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Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and
the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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THE MESSAGE OF BJÖRNSON

By GEORGE BURMAN FOSTER

BJØRNSTJERNE BJÖRNSON was born in a parsonage, the
son of a clergyman. The date of his birth was 1832. His childhood home was in the highlands of northwest Norway, and he was educated in the University of Christiania.

At first, his interest was in science, but later he turned to literature. The men who influenced his life most profoundly were Darwin, Mill, Taine, and Herbert Spencer; the woman was Ellen Key. They were alike republicans in politics; freethinkers in religion.

Yet it would be more in line with my purpose to place Björnson alongside of Ibsen. Ibsen was only four years the senior of Björnson. Their friendship began early and, in spite of the breach which came later, the development of their inner life was the same, pari passu, on the whole.

Like Ibsen’s, Björnson’s life falls into two periods: his northern youth and his European manhood. The problem of a new era and a new science overtook both of them at about the same time—1870; later in Björnson’s case than in Ibsen’s perhaps. Yet the inner work was finished more quickly in the case of Björnson than in that of Ibsen, so that by 1875 he had published the first of his vision and thought in two dramas—A Bankruptcy, and The Editor.

Yet despite all this similarity in the outer and inner life of the two men—these two competitors for first place in the hearts of their countrymen—how different they were! We see Ibsen, the solitary deliver into the subterranean recesses of life; the ceaseless doubter whose doubts deepened as life went on; later, we see him the resolute individualist, always striving to mount above himself but seeing nothing to mount on; with a bitter laugh upon his lips, more and more—laughing at God, at man, at his own works, his skeptical

1 Edited by J. V. Nash, late Head of Department of Comparative Religion, the University of Chicago, from unpublished manuscript notes left by Doctor Foster at his death.
pessimism growing deeper and darker to the end. We find Björnson, however, a glowing wholesome man, full of faith; irradiating light and warmth, awakening love.

Such a man as Björnson may seem to us less profound than those gloomy men who are always peering into the night side and the seamy side of life, as was Ibsen! And, indeed, they are less at home in all the nooks and corners of human doubt and human misery.

Perhaps one must be decadent in order to be able to reach the ultimate depths in psychology; perhaps consummate finesse in unraveling human feelings is given to men with pale, thin, transparent hands. Saint Augustine and Sointless Friedrich Nietzsche, the greatest psychologists, were such men.

Still the healthy are not, on that account, less profound—the rectangular men whom Plato loved, because they saw truth without being consumed. One does not get the impression that Björnson shunned the problems of life because he was too healthy and normal. Another factor to be considered is that Björnson was the child of a pastor's home, and he never forgot the strength and healthiness and fullness that so often come from the privation of these homes. His pastors are not the caricatures that Ibsen sketched. Björnson knew them better than Ibsen did. Björnson never wholly condemned ecclesiastical Christianity, but only excrescences, using as criterion what Ibsen used—truthfulness and personal freedom.

With Ibsen, he stood for individualism, but he also stood for the two-fold content of Christian morality—love of man and faith in man. A reform of ecclesiastical Christianity, in the sense of inwardness, freedom, and truthfulness, found a champion in Björnson and a program in his works.

Yet Björnson knew pietism better than Ibsen did. Ibsen could only delineate in Einar that smooth self-deceiver, while Björnson has delineated in Ole Tuft (auf Gottes Wegen) a quite different nature, profound and truthful, showing its conflict, its losses in life, until Tuft penetrated to the new knowledge: "Life is supreme. After this day I will not seek God or God's will in a formula, in a sacrament, or in a book of any kind, or in a place, as if He were there especially: No, I will seek God in life—in life which is rescued from the depths of the anxiety of death, in the triumph of light, in the bliss of resignation, in the fellowship of life. God's best word to us is life; and the love of life is the supreme worship of God.

"Never—again—shall—words become the supreme things to me—just as little shall science. Never again will I evaluate men as to dogmas which arose from the feeling of righteousness of a vanished
age, unless that dogma satisfies the standard of love of my own age. Never, by God! And never, because I believe in Him, the God of life, in His incessant revelations in life.

And this Pietist, Ole Tuft, became a reformer of church doctrine that rose from the righteous feeling of ancient times. What is the consistency of our faith that war and oppression shall end, while we teach the doctrine of hell, with all its cruel revenge and barbarity, in all schools and churches, as God's righteousness and love?

This criticism of traditional Christianity by Björnson is of great importance. Ritschlian theology in Germany joined this criticism of dogma and church, but from the point of view of Weltanschauung and history. The criticism of ancient institutions must be made from the point of view of morality and of the spirit of Christianity. The moral peril of the old dogma and the old church must be summoned before the judgment seat of love and truth.

