

THE GREATEST FAITH OF ALL.

BY T. SWANN HARDING.

Think not, for thus may ye enter into temptation;
Beware of that which is new, for it is false;
Beware of differences, for they are of necessity wicked;
Be not yourselves; be ye pale imitations of others;
See truth, not clearly, but through the mist of thine own
pet system!

THESE might well be the accepted commandments of a new, yet an ancient faith. And the name of this religion is Conformity; its god likewise is Conformity. And it is and has always been the greatest faith of all, for there are none like unto it. All it needs is to rise to self-consciousness.

The religion of Conformity is bulwarked in the deepest recesses of the human soul; group psychology and the untutored psyche are its allies; men, far from being the truth seeker par excellence, bows down even to error in its great name and Conformity rules with a mighty sway those humans who are more gregarious than intellectual, more desirous of repose than of truth—and lo the name of these is legion. This faith should at once be nominated for the religion universal and all other petty systems dropped; indeed other religious efforts are not worthy of the name compared to Conformity. For the best that other faiths can do is partially to regulate a man's life in certain very limited and well defined spheres; Conformity is not only unlimited geographically and chronologically but philosophically and generally. It enters in as an element in every region of human activity and it is the real, fundamental religion of those who mechanically voice a thousand diverse creeds, dogmas, tenets and ideals. It is the faith which underlies all other faiths.

For a man may worship the great God Conformity in the manner of his dress, in the matter of his reading, in the way he sits down, in his selection of a political party or a religious affiliation or a secret order. Not one moment need he trust to his own resources. Not once need he think or solve a problem with his lagging intellect. For Conformity doeth all things well.

It is temeritous, it is literally foolhardy for a writer to attempt a critique of this religion, more powerful than any ecclesiastical hierarchy that ever graced this trifling planet. But I am by nature both foolish and honest and I am directed by an inner urge to examine the faith well knowing that I risk all popularity by doing so. In my heresy may lie the explanation for my failure as a writer; and I am doubtless doomed to fail more abjectly than did ever he who found his name upon the *index expurgatorius*, because Conformity is far more powerful and far more dangerous than the Papacy ever was in its palmiest days. For Conformity is stupidly dogmatic and Rome has always been intellectually clever; Conformity plants its feet firmly upon the rock of reaction and impedes the wheel of progress to a full stop, while Rome has had the virtue of movement in some direction at least.

Conformity makes the cut of a coat more important than the cut of a character; it makes personal idiosyncrasies more important than personality; it makes a desire to believe the incomprehensible more important than a desire to be of use to humanity here and now; it makes opinions more important than facts and a disposition to agree about something more important than the character of the something agreed about. Conformity confronts and menaces the honest individual desirous of self-expression at every turn; lo it encompasseth him about with destruction and bringeth desolation unto him. So long as he is content to be like someone else, to ape some popular idol, to do as the "right-thinking" do, comfort and respectability are his. But let him once start to be himself just as honestly and sincerely as he can and immediately his pathway is strewn with stones by those who have been commanded to love one another. Perhaps they are to love one another, but not to love him. He does not have to be an iconoclast to attain the enmity of the Conformists; he absolutely does not have to be disrespectful towards the cherished beliefs of others. He has only to ask a hearing for some gentle examination of commonly accepted dogmas and taboos, and prison yawns for him. Let him, indeed, but retain upon

his head his straw hat later than the day ordained by Conformity for its removal to the ash-can and, in the words of the latter day prophet, "his name is mutt."

One night the eccentric Leo Ornstein played in a typical American city. The house was less than half full and the papers entirely ignored him the next morning. This did not happen because Ornstein is not a genius, for that he is, it was neither because this awkward, quick-moving fellow lacks musicianly ability, for this he does not. No. The cause was simply that he has offended the sacred taste of those who worship Conformity in music, i. e., those commonly called "music lovers." When he essayed the Allegro of Beethoven's "Apassionata" and the F sharp Major "Noctourne" of Chopin, he had done what was to them essentially nothing less than sacrilege. He had honestly and sincerely given his own interpretation to these works; but he had, in doing so, touched the Ark of the Covenant of Conformity's Jehovah, and he is henceforth eternally banished from the presence of conforming music lovers, and their illegitimate satellites who ignorantly conform to the taste of the Conformists. When there came the odd glissandos and the "monstrous cacophony" of Ornstein's own "Impressions of Chinatown", the orthodox who had come to revile ground their teeth in well simulated dismay, pursed their lips, shrugged their shoulders and looked at one another with horror—and worse emotions—in their musically cultivated eyes. So we children used to go to the "niggarr church" to sit in judgment, though we in reality exposed our own selves to judgment for a shocking exhibition of discourtesy.

