LIGHT FROM ABOVE
A Popular Presentation of Christian Doctrine
Revised Edition

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PREFACE

In writing this book the author has sought to present something that fits into the thought of life and into the heart hunger of all people.

There are, thank God, truths which are contemporary with all generations. External circumstances or the changing moods and whims of humanity do not affect the eternal verities of God’s Word. The Word of God stands and is ever applicable to the problems of life and to their solution.

Within this book the Word of God is explained; and it is applied to everyday living. May it serve to bless many who are seeking after God’s purpose of life!

Alfred W. Koehler
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CHAPTER 1

On Being Religious

All human beings are by nature religious. A study of human nature reveals this fact. They may not be affiliated with a religious organization or may not have formulated their religious convictions in a set of doctrines or a code of ethics, but all are religious nevertheless. Religion is not acquired; it is inborn. It is as natural as life itself.

The religion that man has by nature is founded on man’s natural knowledge of God and of the Law of God. Man knows by nature from the divine works of creation that there is a personal, eternal, and almighty God, the Creator, Preserver, and Ruler of the universe. This knowledge is derived also by observing God’s continuous operation both in the realm of nature and in human history. Cf. Romans 1:20; Acts 14:15–17; Acts 17:26–28. In addition, the divine Law of God is written into the heart of all men. Thus God confronts man from within man’s own self, manifesting Himself as the holy and righteous God, who demands and rewards the good and condemns and punishes the evil. Cf. Romans 1:32; 2:14, 15.

The natural knowledge of God is innate. It is furthermore increased by means of observing the realm of nature and by drawing conclusions from such observations. Because of this fact, all human beings are by nature religious.

RELIGION IN GENERAL

Religion cannot be easily defined, but the areas in which it operates are clear. Religion concerns itself with the relationship of man to his God and with the relationship of man to his fellow men. Heathen as well as Christians use the word religion. Since the heathen
associate heathen concepts with this word and the Christians associate Christian concepts, it is impossible to formulate a definition of religion that would be comprehensive enough to include all forms of religion under one class as being acceptable to God.

In a general way religion may be described nevertheless. Broadly we may define religion as the beliefs, theories, or basic ideas by which man’s life is lived. This generally includes an awareness, or a conviction, of the existence of a Supreme Being, which arouses in man a definite kind of behavior in accordance with these basic ideas.

Unfortunately, many people regard any religion that fits into the framework of such a definition as being acceptable to God. There is no justification for such a conclusion, because there is more to acceptable religion before God than is indicated in this definition. The definition may stand, however, when we consider religion in general.

**How the Religious Practices of Natural Man Develop**

When we study the behavior of the human race throughout the world, we find that the religion of natural man, uninfluenced by Christ and the Gospel, will develop into different forms, ceremonies, practices, and beliefs. In some of these matters they may be similar, but in others they may differ greatly. It much depends on the intellectual development, human imagination, background, history, and environment of the individual. These matters determine the forms of religious obedience, reverence, and worship. In some religions self-denial and sacrifice are emphasized; in others self-chastisement, moral exercises, and ascetic discipline are more prominent. In some religions certain foods are forbidden; in others periodic pilgrimages to so-called sacred places and shrines are important. Certain matters may be a part of one man’s religious practices, but are not so of another’s. For example, ancestor worship is a major part of the religion in China. In India certain animals are regarded sacred by the adherents of the Hindu religion. Among Muslims the use of alcoholic beverages and tobacco is forbidden. Shamans are a part of religion in Africa.
NATURAL MAN’S CONCEPTION OF GOD

The religion of natural man may lead man to think of the Supreme Being in various ways. Some people believe in one god (monotheism), others in many gods (polytheism), and still others say that all is god (pantheism). Some maintain that the various ideas of God do not really matter, for they believe that different people may picture the same god in a different way and in a different manner, as though it were a matter of viewpoint. There are others who believe in a personal god who is regarded as not exerting any influence on men or on the world he has created (deism).

ARE ATHEISTS AND AGNOSTICS RELIGIOUS?

An atheist is one who denies the existence of God. An agnostic maintains that it is impossible to know God. On the surface it may appear as if atheists and agnostics are without religion, since they do not profess a religion nor are identified with organized religion. Yet they, too, have a religion; their life is guided by principles, loves, and moral convictions, and that is their religion. There isn’t a man alive who doesn’t worship something. If he does not worship the true God, he will worship something else, even if it be just his own proud self.

