

Liberty and Responsibility in Religion

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Religion as presented by Jesus to those followers of his 2,000 years ago was spoken of as a way of life. In history, in human life, in nature, Jesus saw the evidences of a spiritual power whose relation to life he compared to the relation of the loving parent to children. Would you know the nature of that spirit, you must follow the way of life that seeks its deepest meaning, its alluring possibilities, its enriching development. The seed of thought, the seed of effort, the seed of affection must be cast into the soil of human effort, devotion, and sorrow and pain, good and evil. Not all the seed will spring up and bear fruit, for life is an adventure. Some of the seed will fall where there is no soil, some where the soil is shallow, but some will fall where the soil is deep and rich, and here will come forth the harvest of life's sowing, not the harvest of things, not the harvest of dollars, not the harvest [of] power and dominion, but the harvest of understanding, the harvest [of] rich and abiding values. The figure is suggestive. The life whose roots are firmly fixed in the soil of reality and history, that drinks from that soil, the moisture, the nourishment, and the vital humus of the decomposing past, whose roots reach out in every direction, searching, absorbing, and penetrating for every food that the past has to offer, is the life that is suggested. The strong sturdy stock, growing, expanding, laying up year-after-year the solid structure through which the unseen forces operate. Finally flowering, producing its fruit, and its seed, and sending forth the fruit and the seed to new creative effort. While the stock, with all its material, becomes in its turn, the soil, and the moisture, and the humus of new

¹ This manuscript can be dated by clearly being written during World War I, for example the phrase, "the crumbling din of war and conflict," and by its inclusion in a bound collection of manuscripts that include manuscripts that are clearly from 1918—e.g., "Five Months at Camp Devens."

growth. That is the suggestion, life growth, labor, getting, reaching out, absorbing—yes, but for the purpose that, in the end, it may transmit, fruit, seed, heritage and production, some thirty, some sixty, and some a hundred fold.

If you read behind the words of the New Testament, into the human values and hopes that were operating there, you will feel the undercurrent of aspiration, of longing, of dynamic possibility that runs through it all. Through the minds of those followers of Jesus was pulsating that same great passion for life, and life's fullest expression and realization, that has been the golden stream of power through human history. The scientist of fifty years ago spoke of it as the instinct of getting and begetting, and thereby, in the minds of many, robbed it of its romance and its significance. But deeper still it runs, it is the passion of living and transmitting, not alone the body, but the soul of man from generation to generation, laden with its rich accumulations, and its still richer promises. How it must [have] changed the outlook upon the lives of those fishermen, those publicans, harlots and sinners, as that strange young carpenter flung back into their faces as truth, the very hope that they had sometimes dared to dream of. Into the dead monotony of the ingathering and bartering of fish he had hurled the faith that life has a deeper meaning than just eating and trading. Into the dread monotony of the publican's money changing, he cast the hope of a life that sows, gathers and transmits. In the tragic sordidness of the harlot's trade he thrust the ray of light and warmth that might bring forth the beauty of a true affection from the ashes of a burnt-out passion. No greater witness to the strength of that virile soul of Jesus of Nazareth may be found than that after nearly two thousand years of superstitious worship we may still find the outlines of his rugged, buoyant life in the half-mythical records of the Gospels. Back of the myths, back of the tales of wonder, you feel the pulse of his abundant life, strong, passionate, full, that touched the soul of his time, that sent men away from the shores of their eating, their drinking, their money changing, their sordidness and passion, out into [the] depths of human life, which reaches down into the deep under-currents of eternal values. As with Jesus, so also in every age and time, where men and

women put away from the shores of their selfish satisfactions, and strike out into the deeper waters, do we get that same thrill of life, that same great stirring [of] hope, that same great passion for the sowing of the seeds of ideas, for the deeper and more intimate relations of fellowship and common aims in the great purposes of life, and life's great adventures. Veins of glory run through, and transpires the whole fabric of the world.

