

NATURAL VERSUS REVEALED RELIGION

Their significance in the Mexican situation

BY HAROLD BERMAN

TWO nations, unrelated to each other in blood and ancestry, living in two widely-separated hemispheres and professing widely-disparate faiths—though the both faiths are the offshoots of a common aboriginal stem, Christianity,—are now engaged in a desperate battle, the object of which is the shattering of the power of their respective churches.

The Russians, ever since the Bolshevist Revolution, have been busily engaged in fighting the centuries-old oppressive power of the Greek Orthodox church, in closing up the sacred edifices, confiscating their immense landed as well as movable properties, and in curbing the spiritual power of the clergy in general. Even now, after the initial hectic flush of battle and the melodramatic clash of steel in Russia has passed over and its place has been taken by a far less spectacular, less frenzied but none the less effective, if silent, grip, Mexico steps into the ring and begins to belay all about her in the frenzied manner of the Russians of a few years ago.

There is this difference between the two, however. Whereas the Russians avowedly fought as the uncompromising enemies of all religion, boldly declaring it to be the "the opiate of the people," a pernicious habit to be fought and extirpated without mercy or compromise, the Mexican officials profess to feel no enmity whatever towards the Christian religion as such, and not even to the Catholic branch of it as practiced in their country ever since the coming of the white settlers in the wake of Cortez and Pizzaro, but are merely trying to shatter the overwhelming political and economic powers exercised by the Church over the people of

Mexico. The struggle thus becomes, strictly speaking, not a religious war, a war of the kind that has darkened the skies of Europe on and off for centuries past—a fight to the finish, between sects and creeds, each one of them fighting for the adoption of its own interpretation of the Christian creed—but rather a struggle between a surviving vestige of the Mediaeval Catholic Church, with its claims to temporal as well as spiritual powers, and the more modern system in vogue at the present time in most countries where the respective functions of the two institutions—Church and State—are never allowed to encroach upon one another.

It is inevitable, and practically a foregone conclusion, that the ultimate victory will be on the side of those who are fighting for freedom, on the side of those who represent the State in the present, much belated, battle. The Church will, sooner or later, be obliged to yield, if not gracefully then shamefacedly and in obedience to overwhelming force; not so much to *physical* force, as to the force of public opinion and a growing sentiment of modernism. But yield it must, its battle having been lost several centuries ago, at the time when the Renaissance first came knocking at the door of the Christian nations of Europe. It has been a *battle of attrition* between the two ever since. The place and the role of each in the scheme of existence simply had to be properly demarked and clearly defined. One must not encroach upon the other's province or dominion.

One detail in this momentous drama now being enacted before our very eyes on that country-wide stage has, however, generally escaped attention. The great mass of the people of Mexico, as in most Central and South American countries, are Indian. The most of them are pure-bred Indians, the aboriginal heritage strong in their blood, but speaking the Spanish language and worshipping an Hispano-Catholic God. And it is these very masses—Indian almost all of them—who have so solemnly sworn “to shed their last drop of blood in defense of the sacred shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe,” as well as all other shrines, churches and monasteries that dot every highway and byway of Mexico.

When one, however, opens the books relating to the history of the conquest and the settlement of Mexico by the white men, one finds recorded in them the intensity and the determined obstinacy of the ancestors of these very Indians' resistance to the forcible adop-

tion of Christianity. And he learns also that they yielded only, when at all, to the convincing arguments of the stake and faggot and the torture chamber. In other words, we find that their ancestors were ready to shed their blood to the last drop in their fight *against* that very faith, even as their successors in the present day are ready to consecrate it now by their Martyrdom. And then, and quite involuntarily, a thought—a destructive thought, let us admit—enters our mind, and we ask ourselves: “what is the nature of that, so-called, Revealed and Absolute, truth for which men of all ages stood ready to shed their own and other people’s blood?” For, we must remember that not only were the representatives of each and every religion ready to shed the blood of the followers of all other faiths, but that even the followers of *each sect* were ready to fight to the bitter end the members of other sects within that very religion, aside from the occasional seeking of their own martyrdom for truth’s sake. Each one of them fought for his own conviction, for his own conception of *absolute truth*. And yet we are aware that only one of them—if any—could be true, in the dogmatic sense. Only one set of dogmas, at the most, could be true, all others being *Ipsa facto* a figment of the Founder’s imagination, the result of a certain person’s or group’s environment, early education or what not. And we must also remember that when people fought the bloody wars of religion they did not most assuredly fight for ethical principles or concepts as such, but for dogmas pure and simple. When the Missionary goes forth to preach his faith in strange lands, it’s dogma that he brings, while ethics are only incidentals. It’s *faith* that gives him zeal to suffer and preach, “*Believe this,*” he says in effect. “And live among us in peace and comfort and be molested by no one, here and in the world to come. *Believe* otherwise—as you have believed yesterday and the day before—and you shall be put to the torture, handed over to the Executioner, to be tortured and perhaps also deprived of your life, and be accursed in this and the coming life”.

