

RELIGION AND ART

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WHAT is Religion?

In each of us there exists a consciousness of being, undefined and undefinable, but a reality nevertheless. I call this the consciousness of "I am", and by that "I am" I designate the soul which is my possession: the essential ego. It is this ego alone which comprehends a greater, and this greater soul is what I understand to be God, conveniently explained by the simple words "all that is good". It is apparent that both these comprehensions, these experiences of consciousness, are spiritual in essence. Hence, contact between the spiritual "I am" which is my soul, and the greater spiritual goodness which pervades the universe, must be spiritual contact; the syllogism is complete. This spiritual contact is what I understand religion to be. It requires no ritual, no dogma, no order, no creed, to explain it. Religion is merely contact between the soul and God: that is, between the lesser spirit within, which is the ego, and the universal spirit within the universe, which is God. The understanding of this contact is the aim of life.

What is Art?

Art is the precise expression of spiritual contact. It is to man the embodiment of the experiences of his consciousness. Shakespeare was thus an artist: first, because he was capable of receiving impressions from without, which he transmuted into the ether of his soul, and of collating—through reason and by means of his imagination—those inner essences which formed the mysteries of his own soul-conceptions; secondly, because these impressions, so transmuted and collated, found root, and were fostered, cultivated and developed until they became life; thirdly, because he was con-

scious that there was an undefinable contact between this soul and all that it contained and revealed, and the great God-soul within the universe; and, fourthly, because he was faithful in expressing, in words, what the results of this contact were, or, more plainly, he was faithful in explaining life. I have reduced the essentials to four. The first three are important to all men because all men need religion: religion as I understand it and have tried to express it above. The fourth—which all men can appreciate, but few can adequately produce—is the artist's key; it is the *expression*, in Shakespeare's case the expression by words. By a similar process can be explained the artist in the musician like Chopin, the sculptor like Michael Angelo, and the painter like Turner or David Cox.

We can all understand religion, and we can all be religious, because we can all—by a process of individual isolation—comprehend contact between our inner life and our soul-conceptions, and the underlying life of the universe. So, also, can we all understand art. In one confined sense art and religion are synonymous. But we do not all expound or interpret this synonym, and it is this exposition and interpretation which is the function of the artist, and this extra facility which makes the artist.

It seems intelligible to deduce from the foregoing that all artists are religious; but that all religious people are not necessarily artists; in fact, very few have ever been so. The development of this will, no doubt, yield ground for dispute between the orthodox view of religion (the religion of Christianity in particular), and my own view of it. I am, however, attacking only the narrow satisfaction which is found in the man who pins his emblem of faith on the flag-staff of dogma and creed. Such as he requires an apologia for his present satisfaction with life, and, confessing a belief in a heaven which is wholly incomprehensible to him, he accepts an apologia in the form of dogma and creed. This he calls faith. If he knew an intelligible God, he would realize that his conception of his existence—so far as it is intelligible to him—is false. For religion, being spiritual contact, is not a code of law or mortals; it is not a statement of a creed; and—it is not necessarily Christianity.

Why, then, is Christianity the embodiment of my religion? Or, more simply, why do I believe in Jesus? My answer is that in him I see, not a super-divinity of exclusive origin, but what perfect contact between the soul of man and the spirit of God

can be: a contact which in the end implies unity. In other words, I see in Jesus the perfect life suitable and attainable for me, and for all men, on earth. I conceive Christ to be the basis of my religion, because Christ interprets life for me, here and now. This is the only explanation of my Christianity; it is very simple and very logical.

What, again, is the association of Christianity with art, and how are they connected? Simply in this: that to me Christ was the supreme artist. The common consideration of art is confined, in the minds of most people, to literature, music, sculpture, painting. Every so-called critic of art has so limited his conception of art. But, through a long period of soul-searching, I have made a discovery new to myself, which I cannot find in books, nor in the expression of any other artistic medium. It is this: art being, as I understand it, the expression of life, it is, in its complete sense, expressed in Jesus Christ and in him only.

Art exists for me whenever there is appreciation and understanding manifested in my soul as the result of contact with the appreciation and understanding experienced by the artist. For example, the moment which the ego which I possess understands (through reading *The Cherry Orchard*) something, however little, of the understanding which Tchekov's personal ego achieved, and which he expressed in that work, then at that moment the seed of art germinated, and for me that particular evidence of it must henceforward develop and so live. Such an experience is the apology for literature, while similar experiences are the apologies for music, sculpture and painting. And, what is most important of all, precisely the same type of experience is my apologia for my Christian religion, which is contact with true life through the contemplation of Truth, made soul-visible through Jesus Christ, the supreme artist.

Now I suggest that anyone who does not understand religion, that is, who does not understand what is spiritual contact between his soul and the spirit of God, can add nothing useful to the consideration of this subject. People attempt to regard the aesthetic application of art as if it were the alpha and omega of a concise subject. A person who listens to music and merely feels a satisfied exultation of body, and so accepts a sedative instead of a cure for the mental diseases of life, or

who looks at a fine building and sees only its proportions, or who observes a beautiful woman and can attach importance to her physical attraction only, such an one is as incapable of understanding art as he is incapable of understanding religion. He can be likened to that type of religionist who thinks that by expressing a verbal acknowledgment of Christ he will have eternal life. For to say "I believe in Jesus", is not enough: to say "I will be as he was" becomes all-sufficient. That is the difference between the pseudo-religious and the truly religious man.

In reaching the stage of my present conviction, it was necessary to undergo a completely subversory process with regard to my mental attitude to the aesthetic principles of art. If by the general term "aesthetics" is meant the appeal of the beautiful to our physical senses, then the beautiful in art is almost valueless, and when it promotes lust of any kind it is obviously evil. Such beauty goes only skin deep, though the fault lies, not with beauty, but with ourselves. Where true art really lives, beauty is the hand-maiden of the soul.

Consideration of the aesthetic appeal of a beautiful building for worship provides a super-example of the manner in which men cheat themselves. So long as men and women live in hovels, work in hovels, think in hovels (if at all), dream and die in hovels, so long the beautiful building wherein religion is always assumed to be an especially potent force (as if anything spiritual could be enclosed in walls) is a lie. Every beautiful church is ugly, because there is no connection between the building and true religion, any more than there can be connection between that impostor known to some men as beauty yet which is wholly material, and the real beauty which is known to the revealers of truth and which is essentially spiritual. For how can there be connection when there is no life? Where "Beauty is Truth", aesthetics are lost in the mire of their own making, sunk by the realities of life. Keats knew better than most people. For religion is life, and art is life, and a beautiful church in the slums is an impossible attempt to unite life and death as one. It is a colossal example of the false and the cheat. The pseudo-Christianity of to-day is propped-up but dead; the creeds are dead; all man made religious laws are dead. But

Christ, who alone understood what spiritual contact implies, lives: to realize the paradox is to cheat ourselves no longer.

Men must be born again in spirit. They will then understand that art is truly the handmaiden of religion. The long years of groping and searching for truth, the ensuing process of spiritual gestation, and the final upheaval will be worth it, after all.