

PIETY AND THE POSEUR'S POLICY OF POWER

BY HARDIN T. MCCLELLAND

WHATEVER a man does in the way of thought, work, creative art or emulative conduct has as its ultimate apology some personal discharge of energy. It is an expression of individual talent, power or choice of vehicle to feel freely capable of exerting himself, whether his efforts be good or bad, useful or idle, heroic or low-aiming. But if he is mercenary and given to sordid stratagems and spoils, it is safe to say that but few of his efforts will be worthy or exemplary, no matter how industrious or studious his attention and display of energy.

In matters religious we are accustomed to require that a certain element of piety, gentleness and spirituality shall attend *all* of the various stages of this expression of energy, this self-ordained industry and exertion, and that this spiritual element shall give them their only credential of merit and righteousness, as well as sanction them as activities higher or more benevolent than mere force of intellect or muscle. But we do not demand as emphatically that this piety, et al., shall be genuine, that there shall be no hypocrisy, no specious policy of power, no duplicity of devout concern to postulate priority of personal rights or lay claim to the prestige of eristic preferment. Our neglect of precision consequently abets the poseur's delinquent decision, and the resultant program is usually one of irreverence and ruthless will to power instead of piety, meekness and benevolence.

There is no permanent piety in vulgarian creeds of power, no virtuous veneration, reverence or adequate relief from the criminal commerce of mercenary communions. There is no fitting comparison between those ancient worthies who were so devout and these modern worldlings who are so diabolically discrete. They are the messengers of antithetical moods, virtuous credulity and vicious cleverness, and cannot be grouped together in any durable prospect

of conciliation. People taking up positions of worldly ambition and effort cannot be said to have lovable characters although they may have many exemplary virtues, nor can they be considered pious or devout, although they may be inveterate Bible-students, church-mice and prayer-mongers. They may be intelligent, industrious, courageous, progressive and capable of rare executive office so far as their worldly purpose goes, but will certainly do little penance for finite failure because their philosophy falls short of that gentle spiritual attitude toward life, Nature and God which makes for genuine piety and love.

Some measure of this soul-feeling must be present, else your worldling be also a fool, an infidel, a scoundrel and materialist. I often think that the least modicum of spirituality ought to prevent people from worldliness and sin, rhyomism and war; but it seems to take sober social workers rather than men who are overly God-intoxicated to give us any lasting impulse toward redemption. Having true piety in their hearts and honest wisdom in their heads they see the actual utility of moralism and religion, whether presented in powerful pictures of the Ascension or in satirical sirventes of some medieval troubadour. We have two good biographical reasons for saying that such piety and wisdom would see why Wilhelm Meister's pietism in the *Schöne Seele* was no superficial affectation, but an inner enlightenment of soul which gave that thrill of reverent appreciation to Pater's philosophical aesthetic as well as that calm sense of security which Margaret Fuller found in her ideal hero-worship of Goethe.

Only a few years' experience should teach the most stupid humanist that people have little to concern them but the finite interests of their own petty world, that they have habits and do mischiefs not only peculiar but piacular, for which, whether they know it or not, they are individually responsible and, whether penitent or not, they will be held socially and ethically accountable. It is foolish to think that one has wholly escaped all retribution when he has merely evaded man's flimsy inaccurate punitive provisions; no crime, cussedness or covetous creed ever escaped the Divine ordinance of "Live ye in the spirit, else ye be soon dead living." It is wiser to think, and nobler to understand that *God's Laws never miss fire*. Another thing the stupid humanist should learn from his meagre experience of life is that the world has myriad sorts of men; some are sharp while many are dull, some are philosophers while many are fools; some devout many depraved, some are honest reverent souls but the

majority enjoy the marplots of life; hedonism and vanity or else dawdle away their time eating chocolates and reading valorous vulgarity such as was so piquantly presented in the picturesque literature of the Spanish Main with its heroic rogues and galleons of gold. Or, if not so romantic, and given more to the veneer-culture of modern civilization, the latter will belong to that overwhelming majority which gobbled up a million copies of Ben Hecht's garish "Gargoyle," that salacious screed of sex-sampling which seems wholly to have stupified the censors; and with this as guide-book they will glory in and emulate the clever exploits of petty poseurs, those précieuse pick-thanks and social climbers smearing culture and smirking their way to fame. All such are worldlings, and whether openly vulgar or covetly vicious, they still manipulate their finite interests without much moral or spiritual discipline. At best they are little else than pietistic poseurs seeking their fortunes in some shrewd strategem of personal power over their fellows. And what manner of faith or love is that?

