

REVERENCE OF RANCOR AND REVENGE

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ON FIRST notice, a contradiction would seem to be here given, but there really are some sects whose members grow devout and dignified only when there is a program of umbrage and intolerance, rancor and revenge. The destructive spirit is purposely cultivated and refined until the whole ritual and rubric is given over to nihilist procedure, blood sacrifice, eternal damnation and malicious ceremony. The Kamitok celebration of the ugly Siberian Chuckchi, with its orgy of sensual pleasure and its wild climax of war dances and the depraved sense of filial piety expressed in murdering the sick, aged and infirm, gives full play and free hand to anyone wishing to exercise his vengeance on an enemy even within the same tribe; one good feature of the feast is that when a killer hesitates or appears to be unwilling to perform the ritual atrocities he is considered sick or infirm himself and straightway becomes a victim of the ceremony, thus quickening the tribe's approach to extinction. Internecine practice is not so horrible when it offsets increase of offspring by incest. In the rites of the Burmese Buddhists great license of speech and action is allowed, and advantage is often taken by vindictive priests and almsmongers to read into the text a private plea for sacrifice and succor; when the occasion for sacrifice is near at hand *some* victim must be found and fattened so as to appear worthy and acceptable to the gods. But neither of these malicious phases of religious practice and devotion can be considered as suave in subtle vengeance as the creed of the Yezdis who worship death and the devil, bowing to the peacock symbol of creation through pride and destruction, immolation and phoenix rebirth. Although their great patron saint, the last Sassanian king, Yezdegerd, was completely routed when the Mohammedans conquered Persia, there are many secret rites of death and devilry still practiced here and there throughout Armenia, Mesopotamia and Kurdistan.

But we of the professedly Christian nations are little better or different, except that our methods of approach and assent are more seductive and insidious; both sorts of rituals or rubrics are *red*, theirs with blood and ours with ink, theirs is honest and realistic, while ours is specious and symbolistic. By all manner of promised reward and threatened torture, equally questionable salvation and damnation are held ever imminent over our lives. Historical Christianity is a bloody chronicle of eristic controversy, passionnal conflicts, sacerdotal assumption, strategems and spoils; it has tried to cudgel its proselytes and bribe its devotees into submission; it has even attempted with occasional success, to compromise philosophy and secular government. It has almost invariably sought prestige in this world by simony of rewards in the next; advancement and expansion making little treasure for the humble. Church doctrines, whether Christian or not, usually advance first a program of persuasion and inducement veiled more or less thinly under promise of power, knowledge, influence or other reward; and when these tactics fail, the true disposition comes forth and recourse is had to a more coercive policy, while if the opposition is specially well directed or entrenched, "good old Bourbon Orthodoxy" will parry with a program of retribution and revenge. It is quick enough to assume a title to a tithe of this world's treasure, but loathe to assume any responsibility for its trouble, sin or sorrow; this is the usual happiness-philosophy of every worldling who ever wanted the sweet without the bitter. The Church idea of religion is "Catch fish while you may though suckers are better than none; the world is full of religions and the Devil rules all but one." (Heinie: *Gods in Exile*.)

The first pronouncements of the Old Testament largely affecting problems or conditions of the present life only, are carried further in the New and are made to apply even more inexorably to our lives hereafter. Conscious bliss or torment is prescribed for the self-same reason that any other joy or sorrow is predicted—because no power of persuasion exists in an argument which has nothing personal to offer, which promises an impersonal disembodied future full of unconscious rewards and inexperienceable punishments. Dogmatic religion used the ruthless bludgeons of corrupt desire and superstitious fear to discipline(?) a phase of human nature which is still incorrigible and irreverent. It took more stock in cupidity and credulity than in commonsense and courage; that alone accounts for half the fools and knaves which swarm and buzz in futile industry around our flourishing religious pragmatism. Utility and power

have no honest sense of creative genius, courage, devotion, love or piety. We are venerated to smothering, but we are really very little more civilized than Izedi or Chuckchi. Any malicious eschatology is no more fallacious than one which offers us all the heavenly beatitudes for a mere pittance of learning and lip-service.

