world by reason of their friendship and affection for us are better fitted to become our guides and teachers when we too pass onward are reunited with them in the spirit world.

"This life is preparatory for nobler spheres of being.

"Man is to come forth from the domination of the fleshly for he is born for the spiritual life. If he is true to the royal privileges of his birthright then this life will bring him to a magnificent destiny.

We are as children dying [illegible] no language but [illegible]

[illegible]

The truths that never can be proved
Until we close with all we loved,
And all we flow from, soul in soul."

The poem tells us of doubt transformed into assurance. It tell s us of defeat issuing forth into victory. It tells us of death entering into life. We have the peace which is born of battle; we have the joy which comes of sorrow; we have the victory which rises above the dark shadows of death.

In short we learn of perhaps better express the teaching of Tennyson in this sublime poetical conception than in the words of othe r Inspired writers familiar to all;

"F or our light affliction which is but for a moment worketh out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; and ,while we look not at the things which are seeen but at the things which are not aeen,for the things which are seer are temporal ,but the things which are not seen are eternal.Further,For I reckon that the suffereing of this present time is not to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed in us hereafter, And there shall be no more death neither sorrow or crying,for the former things have passed away".

Thus are we taught that life has a hidden goal that there are infinite possibilities of sublimity beyond the grave.Life has a never ending magnificent evolution in other spheres,immortal life in God and infinite development in that life, that, is Tennyson's answer to all the dark experiences of this world,that is the one far off divine event,to which the whole creation Moves."