

THE NECESSITY OF RELIGION

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I HAVE undertaken to say or write something about the necessity of religion.

But why, says some one, representing the *Zeitgeist*, choose a subject without actuality: "la question de Dieu manque d'actualité" some Frenchman has written lately: he means, I presume, that it is not opportune to the present hour and the present mood of the world: many young people, i. e., people of the present generation, perhaps most people of the present generation, do not feel that religion is necessary: what is the use then of discussing something that had a meaning for the Victorian age broadly, but has lost its meaning for the twentieth century?

I see the force of this objection, I think: I see many illustrations indeed of its force.

I asked for example a Victorian colleague, a man not very much junior to myself, what *he* assumed to be the basis of a decent self respecting life, a life which also respected others and sought to be a life of service (one of the catchwords most in vogue at the present time).

"I think," he answered, "that the basis is religion: but you won't find any discussion of that subject in my writings"; the discussion of that subject, I understood him to mean, does not grip the mind of this century; and cannot find a place in books meant for the reading of the present generation.

I asked a young stockbroker about the same time whether in this age and continent, when to get rich quick is perhaps the most usual of ambitions and ideals, he would feel tempted to try a coup on the stock market which would land him on "easy street" (I am trying to use the language of the moment) and bring him, say, three quarters of a million of dollars, but would subject him to the charge at the hands of old-fashioned business men and others of sharp practice.

He answered that he would not be tempted by such an opportunity. "That is," I continued, "consciously or unconsciously you are still influenced by religion and a religious education"; "I don't think so," was his reply. "I don't feel conscious of religious scruples: I don't bank on a hereafter, or another world and life:

on a Great Assize and a Day of Judgment: but I have young children: I want them to be able to hold up their heads: I have a young wife: I don't want her to hang her head in the presence of decent people: sharp practice does not appeal to me: I want to be one of the decent people myself. I want to do the square and right thing: I don't want 750,000 dollars at that cost: *it isn't done.*"

Coleridge, by the way, said that common sense is intolerable unless it is based on metaphysics, but there spoke the philosopher; the people of this generation, if I understand them, would eschew forego, renounce even common sense if it is to be burdened with any metaphysics.

I ventured to suggest a second time that he had more religion in his make-up, than he was conscious of: he continued to dissent from my interpretation of his scruples: and to stick to his previous explanation. And this explanation interests me personally, as one who am nothing but a Greek scholar, more perhaps than I can hope to make it interest you.

For this explanation, though it is the explanation current to-day, among thousands of young men and women, for their moral scruples and their exemplary lives, is also the explanation of one at least of the two great Greeks, Aristotle, who for obvious reasons count more with me than almost all other men: all other men, at least, but one: and he wasn't a mere man. At any rate He spoke often as no other man has ever spoken, "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden; take my yoke upon you and ye shall find rest unto your soul". Even Walter Pater never could get over the impression that the speaker was more than man.

Aristotle, as I understand him, felt very much as my young stockbroker: he fought shy of religion, of the conception of a good God, of an immortal soul, of a conscience hankering after the ideas of a Great Assize and a Heaven and a Purgatory and a Hell. These ideas he felt to be too mystical, too deep buried in subconscious instincts and instinctive aspirations, to be real and practical for *him*: Plato might argue that these ideas are the only logical basis for a self-respecting and decent life: but for himself he did not value the logical bases of a decent and honourable life, half as much as honour and decency in themselves: what *he* felt was the appeal of honour and decency "*to kalon*": not their obscure rock bottom set so far beneath them that he could not plumb those depths nor penetrate those mysteries. He could reach up to "*to kalon*", honour and decency in his reflections and ambitions and aspirations: but he could not pretend to peer deeper into that well, at the bottom of which truth probably lay, but a

truth beyond the range of his vision, as a practical thinker and a naturalist and original researcher, who did not profess to be a mystic and had no mystical imagination.

I am harping on this Aristotelian point of view because as I say, I don't think the stockbroker's mind is just a passing phase of twentieth century caution, or of scientific accuracy, or a passing expression of what is one of the best features of the twentieth century conscience, its intellectual honesty, its determination not to profess more than it really believes.

When I read other twentieth century creeds: when I read other people saying that they are only honest because it is the best policy, or yet others saying that with them honour and honesty and decency rest on some reflection that they want to be happy and to secure their own interests, but they doubt if they could be happy or secure themselves, if they neglected the interests of their neighbors, since man is a social animal, I find myself wondering whether this creed of honesty the best policy, or this better creed vaguely called utilitarianism, less vaguely and perhaps more correctly called a high form of hedonism, offers any guarantee to the world of continued honesty, honour and decency.

I feel myself wondering whether it will continue long to bear the strain placed upon it when temptation comes, as it must come, as soon as the influence of a Christian education grows weaker, and as soon as the tempted man and woman realizes more fully that honesty is *not* the best policy always or perhaps often, scientifically speaking, for the individual, only for the race and the nation.