Perhaps Björnson is not too bold when he thinks that many a bishop could uncover his Christian heart and be surpassed by a Leonardo. In fact, Leonardo, in his great conversation with the bishop, represented Christianity as against Church, Jesus' love as against the "consideration" and "caution" of a clergyman. And it was a triumph of Christianity over Church when the bishop confessed that he had condemned too soon and too severely, that he had been a respecter of persons, that he had possessed too little love that could give him the courage to do right.

"And the congregation that I led but did not trust would have followed my example—for their hearts were good—if I had had the courage to go before in ways of love. But I was too poor in love to be able to do this."

All this is not weakly meant—it is strong and great, like the real love of a disciple of Jesus. This conversation between the bishop and his nephew ends wonderfully. After the penitence of the old man there comes the sacrifice of the new—for now and then love is given thus, that it may teach us to make sacrifices.

Few men have succeeded as this northern poet has in finding such words full of tenderness and strength, for the highest in the religion of Jesus, for faith even on the part of him who does not feel God's love, but will go through life without God.

How full of quietness and greatness does his novel close: "Where brave men go, there are God's ways." And how wonderful that other word, worthy of a place in the New Testament: "God's love is no prerogative of a believer. To feel His love, to rejoice in it, and in its name to make the impossible possible!"
Therefore, the traits of this Christianity are manliness and freedom; also kindness and tenderness and love and fineness. Therefore, the great northern poet is one of the most valuable forces for the reconstitution of the church, so that the church shall be redeemed from its hollowness, its insensibility, its narrowness—so that the church shall not encroach upon the tenderest possessions of the inner life, and man's faith, and man's conscience, with the means of the law, like the State; or of discipline, like a father; or of mere custom, like society. Through his positive contribution, which transcends mere criticism, Björnson offers the best that the individualistic movement at the close of the nineteenth century has given to Christianity.

Now, may all this be said of the double drama in which Björnson has spoken most powerfully to his times? Is "Ueber die Kraft" meant only as a refutation of a degenerate Christianity—or as a refutation of Christianity itself? And, no matter how the poet meant it, does it strike a blow at Christianity, or only at a malformation of Christianity?

It is not easy to decide this question, especially not if we ask it as to Björnson himself, because Björnson has sketched in Pastor Adolf Sang a figure so full of luminous strength and wealth, so full of tender and kind Christianity, that it must be immensely difficult to separate between his personal characteristics and his religion.

A wonderful word shows us how he knew the definitive love of a disciple of Jesus. He really did not need to assure us: "By God, I am no pietist; I do not speak here as a parson," because he was something different, something that brings springtime into a sick room, something beaming and glorious, something victorious, in whose presence all bow.

And yet, he was one who did not require, but did the impossible, because it welled up from his innermost being. No word of censure and scolding passed his lips. When he saw, as Ibsen's Brand saw, that Christianity was half-hearted and time-serving and weak, he did not punish and coerce others with wild exactions, but spoke a word to his own soul: "If only one man dared, then would not thousands immediately dare, too? And so it grew clear to me that I must try to be this one man. And I think that every one ought to try. If he does not try, then he is no believer, for to believe is to have the conviction that nothing is impossible to faith—and then to show this faith."

The woman who shared his life, from an old nervous family of skeptics, bore witness, full of love and gratitude, that he had never

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*In the drama, Beyond Human Power, First Part, 1883.*
tried to persuade or force her to his faith. "That I must believe or be damned—that," said Sang, according to the woman, "that is God's affair. Our affair is to be true. Then we will believe, here or hereafter." The woman's sister asked her: "Yet he works for the spread of the faith?" "Yes," she answered, "in his way. Never, no never, with compulsion. He is against every kind of compulsion, do you hear? Against all, of any kind. Ah, there is none like him."

And this man's power of believing and loving was inexhaustible. He said to his wife, the only unbeliever he knew: "Everything passes before my mind that we have experienced together. Do you know, I believe I love you better because you do not share my faith? On this account you are incessantly in my thoughts. Your devotion to me springs entirely from your own will and nature, and has no other origin, and you maintain your own truth at my side—of that I am proud."

He even valued her faith higher than his own. To Sang, the virtues of unbelievers were not splendid vices, as Augustine called them. "We change," Sang said, "we give our faith, but you give your life. What confidence you must have in me. How I love you!" When his children came to him, confessing that they had lost their faith, this deepest pain of his life did not make him harsh or bitter—did not unsettle his faith. With full love and firm confidence, he said to his son: "You have always been honorable; if you have done it, you had to do it." This suffering was doubly heavy, because he would heal his wife with the help of the children. Yet his faith was brave: "Have I not doubted and waited for the help of others? Therefore, God took this help away from me. It has failed in the presence of the impossible. I see better what faith is now."