The stories of the Gospel, in spite of myth and accretion, still tell this tale of abundant life, of a way of life, that plants, and toils, and nourishes, produces and transmits, the way of life whose roots are grounded in the reality of heritage, and life, and whose hopes burst forth from the outstretching branches of its faith into flower and fruit.

But as you turn the pages of the Book of Acts, you are chilled by the tragedy of the first chapter, which opens with its graphic picture of the men standing looking up into the heavens, whither they thought had gone the promise of their hope and their glory. When he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, which also said, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into the heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go in like manner."² So, they returned to Jerusalem, the tale goes on to say. The rest of the New Testament, apart from certain passages of real human worth, is based upon the hope of that return. The Gospel of a Way of Life, that stirred the souls of men, that awoke the hopes of abundant living, of sowing and toil, and reaping, has been forgotten. The last chapter of the Book of Revelations closes with this same promise with which the first chapter of Acts opens. All the intervening pages are devoted to a propaganda, and an explanation of the significance of this coming, and an effort to get people to join the Christian movement under the promise that they might receive the benefits of this New Heaven and New Earth that was coming down out of Heaven ready-made,

² Acts 1:11.

adorned as a bride for her husband. Today, after two thousand years of watching and waiting, there are still men who cling to that conception of a Kingdom of Heaven, to that conception of God and that conception of life. But what a tragic contrast to the Gospel of abundant living, of sowing, or laboring, of creating, of transmitting that the adventurous soul of Jesus stirred the poor folk of Palestine with but a few years before.

Now I have not gone into all this ancient history, interesting as it may be, just because it is history, just because the shadow of that tragic hope of a returning Christ on clouds of glory still darkens our modern life. Those outward forms are but expressions of inner attitudes towards life, that have their counterpart in every age and clime, modified and adjusted to the circumstances, but apart from difference of dress, they are essentially the same. They were yesterday, they are today, and they will be tomorrow, doubtless. At times all of us are subject to that delusion, yet let us make no mistake in asserting that it is a delusion. That there is a power outside of us, whose existence may be symbolized by the phrase, "God in Heaven," is true, but that power does not bring flowers and fruit down out of heaven and tie them onto dead trees. It may reach down into life, and draw flower and fruit out of the soil of reality, just as the warming rays of the sun draws the spring tulip from the bulb in the soil. Human achievements, human values, vital with beauty and promise, are not brought down out of heaven and wired onto dead persons or dead institutions. They grow up out of the soil of human life, pulsating with all the hopes, passions, limitations and powers of [the] human soul. It is the response of deep calling unto deep, the warmth, the power of the universe, the Will of God calling unto the will of man, rousing it to action, and life. Let us make no mistake about this. While we may stand gazing into the Heavens, hoping for some comfortable cherished longed for heaven to be handed down to us, yet we know it does not come, never has come and never will come.

One great and hopeful change has been slowly and irresistibly taking place during the past century. It is still hesitating, it is still blurred and confused by obscurantism, and sickly sentimentality, but still it is

becoming more-and-more real, more-and-more soundly rooted in reality. That is the change in point of view that is illustrated by the use of the phrase, "Kingdom of Heaven" or "Kingdom of God," as a phrase applicable to this very real and tangible life. In substance, it means that if there is to be a just and righteous living anywhere in the range of life, it must be here on this earth. That, out of the injustice, out of the chaos, out of the selfishness and sordidness, with which that idea of the total depravity of man has besmirched our life, there comes the gleam of hope in the conception of the integrity, the dignity, not to say the divinity, of the human soul, and the sanctity and the responsibility of human life, is a gain by no means to be disregarded. In symbolic language it means that slowly and gradually we are turning our eyes away from the heavens in search of a new Heaven and a new earth to come down out of the sky, and are beginning to see that the seeds of immortal life lie everywhere about us, and that the only Heaven that is worth a prayer of [a] human soul is the heaven that expresses itself here in this world, and is rooted in this world's reality. Its limits we will not prescribe, but its foundations, its beginnings, must be here. That whole change, in spite of the obscurantism and mock piety with which it is tinged, is hopeful. Under its impulse, stirred by men in whom the passion for an abundant and rich life flowed as freely as in Jesus, the life of the whole modern world has been given a new impetus, and a new meaning.

