

## ASPIRATION AS AN ARTIFICIAL ATTITUDE

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**I**T is the futile function of romanticism to be forever yearning for some sort of strong faith, but never being able to strike upon the exact object of its ideal affection. It finds, in this world of course, a myriad obstacles and enemies to its desire and therefore usually aspires more to evade the struggle of conquest than to meet its adversaries face to face in mortal combat—nay, more, its own lack of a durable faith often prevents its meeting even the requirements of an honest cultural *combat a outrance*. Such an aspiration, even though admirably devout and habitually pursued under direction of some sovereign religious conviction, is yet artificial as well as superficial. It misses the actual discipline of experience, the slow refinement of toil and trouble, and skims carelessly over the underlying realities of existence, quite unmindful of the fact that two-thirds of its possibilities are still dormant, submerged under the vast ocean of delusion and artifice. I believe that it is this surface schematism of life, more than anything else perhaps, which keeps the romanticist constantly tortured with the apparent insolubility of the cosmic riddle and with it the many ironies and paradoxes of his half-blind religious experience.

In religions which place great reliance on human hope, we find that faith and aspiration are the chief requirements of their rubrics. Mere verbal assent or lipservice is not enough; it is not ornate rituals nor verbose ceremonial recitations, but simple piety, loyal devotion to the divine in a consecrated spiritual life which makes them vital and significant. Anything short of these necessities mark any so-called religious experience as shallow and artificial; without these it is but a cycle of sham sacrifice, poseur practice and specious sanctity. Spiritual aspiration, as one of the chief functions of religious experience, means that there is a definitely conceived goal toward which, and a sturdy courageous faith with which, to make

sincere moral effort and heroic self-sacrifice. It does not cast about desperately like Carlyle, whose romanticism was more a digestive aid to rhetoric than a spiritual spontaneity of aspiration and mystic insight, seeking the ever-elusive simile which would carry just the proper amount of ambiguity to make it ironical; there is always something wrong with desires that are desperate, with religions that are rhetorical (and rhyomistic), with psychic attitudes that are artificial.

Such a system of upreach is feeble and fallacious, such a miracle-maze is mischievous, in reality a mere mirage of mercenary and meticulous moods which are more exasperating than aspirant. It is, as a general thing, a system of sophist cupidity, crass cunning and confessional credulity which seeks petty prizes at the spirit's expense, trying to capture specious prestige for moral courage at the Cowards' Intellectual Bal Masque. With postiches every aspiration is artificial, with sham saviors and psychic salesmen of the soul's security all progress is a pose, all civilization corrupt. But I will simply say that if all our tactics should turn out to be so much artifice and subterfuge, then indeed would our happiness and virtue be sorry affairs; they would consist only in finite aims and wishes, their skill-limits would be such as to offer nothing but mediocre rewards and vulgarian heavens. And anyway, the poorest scholar in college would not dawdle away his time and paternal favors if he could just once understand how really antithetical hedonism and headwork are. But alas, he does not see, know nor care why it is that in a happiness philosophy which hypocritically aims at worldly comfort, luxury or gratification, no honest concern for or effort toward actual virtue or wisdom will inhere nor be much sought after. He is an ignorant galoot to start with, so how can a brief term in some fashionplate college make any cultural veneer stick long enough to rub off when he begins brushing against the obdurate realities of a worldly life? Foresight and good luck might win his better nature if caught in time, but after twenty years of shallow preparation, pleasure and profit-seeking, what hope for a poor numskull who didn't know any better in the first place? Finite interests and unrestraint have caused more failures than war or panic; clumsiness and inexperience have caused more rancor and regret than all the vandal vengeance in the world.