All the crawfish apologists in the world, whatever religious code they champion, have evaded the challenge of scientific criticism with this or that imbecile quotation, irrelevant issue, textual anagoge, Gnostic hermeneutic or intellectual entrechat. But they do not once acknowledge or try to see that a few pagan and patristic traditions can discount not one title of life, much less render effective categorical imperatives against the immutable laws of the Universe. Institutional Christianity, or churchianity in any creed, is indeed a weak religion casting desperately about for *grounds* and *proofs* and *sanc-tions*, especially when, failing in this, it has to resort to vulgar subterfuge and bribe or threaten its way into the hearts and minds of men. But I do not believe it would resort to this picayune procedure if it were not basically fallacious and corrupt; in fact if it did not covet the very power and authority over individual citizens which ancient kings and modern states have for ninety centuries been strangely able to exercise. It is uncommon that vested authority, whether secular or "spiritual," is ever very effectively opposed by the private individual until he himself has assumed some appreciable degree of authority, copying the vestry tactics of superior power or subtle persuasion, while sometimes having to fall back on those less subtle tokens of moral suasion known as penalties and persecutions, conscription and confiscation, condemnation and exile (or excommunication).

Dante, the most atrocious and melodramatic chronicler of Hell's freeze-over, gloried in devising endless agonies for his enemies. He claims blithely that eternal punishment is necessary to prevent the sinner's relapse after having once been aroused to be good. (I know of many church members in good standing who will wish that their own particular form of relapse had not been quite so worldly and gregarious.) But some excuse is allowed to Dante, as it was a popular fad with the poets and priests of the medieval days to refine and enlarge upon the different kinds of evil, culpability, retribution and damnation; all sorts of pre-arranged sortilege, seduction and suppression were in vogue, the common policy being shaped to fit the cynical humanism that everyone had either to be bribed, wheedled, blackmailed or forced into formalist virtue or conversion. All this

neoclassical revival seemed to lay emphasis on automorphic postulates and included many farfetched predications which were mere personifications, apotheoses, or diabolizations of human moods and passions. The early Hebraic motto of revenge, eye for eye and tooth for tooth had come to flourish all too luxuriantly; the pagan polymonstrosity of Euhemerist theory (that the gods and devils of mythology were but exaggerations of human power and mischief) had come to an all too actual fruition, often lacking in the proper element of deification and noble temperament. And so, even to this day of vast carnage, Billy Sundays and Lyceum Lectures, is it any wonder that the popular pragmatic religions have more about Hell and the Devil than about Heaven and God in them? Persuasion through promise of power and plenty having failed, resort is had to blood-curdling scenes of eternal torment depicted with all the rhetoric of coercive vengeance. The everlasting carouse of umbrage, imputed sin and malicious accusation, wicked assumption and impassioned condemnation, is enough to make anyone disheartened and disgusted, if not susceptible in time to actual sin or mischief and soon hellbent on the very debauchery and depravity of vision against which he has heard so much preachment and prophesy. The whole program and eternal picturing is meant to be persuasive, the glory and satiety of Heaven being supposedly more desirable, a more potent catch-phrase, policy or scheme of salvation than plain example or exhortation to virtue or commonsense; the misery and insatiable appetites of Hell being supposedly more dreadful, more appalling and more to be avoided than ordinary folly, vice, meanness and mischief. It may be alright to capitalize the world's rancor and revenge, but why exaggerate them in the name of religion and morality? Why take advantage of people's innate cupidity and selfishness to play the role of *custos morum* to their better natures? Such tactics as these make our religious programs look suspicious and insincere.

After long centuries of bickering and bloodshed the notion of a halfway station was devised and acknowledged as necessary to accommodate the great majority of spiritual Laodiceans who were neither devilish nor devout. Those who were only partly mean and wicked still had a chance of recovery, so it was found necessary to invent Purgatory, a probationary period between Death and Eternity in which judgment was suspended or rather delayed for further evidence, as Spencer says, while the probationer awaited the final verdict with dread and uncertainty. It was certainly a manoeuvre more encouraging than outright condemnation, but whatever actual

purification could thereby be had was left to the indefinite imaginings of sorcerers and soothsayers. Pope Pius IV confirmed the conception of Purgatory as part of the traditional machinery of religious revenge at the Council of Trent in 1564, and ever since then the Catholic world has been cursed and abused by all sorts of mercenary nuncios, "practical" Devil's advocates, hypocritical Angelos, and other ad captandum tactics of self-advancement, the worst of which is that corrupt traffic in Papal Bulls and Indulgences which has all too nearly made protestants and modernists out of every honest thinker or pious hero throughout the world. Predestination and Purgatory are the two members of a shyster opportunist firm long since outlawed as vicious and arbitrary spiritual brokers. They cannot do legal business with intelligent people because they lack the references and credentials of free moral choice, commonsense and social amiability. They are ghouls of a graveyard long since deserted and grown desolate.

