

LIMITATIONS OF THE RELIGIOUS CONCEPT.

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A HIGHLY intellectual gentleman of Ceylon prides himself mightily upon the fact that he and others of the Muslim faith worship Almighty God alone, while Christians and Buddhists worship mere men like Christ and Gautama. A Buddhist of that same island finds the iron-clad caste system, with its miserable unfortunates of the Radriya grade, quite the right and proper thing. Both the Muslim and the Buddhist united in thinking the Christian just a little indiscriminate because he makes most of his converts among the members of this lowest class.

Then again an African black finds in his fetish all possible means to salvation and can die with placidity and promptitude if he happens to eat taboo. These things are too common among the heathen and pagan peoples to require comment. They are so common as to be uninteresting; we really expect no more than credulity and superstition from those unblessed by our own religion—whatever that religion may be—because religion is an extremely arrogant thing.

But a certain negro Methodist of the American South has more faith in his rabbit's foot than he has in the ministrations of his Christian clergyman! And a certain well educated American lady undergoes much real anguish because when she dies and reaches heaven she fears she will be confronted by her husband and his first wife. And a certain other American lady, apparently of sound mind, finds actual horror in the thought that her son believes Jesus Christ was born quite as naturally and as orthodoxly as he was himself.

Then a certain man of mental processes commonly deemed rational honestly believes he will go to hell when he dies unless he has been completely immersed in water under certain

specified extenuating circumstances. And a certain rheumatic gentleman finds it impossible to derive benefit from the treatment given by a sanitarium supported by a sect who keep Sunday Sabbath because such "ungodliness" shocks his moral and religious sense. And the good people in the sanitarium are constrained to save his soul from perdition because he does not keep "God's holy Sabbath" but celebrates Sunday, the day appointed of Beelzebub.

In spite of all the discussions of religion and the explanations thereof (and there have been enough, in all conscience, as witness the appended desultory book list) it does not occur to me that anyone has dwelt upon the simple peculiarity of the fact that there is such a thing. Of course, a Christian can be brought easily enough to see the peculiarity and the futility of any other religion and, sad as it is for the Christian to contemplate, other religionists see the direct opposite. But who has been impressed with the peculiarity of religion as a whole?

Truly the practical sway of purely speculative ideas is a marvel to consider. Is it not odd that this man should be saved throughout eternity by immersion while that one has purchased bliss by a bit of foot washing; this one, again, appeases the wrath of God by serving him on Saturday, that one achieves peace and rectitude by believing that evil is immaterial and sin is a delusion. Buddhist monks fare forth in yellow robe with begging bowl; Muslim pilgrims swarm into Mecca; the shrine of Benares is full to overflowing; Spanish priests smoke and idly purvey obscene jests; and a large American congregation of intelligent people mumbles over in unison the obsolete prayers of an ancient Hebrew race addressing an avenging Jehovah, or praises, by word of mouth the absurd acts of a group of so-called prophets who were more nearly whirling dervishes than anything else, or voices the metaphysical subtleties of a complicated scheme of salvation (from what?) with all the assurance in the world.

It is odd; it is peculiar, and it is interesting. It is a phenomena of such ubiquity that its importance is seldom rightly estimated. Certain types of mind recoil as if from something disgusting, or they ignore these "silly" manifestations altogether. I contend the very universality of this peculiarity makes such indifference narrow.

And by "peculiar" I do not mean anything necessarily derogatory or disparaging; I mean, in fact, to imply that the peculiarity lies in the consideration that these purely speculative over-beliefs have the everyday sanction and authority that they do. It is easy

enough to imagine a man believing theoretically in almost anything. Very many people believe sincerely in free love—except in so far as concerns their own family. But to think that practical people can take matters so highly speculative and metaphysical as the immaculate conception, the doctrine of the trinity, or predestination, and can strive to guide their lives by them is more peculiar, in reality, than the fact that certain other people can find practical solace in the theory of evolution or the molecular hypothesis. The only difference is that the sanction of religious speculation is a matter of much longer standing and it is so much more inflexible than the sanction of scientific speculation.