The sincerity of religion is determined not by what it presents as intellectual content, but by its code of action, by what manner of persuasion it seeks its proselytes or advances itself in the world. What sort of persuasion (power, love or revenge?) was given subtle expression in the early Greek religion which, at the conquest of Troy, gave each hero a fair maiden captive as part of the booty while the beautiful Polyxena was slain so as to accompany Achilles through the Elysian Fields? What true piety was ever exercised or even feebly expressed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when the Inquisition was the favorite resort of fanatic fools and power-lusting nuncios, especially in the latter days when Torquemada launched vandal codes of vengeance in the Spanish Tribunal of the Holy Office and in the sixteen years of his foul leadership ordered upwards of 9,000 put to death and probably an hundred thousand mercilessly tortured? I sometimes think that the pagan Trojans in the first instance and the Waldenses, Catheroi and Albigenses in the second had quite a little margin when it came to piety and restraint of malice. They could not help responding with a certain measure of retaliation in kind, but they had neither the resources nor genius for a coldly organized system of persecution such as seemed so characteristic in the "Holy Office." The poverty of man's love and loyalty proves him essentially vulgar and irreverent, the poverty of his faith and piety proves him cynical and proud, subject always to psychological fallacy and automorphism. These alone would be quite bear-

able, but there are so many more malicious mischiefs, so many more ruthless and incorrigible expressions of vandal power, that we find our life, in the past, now, and probably hereafter as well, made unnecessarily difficult, artificial and ordered according to discreet pragmatisms rather than devout pietisms.

Very few people could be won over to religions of weakness nor could they be persuaded to listen for long to propaganda which smacked only of absolute meekness and renunciation. Their very life and survival in this world requires that their creeds be flexible and their philosophies practical. Everyone seeks some sort of knowledge, power or position of influence, some title to the proud company of the elect, so as not to continue being the slave and under-dog of those who do already have this knowledge, power and influence. Otherwise they soon find themselves classed as *unfit* for anything but exploitation and extinction. It is quite natural then, and well within the scope of anticipation to say that people will continue to be easily convinced and converted into *any* creed which offers a proper dispensation of rewards and punishments, an easily adapted revelation or eschatology, and at least a *chance* to circumvent the stratagems of their enemies. This is an inevitable condition of life in a finite world of mercenary motives, arbitrary moralism, rhyomism and revenge.

Are they not religions of power and prestige which attach great importance to the idea that the sun, as the source and sustainer of life, has title to Divinity, and that by correct credulity and appropriate ceremony we can win health, wealth and bountiful harvests? Their insincere persuasion soon eventuates in graft, political assumption, trading in popular favor, or other official simony. Amon-Ra, Mazda, Indra, and a myriad various other nominal titles of address with just as numerous rituals reciting and exalting the symbols of the sun's creative and regenerative power, have held many a nation's people together when all other reasons and resorts have failed. The immense popularity of helio-centric religions has of course, waned considerably today, but we can see the evidences of their ancient glory and power in the many temples, monuments, obelisks and pyramids still standing after forty or fifty centuries. The solar discs on Celtic monoliths, the astronomical plan of Stonehenge, and the invariable solar drama behind the architectural art of Hindu, Persian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek and even Mohammedan temples with its radiant acroterium, heavenly engraved pediment, skyline architecture and the many columns, metopes and triglyphs, symbolic of the

numerous heliochthonal blessings and fruitions—all these, like the golden minarets on the Mosque (St. Sophia) of bloody Moslem tradition, point toward heaven, but rest on the secular security of caliphs directing Islam's militant ministry.

