

WHY BE RELIGIOUS? THE ATTAINMENT OF HAPPINESS

by the Rev. Douglas M. Taylor

For many people, religion is not something that has very much meaning. What is the value of religion in today's complicated world? Religion sometimes doesn't have all the answers. Can't you be somewhat religious without its taking over your whole life? Perhaps religion is the proper thing for ministers, but isn't it too much to expect other people to go around being religious too, or at least *that* religious? Surely there is more to life than being religious all the time.

The human point of view is often a narrow one, and this is true as well when it comes to religion. Worldly concerns and earthly issues often blind us to more essential concerns, and we can lose our perspective on what life really is all about and how our more important goals can be achieved. We all want to be happy, but it is only too easy for us to fail to see where lasting happiness lies. We think we will be happy if we get what we want. But we do not always analyze clearly enough what it is we think we want, and whether getting it will really bring us the happiness we imagine. It is not wrong to want to be happy. The Lord made us to be happy (see TCR 43:4). But it is characteristic of human nature to confuse external pleasures with internal delight, temporary goals with more permanent ones, material success with eternal happiness.

In the first place, none of us was born for this world only. Hard as it is for us to imagine, particularly when we are still young, our life in this world is but a fleeting moment in comparison with the life to come. Much of what seems so important to us now will in time become no longer important. And what we neglect now may in fact turn out to be what we really should have been attending to all along. The things of this world pass away, but the character of the human heart and spirit endure forever.

Religion exists to teach us the nature of the human heart and spirit, and its proper destiny. Religion exists to train the heart and spirit in the exercises of kindness, cooperation, and reverence for what is sacred. It exists to raise us above our merely natural selves, to make angels of us, capable of receiving and returning the Divine gifts of love and wisdom, in a heaven of eternal blessings, despite our muddle-mindedness and our natural inclination to look downward rather than upward.

Think how your life has already changed—many things that seemed so important and delightful in your childhood now no longer seem important at all and no longer give delight. Fortunately, children are given parents and other adults to guide them through the decisions of childhood, to protect them from the errors they are so often prone to make. But what is to guide adults through their adulthood, to protect them from the errors to which they are prone? The answer is again, religion. The Lord, working through the life of religion in obedience to His Word, becomes our

Heavenly Father and the church our mother, to guide us and teach us, and to protect us from mistakes we would otherwise inevitably make.

We are not born wise, neither do we of ourselves naturally become wise. The truth about human nature is that it is naturally quite foolish, driven by passions that do not uplift, confused by notions that do not teach. To be religious is to try for more. It is to exchange the profane for the sacred, vice for virtue, shallowness of character for nobility and honor. It is to trade the temporary benefits of this world only for blessings that may last and endure.

In people unpolished and uncultivated by the demands of honor and decency we see the human frailties of self-interest, arrogance, and materialism. But the enemy is also in us. We wish to be happy and to experience the satisfactions of life, but our own self-love and preoccupation with the things of this world interfere with precisely the happiness we look for. Our own self-interest, arrogance and' materialism, and a host of other weaknesses and outright vices, again and again separate us from the real virtues that make possible the sense of fulfillment and accomplishment of purpose that make lasting happiness possible.

What is there that can free us from ourselves, from our own narrowness of view and our proneness to error in seeking the happiness that the Lord wills for us? The Lord said: "Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it . For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mark 18:35-36).

Through religion and the life of religion we learn to turn away from merely natural values, to embrace instead spiritual values that may sustain us in adversity, uplift us in times of joy, and give depth of meaning to our relationships. Through religion we find the transformation of our character that makes true happiness possible, in this life and in the life to come.