Moreover Ornstein added insult to injury; he played Cyril Scott. He might, with a little provocation, enter in upon Strawinsky and other heretical composers given their due by Carl van Vechten in his much needed *Music and Bad Manners*, and commended as antidotes for a concert stage which has become a museum of antiquated music. Ornstein is modern, he is different, he is honest; therefore he offends orthodox taste and Conformity weighs him in the balance and finds him wanting. This sacrifice he is called upon to make to the Unknown God, this penalty he must pay for the privilege of intellectual freedom. Beethoven himself paid that penalty in his day to some extent; Wagner paid it in his, and these saints, after due consideration to the devil's advocate, have been canonized and are now worshiped by Conformists; for the acerbity

of Conformity yields to the ravages of time and the world gradually moves slightly even here.¹

The religion of Conformity demands in one a certain semi-philosophical drift. It is lenient in a certain lightly shaded area just as all religions are lenient. Roman Catholicism, Protestant Episcopalianism, Unitarianism, even Baptism, all have this adumbrant territory of half-seeing leniency in the matter of what are called, rather disingenuously, non-essential truths! You can be a pantheist and remain a Unitarian; you can believe that Bishop Mannix of Australia is a vile traitor who consorts with Labor and remain a Roman Catholic; you can believe that Jesus Christ was born of woman in a decently prosaic manner and remain an Episcopalian; you can view Baptism rather as an initiatory rite than an admonitory sacrament and remain a Baptist. But you can ultimately reach a point where you will find yourself irrevocably without the pale; at this point you have offended absolutely and you are an outcast. By refusing to conform to "non-essential truths" you may become mildly unpopular and the brethren may feel called upon to work over you a bit; by refusing to conform to essential truths—which essential truths are ways of believing about infinite matters which are incomprehensible to finite minds—you become positively dangerous and manifestly unfit to associate with believers. You might—horror of all horrors—upset their convictions!

And so Conformity is to a certain extent lenient and tolerant. Certain considerations purchase indulgence; certain circumstances are extenuating. Only the general philosophical drift commonly, but erroneously, called "Christian" is necessary; for this drift is generally mildly religious and it is assumed to have something to do with the polyglot of religions united under the term "Christianity". In reality it is merely the philosophical adumbrations of the "right thinking" and it has little or nothing fundamentally to do with organized religion. It is hazy in spots. It is considerate under certain venial circumstances; but there is an irreducible minimum which Conformity imperiously demands and that is final. Moreover, Jew and Gentile, savant and moron, scientist and idealist,

¹ Confer—"Radicalism in Music" by Henrietta Straus in *The Nation*, January 5, 1921, wherein we learn of the august body of orthodox New York critics who seek to crush "to atoms the slightest evidence of heretical cacophany" represented by Block, Strawinsky, Propofieff and Ornstein. Even when the "dean" of critics castigated a work by Vassilenko thinking it was of Prokofieff he went his ignorant way undaunted! What matter ignorance in the good cause of the greatest faith of all?

capitalist and laborer are alike addicted to this universal religion and its creed is something as follows:

