

The Religion of the Spirit

Studies in Faith and Life

By
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To My Son
JOHN MYERS TITTLE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR
WHAT MUST THE CHURCH DO TO BE SAVED?

TO MY SON
JOHN MYERS TITTLE

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STUDIES IN FAITH

I

THE RELIGION OF THE SPIRIT

AUGUSTE SABATIER made the world his debtor when he published his great book, *Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit*. It has been a long time since I read it, and I am obliged to acknowledge that all I can distinctly recall of it is the title. But that alone is enough to call forth a hymn of praise if only one were able to compose it. The mere recognition of the fact that there are religions of authority and the religion of the spirit is one of those flashes of spiritual insight for which we can never be sufficiently grateful.

There are in the world religions of authority because there are in the world people who feel the need of authority.

In 1839 John Henry Newman was the greatest preacher in the Church of England. In 1846 he was a humble priest in the Church of Rome. In leaving the Anglican communion for the Roman communion he sacrificed a brilliant career. At the time of his going he himself remarked that he was giving up his home, giving up all who had known him, loved him, valued him, and wished him well. Why, then, did he go? Because he felt the need of an external, infallible authority in which to

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anchor the faith of his soul, and believed that there was such an authority in Rome. And when, stung by Charles Kingsley's taunt of intellectual dishonesty, Newman wrote his great spiritual autobiography, he could say with perfect sincerity that from the time he became a Catholic he had no further history of his religious opinions to relate. Both doubt and adventure had come to an end. The spirit's sails were furled, its anchor dropped, and in the haven of hierarchical authority the voyager remained content.

Many another human soul, beaten upon by the storms of life, weary of doubt and bitter questioning, has sought refuge in the comfortable sacerdotalism of the Roman Church. "Faith with us," writes a modern Catholic, "means acceptance of divine truth on the authority of God, who has revealed it to us."¹ No uncertainty there, no need of the toils and perils of intellectual discovery. Faith in this case is not a going out, but a staying in. It is not an adventure, it is merely a recitation. And in spite of the fulminations of rabid anti-Catholics, the Roman Church will stand unmoved so long as there are people in the world who prefer the haven of authority to the high seas of spiritual quest.

Roman Catholicism is not the only religion of authority. Not long ago at Princeton Theological Seminary a revered teacher² told the members of

¹Bertrand L. Conway in *Best Sermons*, 1926, edited by Joseph Fort Newton, p. 140. Harcourt, Brace and Company, publishers.

²J. Gresham Machen, in *Best Sermons*, 1926, p. 117.

a graduating class that, although all parts of the Bible are not equally valuable, all parts are equally true. The authority which the Catholic finds in his church many a Protestant finds in his Bible. The one feels secure in an infallible institution, the other with an infallible book. In this case the Protestant, no less than the Catholic, is delivered from doubt and from the pain involved in the pursuit of truth. The great questions of life and death are definitely answered. "Faith with us," such an one might say, "is the acceptance of divine truth on the authority of God, who has revealed it to us in the Scriptures." And notwithstanding the findings of scholarship and the discoveries of science, Fundamentalism in some form will not only survive, but flourish so long as there are people in the world who would rather feel certain than find truth.

Religions of authority there always have been, are now, and always will be, because they meet the needs of a certain type of human mind—the mind that craves certainty, enjoys conformity, and loves to "stay put."

But some men appear to be born for a life of adventure. Says Tennyson's "Ulysses":

"Come, my friends,
 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
 my purpose holds
 To sail beyond the sunset and the baths
 Of all the western stars, until I die."

He counts the cost:

"It may be that the gulfs will wash us down."

But he does not shrink, for

"It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew."

Here, then, is a very different type of mind. And the mind whose purpose holds to sail beyond the sunset in persistent quest of truth would hardly feel comfortable in the Roman Church. The mind that is so eager to touch the Happy Isles of Reality that it is not deterred by boisterous seas could hardly be content to settle down in the unimaginative literalism, the unadventurous dogmatism of Fundamentalism. For this type of mind the only religion that offers any attraction, any nourishment and comfort, is the religion of the spirit.

I

The religion of the spirit is rooted, not in authority, but in experience.

The author of a recently published article in the *Atlantic Monthly* reports an imaginary conversation between a bishop and a dean. "It is quite time," says the bishop, "that these disturbing speculations were laid aside and we returned to the recognition of properly constituted authority." To which the dean replies that the present tumult in the religious world is likely to continue, for we are in a period of transition from authority to experience. Many of us undoubtedly are.

Here is a young fellow who leaves home and goes to college. At home on a Sunday morning he went,

as a matter of course, to church. In college, after a month or two, he falls into the habit of certain of his fellow students who try to recover on Sunday morning the sleep they have lost on Saturday night. At times his conscience causes him a little pain, but almost anybody, if he puts his mind to it, can discover a reason for doing what he is doing and wants to do. So presently he makes the discovery that he never did get very much out of churchgoing anyway. The sermon, as often as not, was uninteresting. The anthem suggested, if not "all instincts immature, all purposes unsure," at least a considerable number of notes that were a bit uncertain. The whole service was something of a bore. Why, therefore, shouldn't a student sleep late on Sunday morning, especially if he was out late on Saturday night?

Presently, also, he begins to question not only the value of the church, but the validity of religion itself. Beliefs which it had never occurred to him to question, which he had never supposed any respectable person did or could question, he does question. But, as Stevenson says in his *Child's Garden of Verses*, "The world is so full of a number of things, I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings." The college world, certainly, is full of a number of things, absorbing things, and for a year or two, maybe longer, he is happier than kings are likely to be under present conditions. He does not worry very much about anything, certainly not about his religious faith. He is so content with

life's present values that he feels no urge to ask whether it has any eternal values.

But this unruffled contentment with life does not last. He begins, after a while, to feel fed up on—a number of things, and to wonder whether transient satisfactions are the only kind of satisfaction which life affords. Is life merely a matter of eating and drinking and making merry? If it is . . .

/ So it comes to pass that this student, who supposed that religion was the least of his concerns, makes the discovery that it is, on the contrary, the greatest of all his concerns. He enters into the experience of another student, Edward Rowland Sill, who came out of Yale with a great question mark in his life and confided in a letter to a friend, "People think that a man's speculations about religion interfere with his daily life very little—but how certain conclusions do take the shine out of one's existence!" Then, one day, he makes for himself that greatest of all discoveries which the human spirit has ever made. In the beauty of the world, in the nobility of noble lives, in the silent depths of his own life, he discovers God. And note, now, what has happened. He has passed from authority to experience, from a faith inherited to a faith achieved, from a theology handed down to a religion built up in his own soul.

Is not that what a considerable number of men and women in our generation are doing? At the request of the editor of one of our enterprising magazines, a number of outstanding churchmen have