It was *belief* solely that forms the pith of the argument. And Christianity, the faith that boasted a greater body of dogma—and a far more difficult one to accept—than any other revealed faith with the sole possible exception of Buddhism, perforce had to become the persecuting religion *par excellence*—the religion of fire and sword, foreign missionary bodies and so forth—in order to carry its gospel to the confines of the earth, bring it to those who didn’t receive it

as the inheritance of their fathers, and therefore to be accepted as a matter of course and without any further ado, speculation or inquiry. A dogmaless, or near dogmaless, religion, the teachings of Confucius or Zoroaster for instance, or such as is preached by Gandhi today, saying that "each man, according to his own right manifests the truth, yet no one manifests the truth completely," needs no Missionaries and surely no stake and faggots to enforce its belief, all such accessories to faith being unthinkable in its case. Ethics, and rules of conduct generally, are best inoculated in the young in the quiet of the schoolroom, by the calm and reasoned discourse, or by the example of one's conduct. There is none of the heat, passion and violence engendered by supernaturalism about it and its content. Not even in the, abstractly-poetical lip-worship rendered to the spirits of the departed dead, or the homage tendered to the sun or the sacred fire that characterize either of these religions.

The Japanese, it is related, drove the Christian Missionaries, and Christians generally, out of the land a few years after they gave them permission to come and settle in their land—in the 17th century—when they discovered that these soon fell to quarrelling among themselves on matters of faith, aside from trying to convert the natives. Such a procedure having been unknown in Japan since the coming, many centuries previously, of the early Buddhist priests, who converted some of the natives to their faith and left all the rest alone to cultivate their own ancient faith. And they certainly were right. A belief should either be accepted as a *convention*, as one of the many inherited institutions incidental to the state of Society in which one is born, bestowed no thought on or speculation about at all, but taken as a matter of course, as the very air that one breathes, as one's digestion or blood circulation, and never therefore, forced upon any one who has been bred to other conventions and forms, or should be discarded altogether when, upon mature deliberation and research, it has been found deficient or senseless, in one or another sense. But to fight over it, and to seek to enforce its practice upon others who have been brought up to follow and venerate some other convention is about as sensible as to employ the "Holy office" methods in the matter of the preference of rice to corn-bread or the superior virtue of a chair to a mat for sitting upon, all of these respective customs and practices being rooted in the age-old habit of the people that practice

them, and, without involving any principle or creed, have become more acceptable to them than any other practice, and no more need be said about it. The theology of a people grew out of its own peculiar genius and *weltanschauung* just as its literature, art, food, dress and domestic life did. Either is indigenous to its genius, and therefore fitting to its peculiar mental and physical make-up.

In this connection it is perhaps worth while to recall Hegel's definition of religion as "the knowledge of the divine spirit (in Himself) through the medium of the finite mind" and his division of same into several categories, the positive or definite, and the indefinite groups.