Religions whose ambition is the mere numerical increase of congregational attendance, and the acquisition of political power or economic influence, or whose procedure rests on the subtle tactics of coercive hypocrisy, pragmatic persuasion or casuist equivocation, always preach about rewards and punishments, they always argue redemption for credulity and damnation for doubt, rosaries for the righteous and our vengeance for the wrong. Little is said to reveal their true motives, the actuating will that dictates how their propaganda shall run; and even less is intimated to show the monstrous lies on which they thrive. There is still no scientific proof under test conditions of the truth supposed to underly either theosophy or spiritism; there is no non-casuist conciliation between modernism and the new papal Syllabus, between Unitarian Nature-love and the Baptist "fundamentals" of pseudo-science. That there is going on right now an internecine conflict of religious opinion affecting the very life and prestige of sectarian institutionalism, witness the recent religious socialism in Germany and England, modernism in France, Fascisti concessions in Italy, the Ghandi non-cooperative revolt in India, and in our own contemporary America the Episcopal panic over Bishop Manning's charge of heresy against Dr. Percy Grant and Rev. John Holmes for denouncing the clerical hypocrisies of today. Since when did it become a crime, heresy or taboo for anyone to reveal the fallacies, profits and follies of "sacred" church power if its theory and practice are really innocent and clear of such culpability? Presumptuous power resisted gives rise to retaliation

and revenge; it seems to forget the Arminian maxim that even those who resist or relapse from Divine Grace are still entitled to redemption through regeneration of mind and heart. This is not the age of Inquisition or Amende Honorable; nor is it timely now-a-days to conceive devotion or piety in terms of demonology from Zoroaster, Ukert or Eschnmayer. Hedonism, happiness, sophistry, eudaemonism, hypocrisy, pragmatic rituals, castist codes and rhyomistic propaganda are in full swing and style these days, and anyone who has the temerity to tamper with any of the "Follies of 1923" might as well have also the patience and fortitude to bear all sorts of persecution and malicious mockery. We must remember that Nietzsche's Anglophobia was significantly centered on Carlyle instead of Gladstone or Tennyson.

In many of the Greek myths we find expressions of their notion of religious vengeance; Sisyphus, the Danaides, Tithyos are three examples of eternal expiation through useless toil in the hereafter; the Furies, Fates, Homer's demonology and Hesoid's description of Tartarus were conceptions devised to presage the tortures of the wicked and corrupt. Right here and now we have Chaos, Hades, Gehenna, El Araf, Purgatory, Hamast Gehan or whatever verbal label you wish to pin on the world, but we have not yet tasted the bitter belladonna of Tartarus, Sheol, Hell or Kismet. In Rome, before the civil strife ending plebian subjection and punishment for debt, laws were always favorable to the aristocracy because the aristocracy made them, political power being vested in the patrician families who alone had ancestral gods and hence authority to govern (?). It was several centuries later, during the last years of the republic that the plebians found measures of relief and obtained a voice in the way they were to be governed. It was partly through the patrician decadence, the growth of the new merchant class into a more democratic plutocracy and the Marian confidence in yeomanry as the backbone of the whole state preservation, but principally through the simple fact that the plebians had been wise enough (or at least fortunate enough in having leaders capable enough) to establish moral and ritual relationship with the divinities of the public pantheon.

Another phase of the subject is this: Seventeen years ago, when a separation of the Church and State was effected in France, much umbrage and imputation of ulterior motives were in evidence on both sides of the controversy. Both the Papal Encyclical of Pius X and the manifesto of Cardinal Gibbons voiced loud protest and condem-

nation of the action with arguments that American examples of pragmatic religion were really expressions of hatred and revolt against Catholicism. But the automorphic judgments did not avail, and Paul Sabatier's *Lettre Ouverte* offered the very effective rebuttal that clericalism within the Church itself was more dangerously radical and subversive of the progressive Cultus than any secular body because they made merchandise of their office and sold their sanctuary to gain favorable governmental decision of property rights, increased appropriations and sovereignties. Boutroux says this shows that religion proceeds not from power to duty but from duty to power, taking for granted that the problem of evil is solved—a chimerical assumption, indeed!