How indeed can anyone weigh carefully the popular American art of advertising and the success of quack advertisers of every school, or how can anyone again study the necessities to which all public men and all politicians are driven, by the strain of keeping their positions or their parties in power, by the strain of conciliating their supporters, good, bad and indifferent, of conciliating also their opponents, of being all things to all men, how can anyone study these necessities and yet continue to hope that all the hard driven officials and advertisers of this age can manage to be all things to all men without more offence to their consciences than St. Paul's conscience suffered? can continue to hope that *they* will succeed in becoming wise as serpents and yet continue to be as harmless as doves? (One of the hard sayings, one the hardest of the hard sayings of the Master.)

A certain politician of Italy by no means the most unscrupulous, though one of the most successful, confessed frankly, "had I done for myself what I have done for Italy, I should be a scoundrel". Patriot-

ism was his last refuge, you perceive, as Dr. Johnson had the acumen to anticipate for men of his position and his difficulties. "This 'honesty the best policy' creed and also this utilitarianism or hedonism, I repeat, fills me with apprehension for the coming generations, or would fill me at least, if I did not console myself with the reflection, that those who hold this creed are up against Aristotle, a very hard force to be up against: *he* did not express fleeting phases of human nature but a very permanent phase: and he expressed the permanent appeal which honour, honesty, decency, "*to kalon*" the right and the noble, make to all men, as to my young stockbroker: an appeal which cannot, I think, be watered down or explained away as meaning only "honesty is the best policy" or meaning only a misty utilitarianism or a rather noble form of hedonism. Aristotle, as I understand him, was not a hedonist by any means: not even that vague and obscure and difficult word "a utilitarian".

But it does not follow that these metaphysical phrases of his, honour, honesty, decency, "*to kalon*" the noble and the beautiful, are as effective as religion, or are exactly the same as religion, for hard driven men and women: these look instead like substitutes for religion, suitable to an intellectual man of science, like Aristotle, happily constituted by nature temperamentally, and happily endowed by luck and accident materially: I mean a man blessed with a competence and great natural gifts and supreme intellect: crowned therefore with friends and comforts: sheltered and cloistered in the academic life of thought and research. Even my young stockbroker, though not so cloistered and sheltered, had never known want, had never known, in an acute form, the temptation to make a fortune by sharp practice: has hardly required as yet that stiff and strenuous Christian education the remnants of which and the fruits of which I suspected to be still stirring within him: though he did not admit it and was no longer conscious of it.

But change the venue so to speak, of this trial: let the temptations be transferred from a happy man of science like Aristotle or a favoured and prosperous young stockbroker like my friend, to the dim common populations and to the man in the street: what is going to keep *him* straight, unless it be a much more full bodied and full blooded religion, than this washed-out and watery middle class academic epicureanism and aestheticism and sentimentalism? (Epicurus, remember, was not a sybarite but a simple-living, and rather high-thinking philosopher).

How can the great Leviathan, the great vulgar, maintain, against continuous temptations, a high level of honesty on these

creeds of "of honesty the best policy", or on the better creed of better paid people, that decency and honesty and honour appeal to their aesthetic sensibilities? Yes: but what is meant, says some one, by a much more full-bodied and full-blooded religion? do you mean just the renewed preaching of hell-fire sermons, to stem the rising tide of dishonesty? do you mean that in fact the fear of hell-fire is a conscientious fear, only felt by conscientious people? I think it is: but fear of hell is, of course, only the smaller part of a real religion: the larger part is the love of God and goodness and of Christ the Master and Saviour.

These substitutes for Christianity which loom large to-day, "honesty the best policy", "honesty and decency and honour as aesthetic sentiments and appeals to our human self-respect", have nothing of religion in them, for they make nothing of the great force of human nature, love: love of God and goodness and of Christ; they are appeals to the sheltered and the comfortable and the prosperous and the academic: they leave the rest of us cold: they are weak against temptation.

It so happened that a few days after my conversation with my young stockbroker I consulted a friend nearer my own age, one who has seen ten generations of graduates—counting a generation as four years—leave this University since he graduated: "the young fellows of to-day", he answered, "are very well meaning, full of good intentions, even perhaps of good resolutions: but they have not the stamina of forty years ago: they intend to be honest and they want to be: but against a sudden temptation to make a fortune quickly by sharp practice, they have not the resisting force which I think still existed forty years ago, among the Victorians."

They have not the same practical religion, and practising Christianity—I understood him to mean—which the Victorians had. Isn't that largely true? the present generation are very dubious of a second life, and of the authority of Christ over this life: and they are honest enough to say so: and are all the better for their intellectual and moral honesty, but not all the better for their loss of faith and courage: all the worse, rather: for their anchors begin to slip on a crumbling foundation of quick-sands and of the best policy and of utilitarianism and aestheticism: it is quite true of course that Christianity cannot be demonstrated, never has been and never will be, since religion is necessarily a venture of faith and courage and not a mathematically demonstrable truth: but the religious instinct based upon faith and courage has meant a great deal more in the past to the Victorians, than it means to-day to our lackadaisical, Laodicean, and lack lustre

Georgians: and it will have to mean again more to us, before a higher level of common honesty can be regained by the world.