Moreover, for all its vain and airy theorizing, there is more of a tendency for science to ground somewhere; it quite frequently grounds in concrete fact; it produces a strictly terminal experience and gives rise to truth, something religion can scarcely be said to do quite often enough. Nor could we imagine a respectable scientist standing on a street corner surrounded by a small and discordant brass band and celling down the wrath of Einstein lest his hearers save themselves by believing in the theory of relativity; while at the opposite corner stands the latter-day disciple of Euclid calling down judgment upon his head for teaching these new and heretical doctrines.

It is most peculiar that in this “material” day and generation men can cordially and solemnly hate each other because certain of them believe that Jesus was born quite like Gautama; and there are millions who hold that it is wrong to believe that Gautama was born naturally. The probabilities certainly lie in the direction of natural birth for both of them, though the truth can scarcely be ascertained with sufficient exactness at this late date. But of what consequence should it be anyway?

It is of consequence because, after we get to believing a certain way, it wounds our pride to see others indifferent toward the beliefs which do so move us. Men of fact have hated each other over science. Arrhenius, Van't Hoff and Ostwald (for supporting the former two) knew the bitter hatred of the chemically orthodox. Mme. Curie's demonstrations of chemical action within the atom met harsh words. But a very little study of such facts will bring out more facts and the consequences of such beliefs are immediately important. As Lytton Strachey points out in his *Eminent Victorians*, Florence Nightengale's theory that open windows tended to cure disease wrought havoc and death when applied rigorously,

as she had it applied in tropical climates; but the consequences were immediately apparent and the application of the remedy ceased; the application of a theological remedy is seldom stopped regardless of consequences—aside from the fact that the consequences, if any, are often so remote and metaphysical as to be inconsequential.

A scientific case more comparable is that of the theory of evolution; regarding this Samuel Butler, G. K. Chesterton and others have called some quite prodigious names. Here again we are in the presence of a theory which, at this late date, it is—humanly speaking—impossible to verify and of which the consequences are slight. Investigations of chemical action within the atom are capable of verification in a way that evolution can never be proven. However, even evolution is worn more lightly and pressed less arrogantly as a universal nostrum than is the average religious speculation. Ordinary practical people seldom hate each other violently about it and have sectarian squabbles over it, whatever a few erudite bigwigs may do. The peculiarity of religion is that its imponderable speculations have such immediate practical weight and authority as they do.

But, though religion is evidently odd, the question remains—what is religion? After having read numerous answers to this question one is bound to conclude that religion is almost anything you like. In its protean roles it is, in truth, so varied that it is, practically speaking, nothing at all. It is doubtful if there exists anything in religion which cannot be resolved into something else.

For instance, religion partakes of philosophy, and parts of it are very good philosophy at that. Religion is in very large measure psychology, as James showed in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and as many other later works have demonstrated. Religion is also science; not very good science, perhaps, but yet science none the less. Then again we go over into pathological manifestations and find religion tending to fuse with medicine and taking its place among the healing arts. As Swisher has demonstrated in *Religion and the New Psychology*, the root origin of all religions is sexual and so, in a refined and sublimated sense, religion is a sexual manifestation. In modern life fashionable Christianity is often a mixture of leisure-class society and sociology, mixed with convention and custom and punctuated weekly by Sunday morning disquisitions on ethics and morals or lectures upon philosophy and current topics. There is much in Veblen's "vicarious leisure" theory which aptly explains a great deal of religion. Finally religion is something to which the

worshipper brings whatever especially interests him and cheerfully dedicates it and himself to his fellows, whereupon he is prepared to vindicate his beliefs.

There is everywhere a basis of myth, superstition, sexuality and folk-lore; and in all instances there is a tendency to refine away grossness as those who hold to the religion themselves become more refined and intellectual. The ignorant Roman Catholic or Buddhist literally worships his icons and images; the negro Protestant of the American South has scarcely emerged from fetichism. But the intelligent Catholic, Buddhist or Protestant is very far away from either idolatry or superstition. None the less he has selected from his faith certain beliefs for his own personal possession which embrace the things he holds sacred, the things he is prepared to vindicate and the things he would, if possible, impose upon all men.