Dostoevsky confesses naively that "Reality has caught me on a hook," and writes whole volumes to describe how the same hook has also caught narodniki and intelligentsia alike. It was his literary ambition to lay before us the significance of all cynical subjects, and as much of our difficulty is in moral heaviness, so does his treatment of this significance and difficulty become ponderous and voluminous. However, his mystical terror is to him the supreme reality behind all novel situations of dramatic significance. The eventual, the actual, be it pleasure or pain, happiness or horror, virtue or vice, is the great absorbing objective of his mental curiosity and character-analysis; and this objective aim, even, is actualized, included and solidified into a supplement to the cosmic chronicle of facts, calamities, laws and events. But Gogol, Pushkin and Tyutchev were his predecessors in this refinement of actualism; even some metaphysical relation might be established or recognized between Dostoevsky and Duhring. Both had a double-edged but non-scientific psychology, both were extremely anti-religious, anti-historical thinkers; they differed only on the question of mysticism, value and destiny in man's life. The former was too self-conscious, too much a slave to the fearsome introspections of a soul-fascinated epileptic, to let the world retain its aesthetic aloofness and cultural continuity; that is, its rare moments of ecstatic beauty-thoughts, its exaltation of "special spirituality and sudden idealities," were too stimulating, too narcotic for his religious equilibrium. Hence, he divided history into two eras: one from savagery to the annihilation of God, and the other from God's annihilation to the ultimate transcendence and transfiguration of man. But these climacteric epochs, even, are yet only members to his spasmodic train of peirastic efforts at being and loving, thinking and doing; they are the dreamy work of a

sleepy but insomniac world. Dostoevsky's is a purely racial (i. e. Russian) type of religion, and hence is full of the Slavic abruptness and obtuse soul-chaos of simple spiritual desire. To be either angel or beast depends on whether we seek civilization and progress or delinquency and atavism, whether we live inwardly and upwardly or outwardly and backwardly. With life presented in a vast moral dilemma, as it was to Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky finds that we are up against a sort of Schopenhauerian problem of choice; to either assert selfishly or deny resignedly the will to live, the will to think, and even the will to suffer. Thus angel or beast is the only alternative allowed in his Gadarean answer to the problem of good and evil, or as they are in his ethical superlativism, Super-good and Infra-evil. Holy aspirations jog along side by side with the basest desires and the ficklest, most absurd convivialities. This is what discomposes the philosophies and disaffects the glamor, disenchants the fascination and disgusts the passion with which we of less chaotic notions look around at life and Nature, religion and morality. "The Idiot," "The Possessed," "Crime and Punishment," "Injured and Insulted"—all breathe (or as it would rather seem to our own literary sense suffocate) in a close, gruesome atmosphere of absurdity and insipidity, doubt and debauchery, sclerosis of heart and paresis of mind. Not atheistic rebellion but merely the indifferent irreverence of "something else" is often at the bottom of many of our derelict religions; they see only the rancor and wreck of a starving world, and make preachment from the meagre observation.

The world may well be the same old "Devil's Vaudeville" that it was in Balzac's day, perceived only by the pernicious sniffers after trouble and applauded only by those devotees of malicious mysticism who thrive on vengeful self-consciousness and crimson wills to power. The life of man as cockroach opportunist is aimless and precarious, narrow and despicable; but the life of man as hero and divine aspirant is clear and true and aims straight toward the heavenly gate. Constance Garnett, who has translated many of Dostoevsky's works into English, says that his religion is largely a recapitulation and recital of the various phases (from the Russian viewpoint) of that eternal conflict between the humble and the proud, between the mystic and the machine, between original genius and academic tradition, dreams and despotism, just freedom and mandatory exploitation. This reminds us of Tolstoi's apologetic for violence on the ground that it frees us from the strain of dreary attention and from the wearying labor necessary to overcome an obstacle or solve some dif-

ficult social problem. Alexander's penchant for violence is illustrated in the story of his cutting the Gordon Knot with his sword without even trying to untie it. It was Tolstoi who befriended the "spirit-wrestling" Doukhobors in their flight from czarist conscription, and said that "a certain variety of church Christians do not want to serve God, but want God to serve them; that is the only reason they join the church." He also ridiculed the automorphism and self-seeking assumptions of prayer, saying that "Prayer is directed to a personal God, not because God is personal (I know as a matter of fact that He is not personal, because the personal is finite, while God is infinite), but because I myself am a personal being." This sort of humanism in the motives of prayer show that it is more rhyomistic than religious and less worthy than the out-and-out wheedling beggary of a presumptuous persuasion. It leaves plenty of room for umbrage and imputation, rancor and revenge. Emerson, however, has refuted this view by holding that "with a truly reverent heart prayer is no selfish petition, but is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul." Yes, and with an honest piety and aspiration, prayer is the sesame which opens the magic doors of wisdom, peace, virtue, justice and social joy.