Adolf Sang is a transfigured Brand. We find nothing more of the Old Testament, nothing of zeal, hate, and censure in Sang, as there was in Brand. Björnson understands that true Christians are children of God, who are like their Father in heaven, causing His sun to shine on evil and good, and sending His rain on just and unjust alike.

Yet it is precisely this Pastor Adolf Sang who plunged himself and his family in misery, with his faith in the impossible, and with his requirement of an unconditional surrender for man. The sick wife, so long on a bed of pain, the wife that he loved so passionately, was a victim of his faith. It was an impressive, heart-stirring speech she made about Sang as he gave up his property—"It must be so; it is!" Again, as he risked his life in a tiny boat on a stormy sea, with one of the little children with him, she cried: "If I had not held out
against him, he would not be alive, nor the children, to say nothing of myself. And now for me the end has come.”

The sick wife saw him sacrifice happiness and the life of his family to his unconditional requirement, to his doctrine that all things are possible to faith. With a militant, maternal love, she cried out: “I do not know what the children will live on. And those bad, wicked men—I do not know when he will perish in the mist on the mountain or in the storm on the sea. There, there, I have it—I will cast myself across his path. I will do everything, absolutely everything that I can think to hinder him. Suppose he would do it now? I have not stood on my feet for many months. But I could—I could. I am firmly convinced; I could. Then I also would do miracles, for I love him and his children.”

To this superhuman requirement there belongs, according to Björnson, a superhuman foundation—miracle. Thus Sang understood. Therefore he sought miracle. Bratt expressed it: “Religion is no longer the sole ideal of man. If it is to be the highest, prove it. They can live and die for what they love—for fatherland, a conviction. And this is the highest that can be done within natural limits; and yet you will show them a higher—well, then, out above those limits! Show them miracle!”

The unconditional requirement which requires the sacrifice of all that is human is indissolubly connected with the supernatural. Adolf Sang wanted to lead the flat, stale, unprofitable Christianity of our day back again into the youth and power of its first days; and he wanted to do this through miracle. Then the woman put herself in the way of the sacrifice, because she was a doubter. Otherwise, she herself would have been able to make the sacrifice. And thus the tragedy of Christianity seemed to rise from this tragedy of miracle, for *ueber die Kraft* is the tragedy of miracle, and shows how miracle crushes him who has it, and his children to the third and fourth generation.

Two fearful truths there are which break in upon our hearts with annihilating power in the two dramas, after we have been led almost to faith in the impossible by means of a magnificent and compelling art. The upshot of it all is this: miracle remains eternally uncertain and crushes, through doubt, the man who stakes his whole upon the supernatural. That is the truth to which the first drama leads us—how we are forced under the ban of miracle.

At first we stand with the sister beside the bed of the suffering wife, and we hear her plaint and her husband’s jubilant confidence, brought from the mountains and the spring flowers, and fortified by
his children. Today the miracle upon his wife must succeed, in spite of her unbelief. We hear the cry of his heart, when his children communicate their doubt to him, and we see his courageous confidence in the providence of God. Nay, he grows ever more triumphant through the unbelief of others.

Then we experience the first miracle: the mountain falls upon the parsonage and upon the church in which the solitary supplicant listens to the call. Yet just as everything threatens to collapse, he turns from the church without harm. The invalid woman quietly sleeps without any inkling of the fearful danger. Do we experience a miracle, however? Was it an accident?

Then a second time we live through the problem. While hundreds of men on the outside of the church, in silent devotion, accompany the singing and praying of the believing man in the church, we enter the assembly of the pastors convened in Adolf Sang’s house. Here we find no Ibsen caricatures! Bjørnson pictures them as men, genuine men of our day, weary of their office, dull; or else skeptical and clever—people who have learned to go with the instincts and traditions of the masses, but also with science.

Here Bjørnson, with extraordinary art, exhibits all the standpoints of the common run of theologians and all the standpoints of ecclesiastical becoming. And all these rationalistic, fatigued men of our day are powerfully affected—as we are—by the magic of a fiery man, who has entered to see a miracle and to find peace in miracle finally. Bratt has left his pastoral office to seek a miracle; he has been in all the miracle places of Europe. Seven years as a clergyman has he promised the faithful a miracle, because it is written that all things are possible to faith and that believers have power to do even greater things than the Son of Man!