A few historical instances of delinquency and defect in religious theory and practice will suffice here. In ancient Babylon and Persia, Marduk the sun-god of all creation had power to cause bodily resurrection, but was usually open to the prescient persuasion of his wife Zarpanis not to exert this power in favor of any but those not yet really deceased. It was a shrewd proviso of the Chaldean astrologers, and neither the ancient Magi nor the modern Parsees seem to have noticed that many clever priests have feigned death so as to give plausibility to the doctrine of physical resurrection. The baggy-sleeved soothsayers of a later day in Rome probably knew but did not let on that great importance could be attached to the fact that the early Etruscan colonists in Latinum with their exotic mythology and Nature-lore gave the later Romans that subtle religious preparation and respect for tradition which made them not only willing borrowers but gullible devotees to the "soft life" presented and argued from the Greek and Mithraic sources in dialectic pastimes and religious pragmatisms. There were sufficient patterns for all the wills-to-believe-in-practical-truth-values that they might devise or dread. It hardly seems a *mere* coincidence that the pantheons of Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome should share that peculiar creed of power and poseur-piety under which the gods and goddesses took rank in precedence and popular favor largely by the amount of influence and authority they were able to exercise over the lives and affairs of the people. It was the invariable tactics of priestcraft to assume the role of mediator between the pantheon and the people, and they took shrewd advantage of the plausible fact that the divine power and rank conferred upon their ministry was patterned after the power and rank which their prototypes as natural forces and agencies were seen to have over the weather, climate, harvests, men's lives and other external conditions of the natural world. It was largely through symbolism and conceptual representation that the transition to humanism was effected, when the divinities first of Nature and then of a housed-in pantheon became no more blind powers and forces, but were idealized and gradually apotheosized into intelligent personal beings related to each other in the various man-like but yet divine degrees of authority and power over men's lives and fortunes.

Passing on to the medieval church, we find that it paid most attention to scholastic studies and controversies because its ideal was a religion of persuasion and hoped to win men's consciences quicker by wit and wheedling than by working some miracle or mischief while they slept (intellectually). It, too, had its policy of power which took shape in antagonistic monastic orders and found expression in assisting whatever feudal king seemed most likely to win the season's tournament against his neighbors. This policy found united action only during the Crusades, and then it was simply for the purpose of overthrowing the Saracens and reclaiming the Holy Land from the Turks. Next, in the decadent days of the Inquisition and its attempted plebian revival by the reactionary Puritans, the theory of omnipotence had been so well brought down to men's bosoms that their religion left piety and persuasion in keeping of the mellow monastic life and became once more a religion of power and vengeance. A full-fledged Puritan's pietistic anxieties for power or revenge could at times suavely enough fall back on the unusually effective persuasion of stern character and virtuous example, but whenever this failed he sought ready refuge in the vengeful tactics of a malicious prophecy, if not a directly physical demonstration reminding the "recalcitrant sinner" of his doom under a Saturnalia of hell's-fire and everlasting torment. A major portion of our past tradition is summed up in Sir Thomas Browne's remark that we should look to "Egypt for science, India for mythology, Israel for revenge, Greece for philosophy, Rome for government and *Norwich for sin*" (Norwich being the great seat of infernal dispensation where the Puritan parliament held sway after Charles II had been sent to his fathers). Although Sir Thomas Browne was a member of the then little-esteemed medical profession, and his acceptance of Christianity as a pragmatic religion shocked his Puritan contemporaries, it did not prevent him from showing a more honest faith and sincerity in the duties of his daily ministrations to those who were sick morally as well as physically. He had no sham salvage scheme, no automatic gear-shift or mechanical Walscheart link-motion with which to make life's spiritual grade in high.