Speaking very broadly, however, it may be said that religion is composed of pathology and spirituality. And there is much more pathology than we are accustomed to suppose, although this ingredient is not always present. A neuropathic type of mind (and such types exist in millions) takes up religion for reasons that are largely pathological; a more rational being takes it up because he must do some service to intangibles and choose to do that service via religion. Some religious people are both pathological and believers in service to intangibles; but all religious people—indeed all people—believe in spirituality, but all believers in spirituality, or ideals, do not become religious.

Of religion as a pathological manifestation I can speak as an expert; I have been a psychopath and have been addicted to that kind of religion. In my own case, very singularly too, I emerged from neurosis during the critical period of a very dangerous illness, when suddenly there came to me the strength and the decision of character to accept an agnostic attitude towards problems of the universe too stupendous for human solution, and this returning strength of will naturally marked the return of mental health and, in my case, the subsidence of religion. When actually facing death I found that the metaphysical speculations of five neurotic years upon matters philosophical and religious amounted to nothing at all, while a consciousness of the fact that I was fearfully tired and that death meant rest was more than all else on earth. Where death led I cared not at all; of my fate I never thought; the past was irrevocable and I was ready to leave it without whimper and without apology; I was tired and merely wanted rest.

Anyone wishing to make a study of the processes of psychopathic religion might well read Dreiser's *Genius*. If a person can withstand Dreiser while he tells a four hundred page story in more than seven hundred, he or she will find Eugene Witla going through precisely the type of religious manifestation which is grounded in acute or threatened or partially sublimed neurosis.

It must be remembered that pathological religion is not confined to actual psychopaths; it much more frequently attacks mere neurotics who continue in a condition of pale pink nervousness all their lives and make the most fervent religionists. This type of religion springs from a great questioning and a great fear characteristic of the pathological condition of the patient.

We are in this great, far-spreading universe and we do not know why; we see manifestations of power which overwhelm our senses, and we tend to be afraid. The mind with psychopathic tendencies feels that it must somehow resolve the riddle of the universe and find shelter from this great fear. The solution may come by thinking out some complete system of philosophy and abiding thereby; this will both solve the riddle and offer companionship in a lonely and indifferent cosmos.

But not many people are so stable or so intellectually bold as to think for themselves. Self-consciousness and all it entails is a late development; it is a thing which does not bother the lower animals. Herd instinct and the thing called crowd behavior are powerful agencies. It seems much "nicer," much easier, much more conventional and much pleasanter just to adopt some creed already thought or imagined out by others, to drop into this intellectual haven and to live dumbly thereby forever. This solves the problem; no religion and no sect is so poor that it cannot present a solution for the problems of infinity if you care to adopt it. Let a man but decide which will bring most lasting satisfaction and he can ignore all else and be happy. Nor for that do I blame him. He has a right to such security if he fancies it. He has a right to postulate a nice, kindly, old gentlemanly God or any other kind he wishes.

He also has a right to try and verify his belief, just as the scientist has a right to verify the ionic hypothesis. But I part company with him where his vindication sets in. So long as he says "I will so to believe," I agree with him and we can both be happy; but as soon as he says "Thou also shalt believe as I do," I question his authority as well as his courtesy. And it is the psychopathic religionists who are militant. They have adopted a belief which,

since they have managed to make that much of a decision, ministers to their shattered nerves and brings peace; they then feel impelled, like all neuropaths whose symptoms have been relieved by some agency or other, to press their theological nostrum upon healthy humans who live untroubled by psychopathic riddles and fears.

It is naturally the psychopath who "gets converted"; his doubts at end and his fears opiated, he feels saved from something and determined to save other people who are not desirous of being saved from imaginary disasters. Should the psychopath chance upon some minister of iniquity who lacks the consciousness of a "conviction of sin," he gets nasty. He gets nasty because it always nettles a psychopath to see some one treat with indifference a matter he regards as tremendously important. He desires also to missionize the "heathen" and to convert the Jew, regardless of the fact that each race and clime has its own religion and its own psychopaths ready to do propaganda work. He is not amenable to reason; a psychopath never is. But once give him normal health and he is likely to recover from religion. On the other hand, let him remain slightly neurotic for life and he will doubtless be religious for life also.