But to get back to the immediate subject: There is neither piety nor aspiration of any genuine sort in religions of power, persuasion and revenge; their proprium is self-service and their procedure is

seduction and spoliation, either get proselytes or kill off enemies (or as in Islamism, both). The original sources of practically any religion are usually sincere and ennobling, constructive and altruistic; but their charm and vitality are soon grown corrupt, vulgarized and given vendible interpretation, so that they are shortly no more aspirant or inspiring than any other wordly institution or enterprise. I am not so well posted on the different sects of other religions, but of the common fate of every schism and sectarian departure throughout the history of Christian dogma is any argument, I will say that we Occidentals are only recently become religious, we still cling to our former animal traditions and have more faith in power than penitence, more hope for revenge than for redemption. It may be one of the permissible tactics of a *growing* religion (not yet adolescent, much less already matured), to resort to vital lies, psychological fallacies, automorphism and prejudicial propaganda. Ritual artifice and ceremonial magic, hypocritical assent and ambiguous observance, run rife in every creed and code of Christian gregarianism. Even when we agree that religions have to *grow up*, like any other product of the earth through man's tender(?) care and cultivation, we do not also acknowledge that all these questionable resorts are very respectable tokens of his aspiration and sincerity. We do see, however (although our discretion advises silence), that these practices are worldly and clever perhaps, but certainly not spiritual or exemplary such as a true religious sovereignty ought to offer. They are sanctioned by poseur priests whose only office seems to be to strike artificial attitudes favorable to popular sentiment, rather than be aspirant and devout in sight of God.

It is not redemption from Nature or the material world that men need, so much as it is redemption from false notions, bad habits and mercenary motives. True love of Nature never yet corrupted any man. She is his mother, nurse, comrade and guide, and if the man himself is upright, just and even half-way congenial, Nature will aid and comfort all his periods of aspiration or adversity. It is all a sophist scheme of false psychology, a specious logic of lucrelust, which makes prejudice plausible and tries to show us in need of revival and rebirth, telic judgment and total transfiguration. We are smothered with rubric recrimination and revived with a perfunctory sprinkling of holy water. The vacuous hermeneutics and astute anagogy of the world's religious scriptures are vain and voluble to no good cause; they serve largely to befog the issue so that priests and potentates may continue in their lecherous hypocrisy.

The major portion of the world's people are not responsive to any moral exhortation except as it exaggerates the goal and magnifies the reward. If no great epileptic phenomena attend a savior's birth, nor any cosmic consternation mark his decease, people generally do not feel aroused to the significance of the situation, nor are they very ready to accept the exhortation on such normal merits alone. They are emotionally sluggish and mentally inert, so it requires quite a charge of dogmatic dynamite to "waken them from their native slumber and break up their caked prejudices." Our motives, even more than our methods, need occasional overhauling, they require revamping for the same reason that any other habitual practice requires occasional reformation or readjustment. Likewise it is aspiration and its emotional sobriety, rather than material ambition and worldly achievement, which require revision and redemption, because the quality of the latter invariably depends upon the quality or purity of the former. We are alright by natural birth-right, but our early education has been sadly (and often criminally) neglected. In view of this, religious anagogy caters too much to human cupidity, to abnormal psychologies, inert minds and imbecile morals. Better no religion at all than to have forever the cheap melodramatic resort to force of artificial aims, rhyomistic rewards, bribe tactics, unctuous umbrage and précieuse perquisites of power.

Antiquity was perhaps as noisy and turbulent with factions and antagonisms as our modern era. Those times were creative, we say, of all our venerable traditions, our historical perspective and our even yet probate heritage of moral principles. But there has been little uniformity in the various legacies of those glorious times when former civilizations flourished and the fittest unfit survived for a time; especially if we look at past history as the chronicle of different races, regions, types of religion and of men. We find, as a national characteristic mainly, that the Jews taught wrath and revenge; the Greeks love, art and education; the Hindus superstition and intellectual subtlety; the Chinese political probity and ceremonial magic; the Egyptians priestcraft and sorcery; the Romans economic power and political prestige. And these were not only diverse expressions racially or nationally, but were also the different results of native prejudice, climatic conditions and geographical situation, indigenous conflicts and long centuries of determined meditation and meandering practice. No wonder there were gods and goddesses of nearly everything under the sun—love, lust, wisdom, folly, beauty, deformity, jealousy, hate, creation, destruction, war, wine, power