Great masses of the more or less submerged and illiterate population of congested Great Britain, for example, have lost their religious instinct for the time: I happened to read lately Mr. Filson Young's account of the Edith-Thompson-Bywater trial: (the two persons hung for the murder of Edith's husband): the judge—says Mr. Young—talked about the seventh commandment and spoke of adultery: to what purpose? Why these people and their set did not know what the seventh commandment was: they were not in theology, so to speak: they hardly knew what was meant by adultery: just an out-of-date church word for the romance and adventure which gave a spice to their dull lives: until such people are brought up as Christians again on the commandments and on the New Testament, says Mr. Young, how *can* any improvement in their modes of living be expected?

And is not that common sense? a revival of the religious instinct is a *sine qua non* for a revival of a real and true honesty, and a revival of all the other Christian virtues.

I don't want to leave this topic of religion, the best topic is the world, for mere theology: but I think the Anglo-Catholicism which so shocks the Protestants of the House of Commons and makes them revive the old cry of "no Popery" is itself a testimony to the need of religion of which I am speaking. Sir Henry Slessor in that debate was perhaps injudicious: but he had the root of the matter with him, I think, when he said that these Anglo-Catholic "priests" who had captured masses of illiterate and hard-driven people by their devoted lives of service to them, and even by their superstitious rites and ancient rituals, by their quaint drawing, e. g., of crosses in the dust across the church floors with the medieval prayer of exorcism "avaunt ye spirits of evil", when he said that these Anglo-Catholic priests with their sacramentarian theories of Holy Communion, established a hold upon the human conscience, which no mere negative Protestantism, no theory of a mere memorial service would ever establish: and he added—and so far as I can judge he was right—that sacramentarian theories of the Eucharist are more and more accepted by the Free Churches, as well as by high Anglicans; that they are necessary in fact to give that supreme service a real meaning and significance: to make of it a rock against poor and illiterate men's and women's sufferings and all their continuous and sordid temptations.

The under-world of Protestantism, said the Bishop of Durham, (who is not remarkable for any leaning towards Sacerdotalism and

Superstition and Popery), defeated the Archbishop's bill by shouting "no Popery"; but the under-world of Anglo-Catholicism, represents a larger mass of human nature in the raw: how can you expect to revive the religious instinct, without an element of mysticism, miracles, myth and mass? without a service which is something more than a memorial service?

The Sacramentarian theory always *has* been part of Anglican theology, always has been accepted by a portion of the Anglican church, and is more and more a part of every Christian church. To raise the cry of "Rome" and "Popery" and "transubstantiation" avails nothing: transubstantiation is mere metaphysics which not one man in a thousand understands: but if Christianity is to rear its head again as the real bulwark against loose living, and crazy, dishonest money making and mad luxury, the three evils of the age and of every age, it has to make something more of Christ's last supper, and those strange words with which He celebrated it, than a bare memorial service; something more of Baptism too than a formal ceremony with a sentimental value for decent parents; something more of marriage, than a few "probenachts", or a temporary companionship.

I imagine that the churchmen most of us here sympathise with, probably, I mean Canon Streeter and the devout modernists, the modernists who have piety and religion as well as rationalism, will not disavow "sacraments" and take sides with the under-world of a negative Protestantism: religion is as necessary to most men and women—outside the few elect and academic souls like Aristotle who do not need religion, who need no repentance, as Christ said ironically of the Pharisees—is as necessary as it is also incomprehensible: it is incredible to our agnostic intellect, (and the intellect of man, theologians included, has always been agnostic), (it is the emotions, feelings, aspirations and instincts of man, not his intellect which make men religious and theological) religion is incredible to our agnostic intellect, but it remains generally necessary to our salvation: quicumque vult salvus esse, who ever wishes to remain wholesome in life and feeling, in conduct and heart, it is necessary above all things that he hold some sort of catholic faith: some hold on mysticism and miracle and supernaturalism, without which Christ becomes only a martyr and hero and saint of the past, who misunderstood himself and His maker and the nature and meaning and purpose of earthly life, the mere shepherd hero of "the Brook Kerith".

A recent clever novel is called "Meanwhile": it discusses what a good man can do "meanwhile": while Socialism and a better

world and a new society are being painfully born; but why not say "meanwhile" in a larger sense?

Why not suppose that we are all here to make the best we can make of the present poor world "meanwhile": while we are waiting, as even the pagans Plato and Socrates imagined themselves to be waiting, for a removal to better conditions, and a second chance elsewhere, in "the house where there are many mansions", as many as all the different kinds of human virtues and human efforts can require for a new start: life is quite unintelligible except as a half way house to something better, and the precursor of a new start. We have got to believe in that doctrine of the halfway house and in that doctrine of the new start, to make the best of ourselves and of this present life; and to believe in these things is to have a religion, and the only religion of promise, Christianity.