

THE VITAL ELEMENT IN BELIEF

BY RUSSELL F. SPEIRS

I HAVE lately been reading De Unamuno, Bertrand Russell, Santayana, and Whitman. I have been interested in the manner in which each has expressed himself upon that great problem which brooks no solution—the problem of immortality. Having listened to what each has said, I find that I am neither for nor against the belief in immortality. As mere beliefs, immortality and mortality may avail nothing and indeed be unimportant to man. We do not live by what are commonly called beliefs but by hungers and passions, for of these is begotten insight. And we live by insight, which is vital belief. Before a belief can become vital it must be integral with the spirit of man, one with his entire being; and by that time it has attained an intensity and purity which have made of it something more than a mere belief. Instead of it, whatever *it* may be, being a part of man, man sees to become a part of It. (I have capitalized this last *It* advisedly.)

How many people, people who think men good or bad according to what beliefs they maintain, in seeking to know a person, ask the question: “Do you believe in God?” or “Do you believe in immortality?” and are satisfied with a simple *Yes* or *No*, whichever corresponds with their own prejudice. “Good,” they say, “I know you. You are right; you will be admitted into the fold.” But in truth they only reveal the fact that they do not even know themselves. Beliefs *per se* are of no great value. Believing persons whose whole spirits have been kindled by what they believe, are of value. They belong to Earth’s best. They have some vital connection with existence. They are God’s handful and justify His experiment with this mystery that we call Life.

When is a belief important? When does it become more than a mere belief? When it has the kindling power of wine, or fire.

But it must do more than kindle. We have all known "possessed" persons, the lesser breed of fanatics, who have plenty of fire in them but who are enveloped in their own smoke, a smoke that also envelops others and causes confusion and discord. A belief is important when it astonishes the believer with the light it sheds upon the whole of existence. In a vital belief the importance of illumination transcends that of comfort. The belief of a person in immortality because he is horrified at the thought of his own annihilation is only significant in that it reveals something of selfishness and cowardice. But one such belief does not convince us that all belief in immortality is selfish, cowardly, worthless. It does let us see that beliefs are not necessarily coeval with values.

It must be admitted that a great deal of what has been said and written about immortality is offensive stuff. In those who scoff at the idea there is often a meanness of spirit, a petty arrogance, or a sniveling grief. In many who prate about the idea in churches there is a certain lack of manliness and courage. They use a terminology that is old and lifeless. It is at once apparent that they have no living experience to impart; all they have is an absurd, anemic vocabulary. They speak to us of eternal life, but the death-rattle is in their words. One listens and hears the hollow tones of Death speaking of immortality. Horrible mockery! Of what value is a belief if it quicken not the spirit of the believer but is at most a pleasant opiate?

How much finer is the attitude of De Unamuno, who, feeling that reason cannot invalidate the claims of the spirit nor the claims of the spirit entirely invalidate reason, welcomes the divine uncertainty that produces "the eternal disquietudes of the spirit," the life-giving conflict of spiritual hunger with human reason. One cannot solve the problem of immortality and turn to worldly things; one can but engage in a spiritual warfare destined never to end but destined to strengthen the strongholds of the soul. Who would have the question of immortality answered once and for all and recorded as the solution of an equation that has been solved, when it is the very uncertainty of the problem that gives life and virility to Whitman's beautiful faith, expressed in the lyric cry of his hungering heart? Who would crave the certainty that would kill such hunger, leaving unborn the most ecstatic utterances of one of the world's brave, beholding spirits?

And who, on the other hand, would disallow the value to the

human spirit of those who passionately disbelieve? Who would be so poor in spirit and such a cowardly half-believer as to deny the spiritual lift, the soul-strengthening courage in the beautiful faith of Santayana, a faith that is built upon disillusion? Or who that has read Bertrand Russell's *A Free Man's Worship*, in which the hope of immortality and of other long cherished human desires is denied, can find nothing of heroic proportion in the strong faith that yet persists amid so much honest denial?

Shall we praise Whitman for his belief in immortality and censure these others for their unbelief or doubt? Or shall we censure the first mentioned and praise the others? We shall do neither. To do one or the other would be an admission that, for the life of the mind and spirit we have substituted beliefs that are without vitality because they are still in that low stage of development that makes of them mere formulas. To do either would be to attach values to beliefs that beliefs *per se* do not possess. Life is not so simple as that. We cannot live by creeds and equations. We cannot live by the beliefs of others or make them wholly our own. Our belief must, if it be our *very* own, have in it an element that is unique. In order that we may live significantly, our faith in beliefs that are formulas merely must fall away before the life-giving heroic spirit of man, in whatever form it may be expressed. Above all, in the development of a clear, resilient life of the spirit, we must never become "light half-believers in a casual creed." That way stagnation lies. Ever vigilant, we must remain forever receptive of the waters of Life, the fount of which is the exclusive possession of no single individual or school. These waters flow in many directions and from many sources; and from such diverse streams as Whitman, Santayana, Russell, and De Unamuno we may extract the nourishment that the soul needs.