and prosperity. There were gods active and fainéant, Demiurgos and Osiris, Orpheus and Horus, Agni and Varuna, Kuan-Ti and Kuan-Yin; there were even deities of old (so Heine and Nietzsche say) who actually laughed themselves to death at man's petty postulates and predications. What then would they do today when man's motives are mercenary, his schemes selfish and his aspirations artificial? Huxley says they would feel too sad to laugh and only too glad to die. Even what are now monotheistic religions were originally ambitious cults which took over all the divine attributes and theological predications of preceding and contemporary pantheons, and bundled them all up into *one* being without omnipresent powers and multiple personality. Early Judaism was a religion of wrath and rancor, for Jahveh was always either jealous or proud, in a rage or skillfully hiding in ambiguity. The Jews of old were as prejudicial against the mortalism of the Sadducees as they were scornful of the mercenary vulgarism of the Philistines. With the Greeks and patristic writers religion was guided by philosophic and apologetic persuasion, but the Romans turned back to a religion of power based upon the revision of pagan and Mithraic sources. Proto-Christianity counselled meekness and renunciation because it was a religion of fear and futile ambition (futile at that time, at least). Excepting the few rare thinkers who strove to develop a logical apology and conciliation no one had the courage to oppose, nor the ability to analyze and expurgate the pagan creed, but felt content merely to cast flat denials and sharp anathemas at it, eventually (and literally, we must also admit) talking Christianity to extinction, and it has been a dead issue ever since. Even today no really constructive criticism or sincere effort at ritual reformation is welcome, the rubrics are supposedly the dogmatic word of God and therefore above the need of human tampering. However, mere antiquity of religious traditions is no valid or sufficient credential of their truth or power to inspire. They may be forceful and fascinating without necessarily being also factual and free from fallacy. Hence, they argue no conviction except on those already given to blind belief, already half stupid, intellectually lazy and incapable of any critical aspiration to examine their content of truth or telicity.

Bruno Lessing says that an interesting chapter is being written in the great History of Hypocrisy, and that every hypocrit invariably wraps himself in a mantle of bunk morality. That's a good word, Bunk; it is so charmingly versatile and omnipresent; it reminds one of the old Jewish Jehosophat whose ineffable covenant

replaced the previous Elohist theocracy with artificial propaganda and shrewd character analysis. Bunk morality is the Jenkins mind taking an active interest in religion—it is always businesslike and uses indiscriminate force and flattery. There was some element of bunk morality and religion practiced by that society of repentant Friends whose doctrine of nonresistance did not keep their pietism wholly honest, for we find them devising Quaker cannon and dummy garrisons to scare Cornwallis' men away. And there is a far greater proportion of bunk religion in that highly predatory and pragmatic institution which claims that with sophist psalter and sanctimonious unction a knave's last days may be blessed and his sins so well greased that he can slip into Heaven unnoticed. No wonder Neander said that it is sin that makes theologians; a really wise and good man will have nothing to do with either sin or theology, they are both sources of rancor and revenge. His friend and teacher, Schleiermacher, shared Schelling's critical romanticism and is now recognized as one of the great pioneers in the philosophy of religion. We are only now, after a whole century of vain wrangling and vituperative rancor, just beginning to realize his prophetic decision that psychology will ultimately show that true religion embraces and inspires man's *whole life*: that it is not merely an emotional or anagogic response to ambiguous preachments, not a melodramatic refinement of the moral life nor a rhetorical representation of its fundamental relationship to spiritual aspiration, but simply a composite spiritualization and melioristic synthesis of all man's nobler functions and duties, aims and aspirations. The inner experience of piety or devout feeling need not be denied on losing the validating support of critical thought, because it still has a mystic or symbolic meaning giving it religious value and significance. The immediacy of piety is its highest charm and credential of virtue; it is this intuitive feeling which supports the individual in his reverence for eternal truths and infinite love. Religious feeling harmonizes all our lesser faculties, sensory, intellectual, volitional and affective, into an immediate consciousness of our dependence upon Divine Grace and Justice, upon the infinite and universal life of all things which have their being in God.