MAN’S NATURAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IS INADEQUATE

The religion of natural man has its basis in man’s natural knowledge of God. The natural knowledge of God is insufficient to arrive at the right religion, as the Scriptures plainly teach. While natural man knows something about God (Romans 1:19, 20), he is, nevertheless, by nature spiritually dead (1 Corinthians 2:14), and therefore he cannot by his own reason or strength worship the true God. Natural man makes certain rational conclusions on the basis of his limited knowledge of God, and these conclusions prompt him to worship as he does. There is much perversion of the truth in the manner in which natural man practices his religion; whatever truth natural man possesses often is misinterpreted and misapplied. For example, God
is pictured far beyond what the natural knowledge of God in man allows. Or man is credited with virtues and moral capacities contrary to the actual facts.

Furthermore, self-love is the motive of natural man in practicing his religion. In that respect all religions except Christianity are alike. While the forms and demonstrations of the religion of natural man may vary in different people and in different countries, the motive in all of them is the same. The motives are self-love and human pride, coupled with uncertainty, doubts, superstition, self-righteousness, and fear. In every instance natural man seeks to secure a right relationship with what he considers his highest good, or his God, by means of self-righteous efforts.

Whoever believes that man is reconciled to God, wholly or in part, through his own efforts is following the pagan conception of religion; he is a heathen, whether he lives among his own kind or in a so-called Christian country.

And yet it is a popular belief that all practices of religion are in one way or another facets of the true and right religion. This is a false assumption. No form of natural man’s religion can ever be the right religion, because the element of truth in man’s natural knowledge of God is perverted through man’s rational conclusions.

**Sincerity Is Not Enough**

We hear people say that if a man is sincere he will be saved. So any religion is believed to be good if its devotees are sincere. This is a common mistake among people. Sincerity of faith does not prove the truth of any religion. People can be sincerely wrong. “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death” (Proverbs 14:12). Sincerity is a necessary part of possessing the right religion but can never be a determining factor as to the correctness of the religion. This is so because sincerity is not a part of the religion itself but is a characteristic of the individual who possesses it.

Another prevalent false assumption is the idea that it does not make much difference what one believes, so long as one believes something about a God and about decency in human behavior. If it
makes no difference what a man believes, then any belief or any kind of life may be acceptable on the grounds of religion. To maintain that any kind of faith will help and save is as foolish as to say that anything a person eats will provide nourishment.

Erroneous is also the idea that it does not matter what one believes, just so one lives right. To that we say: A way of living is a by-product of a way of believing. Jesus says: “In vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:9).

**Religiously, Natural Man Is Helpless**

It is a sad but true fact that natural man cannot arrive at the right religion by himself. He cannot by his own efforts know the true God and His revelation to man. He can no more contribute to such a knowledge by his own effort than he could have contributed to his own physical birth. “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:14). Basically the religion of all men by nature revolves around the works that men do, the sacrifices that men make, the righteousness that men according to their own standards endeavor to achieve, the denials that men practice. These bases are not the foundation of the Christian religion. Therefore, no one can by himself arrive at the right religion.

**The Correct Basis of Faith Is All-Important**

The true and right religion depends on the correctness and truth of what we believe and in what we place our trust and confidence. If we believe the wrong things, our religion obviously will be false, no matter how sincere we may be. If we believe the right things, our religion will be right. Jesus made this clear in the Sermon on the Mount, when He spoke about the folly and disastrous results of building a house on sand and the wisdom and security of building a house on a rock. Cf. Matthew 7:24–27.

To be a Christian, one must build on the words of Christ. Jesus says: “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word” (John 14:23).
Christianity is the true and right religion, because it is the one religion that comes to man from God, in whom it has its basis and foundation. It is the only religion revealed to man by God in His Word, and it is the only one bestowed upon man by God. Christianity is light from above. It is made known in the Bible, and it shows man that God has reconciled the sinful world to Himself through Jesus Christ, the Savior from sin for all mankind. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). “The Christian religion is faith in the Gospel, that is, faith in the divine message that through the substitutionary satisfaction of Christ God is already reconciled to all men” (Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics [St. Louis: Concordia, 1950], 1:9). Cf. Galatians 2:16. Only the Christian religion reveals that God loves man. It shows the basis of this love as well as the demonstration of this love. According to the Christian religion it is not man, but God, who has done everything for man’s salvation. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, very God of very God, assumed the human nature into His divine being, lived for man on this earth, fulfilled for man the demands of God’s Law, and paid for man’s guilt of sin. In the Christian religion God assures man that He credits Christ’s righteousness to man. This is wonderful news, so different from natural man’s conception of getting right with God. It is called “the Gospel,” which means “good news.”

If we embrace the Christian religion, we are religious in the true and right manner, because we are right with God on God’s terms.
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