It was only after the various romantic, rationalist and Erastian movements of the eighteenth and the scientific criticism of the nineteenth centuries that brought about the separation and ultimate subjugation of Church to State had become a durable part of man's twentieth-century-intellectual equipment that he began to look on religion as being much in need of rational restraint and intelligent

guidance. Only after these disciplines had become thoroughly effective did the Church take refuge in the meekness and piety of which it was supposed to have been exemplary all the time. But there are still a few conditions raucously requiring improvement, especially the attitude toward the utility of religion; as it seems still necessary to offer rich and rare rewards so that anyone will feel justified in any religious faith at all. So that today we find the tutelary gods working overtime trying to satisfy our pious policy of power—a situation to be expected when we understand that predatory preachers of pragmatic religions always flourish in a vulgarian age such as ours and seek new proselytes by shrewd prescriptions to cupidity, fear and prejudice. I cannot see much difference between this practice and that other policy so cleverly affected by the dissolute precisions of Puritan persuasion whose vain formulism, as Macaulay says, “made the most dissolute cavaliers stand aghast.” It is indeed fortunate for us that through the endless agitations of modern Erastians the secular power takes care of practically all punishments, the Church only having power to withhold its own institutional sanction on certain forms of conduct the same as it still claims power and authority to withhold the objective benefits of holy communion. On the other hand we can readily see whether it is for the sake of piety or power that the various denominations or sectarian organizations send whole parties, processions and caravans of missionaries into Africa, China, India, Asia Minor and Australia armed with guns and concessionaires, wireless apparatus and surveying instruments, cameras and gaudy presents, while, as though only an afterthought of the enterprise cartloads of Bibles, Psalters, hymnbooks, propaganda and other paraphernalia bring up the rear. Even a numskull heathen can often see that *his* religion is ridiculed and trampled under foot for the very selfsame reason that his land is exploited and his freedom replaced with mandatory law.

Another phase of the modern fallacy in religious pietism is trying to find its basis in forced readings, in driving hard bargains with Revelation and reward. How much indebted is our own great Scriptural heirloom, the King James Version, to the allegories of Alcuin and the postillations from the schools of Charlemagne? Here were sources for genuine reverence and piety, but their modern imitations in poseur pietism, in the morbid search for signs and wonders, mysteries and hidden meanings, which is the bane of every honest spirituelle and healthy religious interpretation or Bible study, have debauched the whole program of religious outlook and education

With these as the principal purposes of study and interpretation there is no end to the number of doubtful allusions and ambiguities to be read into (rather than out of) the Scriptures and *there* is always to be found a condition whereby a thousand misunderstandings and controversies may continue to rancor and canker in men's minds and hearts. Any of the world's great Scriptures, without regard to national or racial distinctions, should be first read literally, then interpreted according to the moral figures supplied, and then, if the probable analogy seems to conflict with the social or historical character of the narrative, take pattern from the general spirit of the whole and but few errors of construction will be made.

Practically all the clever assumptions of ambiguity, Cabalistic analyses, and formulistic schemes are false, farfetched, word-stretching efforts to realize verbal symmetry rather than spiritual verity, thus proving themselves particeps in causum to the usual automorphic fallacy behind all eristic theologies. What difference does it make whether our favorite Church be disguised as R. C., C. S., Anglican, Unitarian, Theosophist, Parsee, Presbyterian, Shinto, Moslem or Buddhist so long as we seek piety *before* power, and not afterwards like the vulgarian? If we pray only for personal rewards and prestige, only for our own reprieves and good fortune, what value except that of mere rhyomism may be read in all our Psalms and ceremonies, however loud and pompous our lip-service? Such intellectual hypocrisy, precian formulism and feigned conformity to a strained doctrine knows little religious truth, for it is vain, a vicious and demoralizing practice ranking alongside the proverbial quackery of doctors, graft by corrupt politicians and chicanery by shyster lawyers. Casuists are invariably set on realizing the common vulgarian passion for ambiguous readings, both a literal and an hermeneutic interpretation somewhere behind whose conflicting meanings they can work their own mischiefs on the world. They are never concerned to understand how discerningly that famous jurist-philosopher Thomasius showed that true pietism consisted in turning from external rituals and institutional authority to the inner soul-life and moral integrity of individual religious experience; that it is the spiritual devotion to truth and innocense, beauty, wisdom, courage and benevolence, rather than a mere cupidity or forced conformity to some theological prescription, which makes up the religious life, be it Christian, Moslem, Confucian, Buddhist or Tartar in ritual distinction. Neither rubric dogmatism nor ritual empiricism can dissuade true piety from its faith.