Kierkegaard, one of Denmark's most original and fruitful thinkers, devoted his life to the religious aesthetic of "being a Christian," a real living exemplar of the divine life showing men the mediocrity of mercenary motives as well as the wicked and futile (because fallacious) policy behind their customary pragmatic faith and expedi-

ency-morality. Like Socrates, he believed devoutly in the moral necessity of "making difficulties" where it was natural for others to "take things easy," for without toil and trouble and obstacles to overcome, our spirit soon grows flabby, inert, lazy, weak and an easy victim to subtle arts and mischiefs. In his *Philosophiske Smuler* he approaches romantically life's particular problem, Salvation, and says that religious faith must be divested of our intellectual attention to historical events, time-relations and material catastrophes. God does not submit to intellectual power or subterfuge, and hence, in the devout passion of religious trust and pious expectancy, such physical and logical propositions as the intellect cherishes are set aside, rendered non-essential and irrelevant. From first to last, then, under the comfort and guidance of this conviction, Kierkegaard lived, not for some vaguely conceived, abstract universal idea, but for the individual soul, its present possibilities, its future betterment and its ultimate salvation. Just some such an actually-lived Christian life is what we all need today in place of the vast concert of casuist ethics, duplex morality and hypocritical religion. In France at least great impetus may be given us in this direction since the celebrated philosopher, Emile Boutroux, has undertaken to direct the affairs of the *Fondation Thiers*, and brings to bear on all its students, patrons and devotees the new conception of education as no more than mere acquisition of knowledge, but the development of our whole life and being, all our powers, functions, possibilities and creative capacities. He is especially anxious to show that morality is a spontaneous discrimination between right and wrong, good and bad, truth and falsehood; that it assumes that thought is developed already to the extent that the moral person is intelligent first and good by natural consequence. It is not by recourse to blind will, not through the chance virtue affected by wise weaklings or clever worldlings, but through the emphatic and intelligent cultivation of free spiritual insight, energy and initiative, through the individual's personal nobility, honor and power to think, act, choose and aspire spontaneously that morality is to be had as a really operative and sincere process in life. No man has ever been really good nor even really converted to religious sincerity when only urged by the external force of law or the internal importunities of hunger or lack of shelter. He must have some spiritual inclination, some religious feeling and insight already, before he can be converted or aroused to virtue.

Religious hypocrites always argue a suave defense of their duplicity, saying they believe so-and-so even though they don't practice it. It is not their private sentiment, cherished because an agreeable balm to conscience, but the conduct which they actually pursue from day to day, that shows what they really believe in. They really believe only in the world and what it gives them, not in the nobler spirituelle of honest aspiration and heroic sacrifice which shall give them a less artificial prestige in the next life. If their present lives were not so ambiguous and rhyomistic they would not even interpret the next world in terms of Heaven and Hell, in terms of self-satisfaction and aural vengeance. Our popular debauchery of morals in an artificial hope and hypocritical religious outlook finds expression in the depressing fact that it is gradually becoming more and more fashionable to affect worldly sophistication, vulgar sentiment, lazy luxury, selfish fallacy, social folly and irreligious attitudes toward life. It is all a result of our modern vagaries in education, the false culture which aims at material acquisition and sensory satisfaction; we strive to develop new fashions but neglect to develop what little soul, what few spiritual powers we have with us always. Our pietism is a sad subterfuge of specious prestige, an artificial longing for personal power and pleasure; so how can our religious programs offer anything acceptable without mixing in a large portion of hedonism, money-grubbing, "success" and jazz? Do we not sin greatly when, in moral or intellectual pride, we assume superiority to Decalog and Demiurgos, taking more delight in perusal of the Decameron than in studious interpretation of the Doxology? How came we to possess authority to presume ourselves beyond the reach of God's law, superior to Nature, above reproach regarding our motives, tastes and tactics? These things are not even beyond our own critical consideration and occasional repudiation, and they are certainly very finite and ignoble when, in the course of application or resort, we feel hurt and vindictive at the petty umbrage of untactful companions or grow intolerant of the exhortations of teachers and counsellors. Vital lies and hypocrisy are necessary only so long as we choose to remain fools and vandals, world-seekers and weaklings.