“Seven long years, as the needy days came (and they came often, and sleepless nights, too) have I wrestled in hot prayer: where is the miraculous power Thou hast promised the believer?” And it is not for himself alone; it is for a whole world, for an age that was sick, that he seeks certainty and peace.

If a miracle should occur among us—so great a miracle “that all who saw, believed”—? At first, millions would come storming in—all who live in need and yearning—the disillusioned, the oppressed, the suffering, all who demand justice—in tears, in jubilation; yes, even if they run the risk of dying on the path, they would rather die on the path hither than to live on any other way. All who seek truth on the earth would follow them; in front, those whose thirst

* His wife, who had hardly slept in months.
for truth is greatest; the deep, earnest seekers, lofty spirits. Their
glow would be most beautiful, their faith most important. It is not
the stress for truth, nor the capacity of faith that they lack, but
miracle—miraculously!

Now his words become more powerful, his heart is aflame with
enthusiasm and longing. All tremble and quiver, and a sagacious
bishop weeps, saying in a mild and trembling voice: "Ah, if it should
come and I an old man should behold it!"

Then it comes—before our eyes. The sick wife rises from her
bed. In her white robe she walks slowly through the room to the
path that leads to the church, meeting the shouts of the people, in
and out of the church, which announce the miracle. Adolf Sang
appears in the doorway, quick and manly. The evening sun lights
up his face. He reaches out his hands to his wife, who stands in
the middle of the room. She sinks in his arms, and with a last
effort whispers to him: "Thou shiniest, as thou camest, my beloved!"
Then she sinks down dead at his feet. He places his hand on her
heart—he bows bewildered over her. As a child, he looks from
earth up to heaven.

"But that was not the intention? or?—or?—" And he sinks
down dead beside the corpse of his wife. The miracle has broken his
heart? Was it a miracle? Is there miracle? Do all who saw it
believe? What did he mean by that "or"? Thus they all ask. And
there is no answer, except Bratt's: "I do not know. But he died
through it."

The second part of the drama* preaches with fearful power the
second truth, viz: men whose souls have been nourished with this
impossible, are forever off the track. We find Bratt again as a
Socialistic organizer of an enormous strike, by which, in exaggera-
tion of the power of laborers, he makes the miserable more miser-
able, notwithstanding the fact that his heart is full of love. He
ends in insanity. Elias Sang* dies as an anarchistic transgressor,
after he has sent a whole assembly of manufacturers to death. And
whence comes the fearful thing which destroys all that is human—in
which alone it has thought there is redemption? Whence comes it
that Elias Sang, who is kindness itself, flings dynamite about? For
"the greatest thing in goodness," says Björnson, "is that it is cre-
avtive." Kindness spreads itself, that joy in abundance may spring
up in the will of others. What if it kills, however?" Whence comes
this? In the last analysis, thus Rahel tells us, from education in the

* Beyond Human Power, Second Part, 1895.
* The son of Pastor Sang.
Christianity of the Fathers. "Elias has suffered with me all that a man can suffer from the inhumanity of miracle. And then he stumbles over the inhumanity of theories. His fancy was filled with what was greater than the greatest. It has soared up infinitely. Anyone could have known that the desire for the superman would lead into error."

If Björnson thought that he had attacked the essence of Christianity with these two unsettling truths, he was deceived. He has really made the defense of Christianity easy, since miracle, as proof of faith, is sub-Christian, and belongs to the primitive religions.

Moreover, prayer, as a compulsion of duty, does not belong to Christianity, but to the lowest forms of religion.

As against all this, Björnson was right, ten times right. This miracle religion is not Christianity, though it be otherwise as Christian as Adolf Sang held it to be. Jesus himself agreed with Björnson, since Jesus clearly and sharply taught that to build faith on miracle was to build it on sand. "They have Moses and the prophets," said Jesus. "If they believe not these, neither would they believe though one rose from the dead." And history proves what Björnson presented, what Jesus said.

Even suppose many juristically and medicinally authenticated miracles did occur, at Lourdes and Treves, did all who saw believe, therefore? No, only those who antecedently held to the divinity of the Virgin of Lourdes and the trustworthiness of man. They believed therefore, not because they saw miracle, but because antecedently they had confidence of a moral kind in man and in God. Most of us overlook this because we were brought up as children through the false miracle faith.

Bratt's mighty words of yearning echo in us all, because this yearning was implanted in our child souls as the highest thing, and because they awaken the terrible hours of doubt through which we have all passed on account of the miracle faith. When will our children be spared this terrible evil? It ought no longer to be possible in Christianity, since Jesus arraigns the miracle faith more sharply than Björnson has done. He reproached the thirsters for miracle as faithless to God—a wicked and adulterous generation.