The other type of religionist is more rational, and also more polite. I have spoken of this type as "spiritual," in that they take up religion as a method of service to intangibles. It has long been my opinion that such service to intangibles is an eradicable human trait and an underlying cause of much religion. I do not remember having seen my idea really expressed by anyone except Thorstein Veblen in whose *The Nature of Peace* I came across it most unexpectedly.

It requires considerable courage to quote Veblen. In *Orthodoxy* G. K. Chesterton speaks of the sleeping sickness caused by big words; he demonstrates how a sentence composed of small, everyday words will almost compel you to think, while a sentence made up of big words give a pleasant, soothing effect, but cannot arouse cerebration. Veblen's style, then, is a continual opiate. Nevertheless he says this all in one gigantic sentence:

"In point of fact, and particularly as touches the springs of action among that common run that do not habitually formulate their aspirations and convictions in extended and grammatically defensible form, and the drift of whose impulses therefore is not marked or deflected by the illusive consistencies of set speech—as touches the common run, particularly, it will hold with quite an un-

acknowledged generality that the material means of life are, after all, means only; and that when the question of what things are worth while is brought to the final test, it is not means, not the life conditioned on these means, that are seen to serve as the decisive criterion; but always it is some ulterior, immaterial end, in the pursuit of which these material means find their ulterior ground of valuation."

I have studied this Teutonic verbal landslide long and carefully and I have about concluded that Veblen means to say: Crass materialism is not everything. Every man has higher, non-material ideals as well. I believe this. I believe it is true of every man that he must somehow serve some ideal end. He may deal in political Utopias and become a soapbox orator; he may specialize in altruism and take pride in his high moral character; he may think to aid humanity by composing music, writing futile essays, painting cubist pictures or tracking down tri-nitrotoluol; he may seek to lift himself above the herd and go in for self-culture; or he may just "get religion." Then again he may do a little of several of these things, partaking of religion or not as best pleases him.

Not all people who feel spiritually inclined become religious. Custom makes a good many of them discharge their idealism in that direction, and that is why they can be so immune to morality, honor or decency in non-religious matters; pure deliberation brings others to religious conclusions. At any rate, they make a better, saner type of religionist than do the psychopaths, and had any world religion remained in their hands, it might have hypnotized the universe eventually. However, the psychopaths are more numerous, or more boisterous, they are childishly reckless and inherently militant—so that makes a different story.

In conclusion, a word from Martin's *The Behavior of Crowds*: "But when one's beliefs or principles become ends in themselves, when by themselves they seem to constitute an order of being which is more interesting than fact, when the believer saves his faith only by denying or ignoring the things which contradict him, when he strives not to verify his ideas but to 'vindicate' them, the ideas so held are pathological. The obsessions of the paranoic are of this sort."

Religion, based upon the principles outlined above, exists, and it is going to continue to exist; it is neither wise, necessary or just to suppress it or to call it names. I have no more partiality for *The Truthseeker* and *The Menace* and *The Dearborn Independent* than

I have for a psychopathic religionist or an advocate of Blue Sunday. Both types are endeavoring to vindicate something. A pathological atheist is quite as sorry and detestable a spectacle as a pathological Swedenborgian; the rantings of Ingersoll sound as ridiculous as those of some backwoods Methodist preacher. Cocksurety regarding the problems of infinity is an absurd pose on the part of a biped parasite who might be annihilated from the universe by a minute deviation in one of its apparent rules.

But what I do protest against is the arrogant sanction of divine authority claimed so often by religion; this, again, is not an objection to religion as such; it is purely an objection to an assumption of absolute, autocratic authority upon insufficient evidence—I care not whether it be invoked by an infidel, a political theorist or a religionist. I protest against the attitude which says, "I am right! I *know* that I am right! I shall be vindicated and I shall either convince you or call you names." That kind of paranoia should be eliminated or confined in the proper institutions; it should be put where it can do no harm just as quickly as possible. For a finite mind cannot be either absolutely right or absolutely wrong about the problems of infinity; the idea is unreasonable. It can only seek to verify its conclusions and should face the universe and humanity in a spirit of open-mindedness and deepest humility.