True culture and religion are not mutually exclusive, but complementary and have identical aims, for both would realize a perfect development and expression of *all* our faculties, talents and aspirations. Both recognize that the individual has value and destiny only when his genius for wisdom and virtue is given proper culture and

refinement, inspiration and enlightenment, motivation and adjustment. All one's noblest possibilities of head, hand and heart; intellect, body and soul; will, affection and conscience being recognized and disciplined to the best and most efficient use, means that he has outgrown all wordly artifice, vengeful rancor, deceitful tactics and selfish pride. With this unusual accomplishment well in hand a man can be called really educated, for he will not show any vulgar signs of bad taste, ignorance or irreverence. On the other hand, it is not necessary to take refuge in an intellectual suicide nor purposely shipwreck our philosophic emprise through the Universe in order to collect payment on our religious policy. Theism can be scientific and philosophical just as readily as it can be superstitious and fallacious. Religion can be open-minded and devout just as easily as it can be dogmatic and forever plotting revenge. Thus, religious faith and cultural education can be the recognized handmaidens to our spiritual progress if we so desire and use them, but we must ask that they be sincere, courageous and devout, liberal, loyal and creative, and not mere caricatures of culture or creed. There must be honest enlightenment and spiritual exaltation all along the line of march, else our progress be only a specious acquisition of power, an artificial achievement, an illusion to deceive myopic fools. Let us review some of the religious aspects and moral corollaries of progress and decay.

True progress is produced in the laboratory of the soul. It is the result of spiritual attention to duty, of moral achievement brought to bear on the social needs of life. Three principal features mark any age of progress; these are character education, economic justice and social service. If a community is grown corrupt, unjust and selfish, its life is just that much narrowed and made miserable, whence it cannot help but be torn and tortured by the many mischiefs and meannesses of graft, luxury-lust, extravagance, hedonism, injustice and exploitation. Thence it will soon be on the way to decay and failure as a normally balanced, peaceful and prosperous commonwealth. The reason is that no group, community, state, nation or world-federation can remain peaceful, prosperous, happy or make progress while it contains (i. e., entertains those religious faiths and moral ambiguities which help to maintain) the many conflicting elements of power and passion, crime and corruption within its borders. Society is whole and healthy when it is made up of saintly souls as well as savants, mystics as well as merchants and mechanics, dreamers and clerks. We may claim that our life is

about as perfect as possible, that our age is fairly free and successful because we have clever artists and artisans, delicate and beautiful works of art, useful and efficient industrial products, vast political and economic machinery, both private and public power to imagine, plan, construct or achieve great things. But is civilization wholly a success on these merits alone, when we still lack spirituality, love, honor, intellectual courage and moral nobility, while we are still so universally ignorant, foolish, intolerant and covetous, while we are still so indiscriminate and promiscuous in our thoughts and deeds, while we are still so intellectually irresponsible, emotionally unstrung, erotic and hysterical—in fact, while our souls are still corrupt and deformed, wretched and bungling in the very basic things supposed to make for value and destiny, success and significance in our individual lives? I do not doubt that with conditions as they are today, no one will deny that there is much room for reform, many opportunities for improvement even in this raucous would-be golden age of science and invention, greed, debauchery and spoliation.

Intelligence is no one's enemy. It is the friend and guide of all who will admit it into the inner circle of their company; it is the constant counsellor of prudence, the mainstay of fortitude, and the loyal paraclete of those who sorrow. To be intelligent is no easy quondam affair, however. It demands tolerance, largesse, tact, innocence, generosity, courage, love, sympathy, consideration, justice, confidence and devotion. It is ever ready to serve the noble cause of the soul's pilgrimage making progress possible and affording protection against decadence, ennui, umbrage and caducité. It senses danger and counsels wise procedure; it guides aspirant souls through all this world's temptations, trials, seductions and mistakes; it shows the many pitfalls which await the fool and makes us wary of all artifice and subtle fascinations. An intelligent man leaves nothing to luck, chance or blind automatism. He uses his head so that his hands and feet will have discerning usefulness, so that his mind will work efficiently, his conduct be devout and dignified, his heart feel free in its humility, its conscience and discretion. New problems daily arise, life takes on new phases of relation and re-

straint, and it is necessary that intelligence should supply solutions and adjustments to meet the new situations. To be a reasoning being then, and take an intelligent interest in life, means that we seek versatility, that we cut down our spiritual limitations, and enlarge our mental horizon, that we draw upon the inexhaustible energies within us which make for open-mindedness, courage, knowledge, artistic talent, justice and resourcefulness. With these well-developed and properly used we can soon be wise and good, and being wise and good we will also soon be living reverent lives of piety and peace.