I believe in God. I do not know what I mean by this, but I believe in God and in cosmic evolution which moves progressively and regularly onward to eternal righteousness, justice, happiness—in short to the Utopia my “set” has in mind. In a vague sort of way I believe in religion and the church as having some vague kind of good influence and in so far as they do not irk men. I believe in the supernatural nature of matrimony, in the sanctity of womanhood, in the sacred privilege of voting, in the bad luck of thirteen and Friday, in “our” kind of government and the world should be made safe for something or other by my country. I do not believe in war, except when my country wages it, and is winning. I do not believe in inhumanity, except when my country practises it on a weak nation as a measure of discipline. I believe in the perniciousness of wealth when I am poor but in the sanctity of the sacred trust of riches when I acquire wealth. I believe in the rightness of everything “they” do for “they” form my criterion of taste. I believe in my country right or wrong. I believe in knowing the right people, in reading the right books, in hearing the right music, in attending the right church, in belonging to the right lodge and in voting the right ticket. I know the moral and the true at a glance. I strongly disbelieve in the differences in things, in the novel, the strange, the modern, in that which evidences true self-expression and in that which I do not understand; these things I dub heretical or dangerously radical and I hate them with a cheerful heart. I believe in my convictions as the last court of eternal verity and I shall neither read nor listen to anything calculated to change them. I believe that everything is for the best, unless I am getting the worst of it. Outside of these few matters go as far as you like for the sky is the limit. Amen.

This tentative effort must be excused for it is perhaps the first formal statement of the creed of Conformity. But the religion has not waited for this. It is already deeply entrenched. It needs neither to propagate nor to proselytize; it counts its devotees everywhere and in every organization; yet hundreds of thousands are not aware of the fact that Conformity is their god. In political parties, in secret orders, in religious sects, in agnostic debating places, in open forums and in closed clubs—there are its worshippers.

The leniency of this creed tends to universalize it. It makes a comfortable belief after all. For instance you may so modify and

attenuate your belief in God as to make it simply a pious hope that some obscure providential force moves esoterically and half-heartedly towards righteousness in this world. Of you may altogether question the theory of progress as Dean Inge has done, but pass muster by affirming an extraordinary faith in a personal diety or in things as they are. You may be the guilty defendant in a divorce case and yet remain within the pale provided your standing in the immortal order of Bradstreet is above reproach.

The devotees of Conformity are endlessly interesting in their myriad variations. They make up much of life's attractiveness and constitute a pastime for the dodderingly feeble minded like myself. Thus I have known Methodists who played a slashing game of billiards; infidel Jews (a double infamy most difficult to exercise) who lived placidly beneath the thumb of their female relatives; infidels who were perfectly immaculate Republicans; Roman Catholics who admired Ornstein; libertines who kept their "word of honor" like the most moral gentlemen. Here in each case we have a person who did certain things rationally and certain other things instinctively.

A man may, for instance, reason quite equitably about community charity, but may instinctively cherish a relative or a friend who is utterly worthless—because that is the thing usually done. He may rationally believe in communism or soviet government (and I flatter myself that I am one of the seven men outside the communist party in the United States who are aware of the difference between these two things) but he may go through the motions of greatly loving his sister simply because it is decreed by Conformity that he do so.

What "they" are doing is the Conformitist's greatest criterion. When a woman declares that she can no longer wear this hat or this dress because "they" are no longer wearing them, verily I say unto you let the man go forth that he may prepare a further sacrifice to the insatiable god Conformity, for his wife instinctively worships. So it is that the books read, the symphonies heard, the picture seen and the speakers listened to *must* be those to which and to whom "they" are now giving "their" attention.

Conformity always tends to remove from the proper domain of rational cogitation certain portions of life and experience. Viewed in one way it is a dead weight on progress; viewed in another it is

a pardonable time saver. It sets aside certain spheres where instinct shall rule supreme and where the intricate and tiresome processes of reasoning may be omitted. And I have no quarrel with Conformity wherein it is efficient. It does actually make it better for all of us to conform to the habit of not cutting one another's throats with insufficient provocation; I really do not feel that a man is justified for assassinating anyone—particularly a perfect stranger—except an inconsiderate cornettist or a Calvinistic parson. It is in all essentials better to meet an accidental collision with another while walking with a "beg pardon" than with a razor. It is more desirable to "line up" in the effort to reach the vaudeville box office window, the seats in a moving picture house or the door of the place where "they sell it" than to shove without discrimination or courtesy.