The classic argument employed on behalf of religious tolerance is the one advanced by Lessing, adapted by him in turn from one of the tales of Boccaccio. It tells the story of the man who, on his death-bed, bequeathed to his three sons three rings, all the three of them looking alike, the one made of gold, the other two made of some base counterfeit metal. The advice implicitly given them by their father was *not to go to* the Jeweler, who, by assaying them and subjecting them to his tests, would render two of the three sons unhappy for life, aside from proving the death-bed deceit of their father. But the sons soon fall to quarreling about the respective merits of their rings and when they do finally bring their mutual complaints to Nathan the Wise, being uneasy in mind as to which of them is in possession of the genuine gold ring, he also advises them *not to put* their rings to the test, but to let doubt persist for ever. As in the Eighteenth Century, the sceptical, *Laissez Faire* Century, this is excellent advice. Let well enough alone, and do not pry into things that may, and would, make you unhappy. Keep your doubts to yourself, and trouble no one about them—not even yourself overmuch. The scientific or critical spirit of the Nineteenth Century would ask, "is it honest?" Is it even courageous? Why should one want to hold on and to cherish a thing about the genuineness of which the worm of doubt is forever gnawing at his heart? And why bequeath such a bauble to one's children, with the injunction to cherish it above all in the world and to bequeath the same in turn to his own children after him? From the standpoint of logic and clear thinking, of intellectual honesty and courage, this is pure bosh and mental ostrich-play. Man *should have* the courage to seek out the metaphorical jeweler

and force him, at the point of a gun virtually, to tell one whether his ring be gold or some base metal, especially after he had been repeatedly told by his mentors for ages and centuries that his very happiness and salvation depend upon its being genuine.

We are aware, of course, that the wearer of each ring—the practitioner of each one of the three dominant religions—is sincerely convinced in his heart, or at least hopes, that he, and he alone, is in possession of the golden ring (else he would not wear it, and the religionist would not practice his faith). But supposing that their father had altogether lost the genuine gold ring and persuaded the clever artificer to manufacture *three counterfeits* in the very image of the original ring made by him sometime before and since then become lost? Supposing that each one of the three brothers was cherishing a base bauble, as the case seems most likely to be with all dogmatic religions whose root is to be found in man's fear of the supernatural and the Great Unknown, what then? One hates to think indeed of the result of such consistent, and destructive, thought, or of the deluge of misery that it would bring in its train—if but for a while—to a struggling, squirming humanity after it had waged all the bloody wars on behalf of dogma as well as between the various religious systems! The strongest emotion, as well as the one most potent of good and evil, would then be gone from the heart of man. And man would lose his dearest as well as his most cherished hope and illusion.

And yet, even as Wm. James has sought to find a more rational substitute for the stimulation and the quickening of the national and individual pulse furnished by war, so must we find a rational cure for the dogmatic psychosis; something that is based on a rational emotion, but on an emotion nevertheless. A purely ethical religion, one based upon the duty of man to his fellow-man and the collective welfare of all beings that compose a State, group of states, a nation, or nations could, in due course of time, be brought to that stage of perfection where it would possess a sufficiency of emotional power to sway the heart of man, and even to supply that mild opiate that all religions and national emotions have exerted upon the heart and imagination of man since time immemorial. The only appreciable difference between the two would be that, whereas the old emotion leads to hatreds and to wars, the new one would bring in its train the love of one's neighbor as well as international peace and concord, aside from ridding us of quite a parcel of brass rings that

masquerade as pure gold. The basic ethical conception and practices are universal and one the world over, though they may vary somewhat in detailed local expression and interpretation. They are one and indivisible for the entire human race.

Could one visualize, if but for a moment, a warless, hatredless world, a world freed from all prejudice, from all religious strife, from all fanaticism and misunderstanding and all the evils that they bring in their train, what a glimpse of Paradise would be his! Yet such a paradise could be brought many steps nearer to us if not realized at once by the weakening of the power of the several dogmatic religions that rule the world today.

Rational thought and duty, minus supernaturalism, would undoubtedly have hard sailing for a while among the average, among the generality of people. Its fight for recognition would be considerably augmented by the fact that we live under a Machine system and Commercial age. The Machine Age, in its initial stages an invaluable aid in developing a *negative scepticism* in the few superior minds, became in due course of time the constable of "things as they are". It's a Sheriff standing guard with a primed and loaded gun over the delicate machinery of this great and complex system. The *status quo* is its chief aid in being as in growth. But the recognition would be bound to come once the greatest and most irksome shackles—Supernaturalism, and tradition in their more deleterious forms—have been thrown off. The human mind would then be far better equipped to cope with the other evils: the racial and economic barriers between man and man and between nation and nation.