Whoever requires miracle will not, just because of his distrust and selfishness, bow to the ideal and trust God, until he has been antecedently assured, in an external way, of his cause, of his reward, of the divine help. Yet God never gives a sign except the sign of the prophet Jonah, which is not, as Matt. xii. 40 misinterprets, the
resurrection of Jesus, but the preaching of repentance to the conscience, as the old text in Luke xi. 30 distinctly shows.

Jesus here peers more deeply into the soul than does our modern poet. He has exposed the final root of every "proof" in religion, viz: doubt of the ideal—unwillingness to commit ourselves entirely to the ideal when our conscience is reached and aroused—the unethical requirement of guarantees that our sacrifice of our selfishness and happiness shall not be without its reward. This is all as bad as it can well be.

In truth, the miracle faith springs from pessimistic religion of Nature peoples. Already the great polytheistic religions have mounted above miracle. Their gods are orderers of things, kings and lords who disclose themselves in regular processes. The sun gods, the gods of spring, sky, stars: these are spirits of order and rule over the whole world. And the Father of Jesus Christ has inwardly nothing more to do with miracle, since he sends his rain upon the just and the unjust alike.

Brutt sought miracle as proof for his wavering faith, as an aid against his doubt. Adolf Sang sought miracle as proof of the genuineness and strength of his faith. Neither is according to the mind of Jesus, who would not give a sign, but would arouse the conscience. Miracle came to Jesus; he did not seek it—he condemned it. Nor did Jesus view prayer as a divine coercion. This is only to expect miracle, if one but prays fervently enough.

Jesus said finely: "When ye pray, use not vain repetitions as the heathen do, for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be ye not, therefore, like unto them; for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him." No prayer is needed by that Father who clothes the lilies and feeds the ravens without any petition on their part. And Jesus' greatest word is directly against Adolf Sang, who would force God to do miracle—"not my will, but thine, be done."

Therefore, Björnson has not dealt the heart of Christianity a blow with his tragedies of the miracle faith, often as this faith is confounded with Christianity today. Nor do I think that Björnson meant to do so. He meant Rahel to be the proclaimer of true Christianity, in harmony with all that is human—Rahel, in whose mouth he put his own most beautiful and most profound words. Indeed, it was Rahel who, at the end of the second drama, found the genuine Christian attitude to suffering: suffering is a blessing and a task; it alone fully ripens man; it alone makes man certainly a blessing to others. She says: "Men live, each of them, in his cloud of smoke.
They do not see. We are educated to it. I blame nobody. But God, whom we shall all understand better with time—He must have a share in all that we suffer through the supernatural. The more, the oftener, the stronger we cry, the deeper is God felt. Nothing is ours until sorrow touches it; no ideal, until sorrow breathes upon it; no understanding, until sorrow has looked us in the eyes. Our mind is like a room full of visitors until sorrow enters, quietly or quickly. Then it is our own. Then we are at home.

"Elias, Elias, first now do I understand thee as thou deservest. From now on I leave thee not again—that not for which thou diest. Our suffering shall purify us; our tears shall shine like the stars and save thousands."

True and beautiful and human as Rahel’s Christianity is, it is not the whole of it. In Sang’s Christianity, Björnson sketched a false kind. He rejected in Sang certain traits which Christianity cannot give up without sacrificing itself. Christianity is not just humanity in the sense of a harmonious symphony of all requirements. Christianity has a requirement which is über die Kraft of most of us, and a faith in the impossible which it can not surrender.

Yet Björnson opposed both of these as unhuman and dangerous things. Björnson let Elias wonderfully divine the requirement: "I call only him a Christian who has learned from Jesus the mystery of perfection and does it." All else is wish-wash ethics and compromise Christianity, thinks Elias. He says: "In life as in doctrine, they bow before status quo—before what exists in their day and place, before institutions, before conventions. prepossessions, economic and all possible conditions. They adjust themselves to what is."

We, however, must mount up to the ideal that is above our power. An ideal must be above us, else it can not draw us up to itself. Man moves ever upward and onward in his ideal to the unknown goal of his future. Björnson is an impressive witness against Nietzsche, who thought that Christianity was an overcome standpoint, since its gaze was fixed no longer on the distant sea and the undulating dawn. Yet this ideal is ever über die Kraft. Christianity is not a rigid law that can be overcome by another law. It is unwitheringly and eternally living. It is the disposition of love, which grows and deepens, until we know not what we shall be.