But as soon as Conformity begins to mean a dumb and unreflective desire to bow down; a tendency to do things with dogged and perverse animal instinctiveness; a supine desire to remain perpetually and utterly ignorant of all that militates against doing these things as "they" do them—then I dust off my battle axe and feel like going forth to combat. I do not say that Ornstein should dominate music, or Mencken literature or Lenin politics or Max Eastman morals. But I do hold that Ornstein is entitled to the same notice given other musicians; that Mencken should have his unbridled say without being calmed down as he always is, except in his own magazine; that Lenin should be given the opportunity for a social experiment which France and the United States a few years ago expected the world to give them; and that Eastman may indulge in common law matrimony without losing caste provided he goes at it honestly and in sincerity. In many matters Conformity is entirely intolerant and knows but one remedy for differences of opinion—repression.

That life carries anywhere I do not know. I have not met anything in my rather comprehensive experience which would make me dare to affirm so much. I have not met anything that would cause me to affirm or to deny God. Although I have read twice as much as the average Christian and twice as tolerantly as the average infidel, I must admit that I really know less than either. Moreover I have somehow constantly found that the people who know the most as Gospel truth are the most ignorant. This non-conforming skepticism makes one rather a spectator of life, yet it lends toler-

ance, humility and sophistication. Death of intellect is after all a matter of opinion largely based upon our respective beliefs about matters upon which absolute truth cannot be known. It really seems a waste of time for us with our small minds to try and explain the nature of this finite bridge of time, buttressed as it is, in the cloud masked realms of infinity. You are justified in saying that you do not think I have depth and in hoping that I may sometime see things as you do; you are justified in a polite effort to convince me. But, as I see it, no one is ever justified in making a paternal assumption of rightness, authority and verity and in demanding Conformity.

Upon him who dares to protest against the almost instinctive taboos of society there descends the consummate wrath of Conformity in all its violence. That his views are not adopted is a small matter; but that, for the crime of being different, he is not even vouchsafed a hearing is a heinous matter. While this is neither a squeal nor a wail of protest a personal allusion will best illustrate what I mean. I cannot protest because I have deliberately chosen unpopularity myself in order to safeguard my intellectual integrity. I trust that I am not as these Publicans here and I am very glad of the fact that I am not.

I happen to know the art of merely making money by writing and I have made it pay. But I turned my back on this. It suddenly dawned upon me that worship of Conformity could never produce literature and that it was a mean way of making a living which stifled the honest best that was in a human. And so I decided to write sincerely what I thought; to give expression to my version of the truth as experience gave it to my mind to apprehend. I became conscientious. I became honest. In doing so I very carefully and successfully prepared the skids into oblivion. I whittled away the Dr. Frank Crane in me; I sand-papered off the Orison Swett Marden; I collated and correlated experience as it came to me. I sought to discard my theories and to sit, as Huxley advised, like a little child in the presence of the facts of nature, innocent alike of preconceived notions and instinctive reactions. I endeavored, as Schopenhauer advises, to cease searching for the Truth I desired to find, but to interrogate facts as they actually exist.

My manuscripts were then interesting, clever, analytical and were sufficiently correct from a technical standpoint; they were even

described as "able." Numerous editors and experienced critics assured me of this and I see no particular virtue inhering in its denial by me.* But these manuscripts were continually rejected because they were not deferential to the religion of Conformity.

Just this week one of these efforts came back from the editor of America's most intelligent religious periodical. I was told that it was interesting, clever, analytical, able and technically correct; but the editor felt called upon to reject it because it did not teach that life "carries anywhere" as he "felt" that life "ought to do;" because it remained honestly, though affirmatively, skeptical and did not seek the "deeper depths" of deism, and because this demonstrated that though my "experience had gone deep," my intellect had not; further because, being written honestly as the writer saw life, it lacked what the editor called "core"—i. e., the unalterable essentials of the sacred creed of Conformity. For this very same reason, differently expressed, this manuscript had been rejected by a score of editors of widely different journals—conservative periodicals, liberal journals of opinion, radical weeklies, magazines of philosophy and essays, of futuristic art and free verse. It flies in the face of Conformity; it presumes to deal directly and naively with facts. Therefore editors find that they cannot cram it into their own rather cramped theories and categories, or that they dare not inflict it upon their Conformity-addicted readers.

These things—and others of diverse nature—are fact for that writer; they constitute truth as Experience has shown him truth. He even finds them adumbrant in many minds and half-expressed by many tongues. He writes of these various things honestly and sincerely as well as respectfully—yet none dare give him a hearing. The answer is—Conformity, the universal religion of the non-thinking mind. And yet he cannot cease to write the truth as he see it; he will not cease, despite rebuffs and contumely, and he will not simply because he must be honest. He is a nobody, to be sure. But think of the really good writers and musicians and artists and philosophers who are doomed to the lack of a hearing for the crime of being themselves.

Even science is not free from the ravages of this virulent

* I take the liberty of saying here that H. L. Mencken read this very Mss and described it without qualification—"It is good stuff"—although he is not in intellectual agreement with me. Any manuscript which, as to form, can suit so captuous, but so discriminating, a critic is not deficient in worth; that is all.

religion. Lavoisier met with its attacks; Darwin had it to fight; Samuel Butler was ignored and denied a hearing by the orthodox doctors; Benjamin Franklin ran into it. Today we see Sigmund Freud insulted and denied a hearing by those who simply will not see a novel or a different theory of psychology gain currency. Einstein runs the same gauntlet.

These men may not be right. Perhaps Freud and Einstein are altogether wrong. I only protest against this universal religion of Conformity which denies us the right even to see. It is the same faith which strikes at Dreiser and Cabell and Upton Sinclair for the crime of writing artistically as they see life; and it condemned Gustave Flaubert before them and thousands before him.

This is not to preach eccentricity for originality's sake or non-conformity as a virtue. Such vagaries end in mere absurdity. It means that Convention impedes the very minute it tends to make instinctive, actions which should be rational, and the very second that it tempts genius, or even talent, to mediocrity. The basis of ultimate and final authority should not be some artificial code, but the sincerity of the writer's inspiration. If his inspiration be sincere and honest at the moment of clairvoyance, the genius or the man of talent has given us a vision. He may at another moment be a libertine, a drunken roue or a Methodist preacher; he may be an agnostic next week and a spiritualist the week after. He may wear neither necktie nor socks and he may be both a communist and a Jew. He may assail our most cherished opinions and our most sacred fallacies. But let no rule of thumb silence him. Let not Conformity banish him to outer darkness. Permit him to state his case. The French Academy time after time has refused to investigate certain matters because they "seemed" worthless or injudicious. Instead, the man should be given a respectful hearing and the decision should rest with what is truly an enlightened public opinion.

One night Godowsky and Powell were to give a joint recital and Powell was compelled to cancel due to what later proved to be her fatal illness. In her stead appeared one of Auer's young pupils, Max Rosen. It so happened that Rosen appeared after the master had played his last group. Instantly the right thinking music lovers arose en masse and walked disdainfully out, reminding me of Christians departing from a speaker who sought to introduce reason into religion. One of these protesting creatures

remarked superciliously to me—"I just simply cannot bear that thing Rosen. He simply nauseates me." Some day, however, "they" will perhaps say that Max Rosen is a master of the bow. Instantly the right thinking music lovers will flock to hear him, say they knew it all the time and applaud him to the echo. Yet Max Rosen will never in the world be able to demonstrate that he is a great violinist unless he gets a hearing.

I can pardon a failure to understand, whether through ignorance or misapprehension. I can gladly pardon a cultured and intelligent difference of opinion which comprehends opposing opinion, recognizes its importance, but cannot adopt it. I can, in fact, pardon almost anything but a willful disposition to refuse to try and understand and to judge, none the less, by the standards of Conformity to some irrational taste or code. For this is the very essence of Conformity at its very worst and, though I am as a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal, though I give my manuscripts to be burned and roast myself as a heretic, I cannot conform. Nay, I shall not—so far as in me lies—bow down and worship the great God Conformity and I shall endeavor to act as I act and to do as I do for reasons reflective rather than for considerations instinctive.