But even here we have fallen into a fatal mistake, the significance of which we are only now beginning to realize. No greater service has been done to the thought of man concerning his relations one-to-another, than the thought produced during the last century, that sentiments and spiritual values, and ideals are not disembodied spooks, that hover about us, and are transmitted from one-to-another like a wireless message, a channel of expression. Not having discovered an automatic Heaven and an automatic Kingdom of God coming down out of Heaven to us, we have tried to discover a Heaven that works automatically coming up out of the earth, ready-made, or in-process at least, into whose Heaven we shall glide without effort or trouble. We have fallen onto all sorts of mechanical devices as substitutes for work, devotion, consecration, and thought.

If a former generation has been transfixed by [the] possibility of a ready-made Heaven coming down out of Heaven ready-made, the last generation has been transfixed by the hope of a ready-made Heaven springing up out of the earth of economic laws, unaided, unguided, unfed, and not paid for in effort and sacrifice. We have forgotten that economic laws are capable of adjustment to the needs of human life, just as other laws of nature are. Economic forces may be harnessed to well-being just as steam and electricity have been. Just because electricity ran wild for centuries before it was tamed and harnessed to the needs of life, is no reason why economic laws should continue to run wild for centuries longer. Social laws, social adjustments, social relationships, are as much subject to the domain and purpose of human life, as any other so-called natural law. They may not be defied, or ignored, but they may be used, directed and controlled in the interest of that which we deem paramount. Just now, under the pressure of circumstance, we are beginning to see how hollow is the attempt to shuffle off onto the scapegoat of economic laws, our terrible and tragic social sins of the past fifty years. Just now we are beginning to see that a higher moral law holds us accountable to the supreme task of making those economic laws conform in their operations to the well-being and purpose of man. Through the tragedy of the times, we are learning as men have never learned before, that just as no man liveth unto himself and no man dieth unto himself, so no nation liveth unto itself and no nation dieth unto itself. We are not leaving the destitute peoples, not the armed forces to depend upon the precariousness of the natural operation of the channels of commerce to adjust the balances of supply and demand. Human thought, human feelings stirred to some slight extent, are turning their efforts in the direction of a deliberate effort to direct the operations of these slow, lumbering life-and-death methods that have brought us to this tragic situation. Think you that we shall again permit idle factories, idle land, and starving people to exist side-by-side in this world again. If we do, we have lost this deeper meaning of the present world struggle, and again have started our silly gazing either into the heavens or into the hopeless earth for a ready-made Utopia.

We have dreamed a dream of democracy. The first fresh years of its vigorous life pulsated with life, activity and effort, and then slipped back into the heaven-ward gazing attitude and thought that democracy might come slipping in on the flood tide of the ballot. We have dreamed a dream of industrial democracy. Only this week a man stopped me on the street to ask if I thought the soldiers, as they returned from war, would vote right. What can one say to that star-gazing attitude? Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die, is a logical sort of formula even it is sordid, but eat, drink and be merry, and tomorrow will come the realization of our lazy dreams is a hopeless proposition. Either we must slip back into the clutch of those who do work, labor and control the destinies of men, forgetting forever the dream of liberty, a fellowship or democracy, or we must take up the last full measure of responsibility, and, in effort and devotion to principles, work our way through to an effective realization of the values to which we have pinned our faith.

What I have said has been but an illustration of a principle that I wish to apply to our immediate concerns of religious values in our times. There are certain qualities of the human soul that have to be fed. There is one way of feeding them that has given satisfaction to many. It is the symbolic and sacramental conception of religion. It localizes God, either in some graven image, or some great person such as Jesus, and showers upon that localized expression or symbol its adoration, its sentimental feelings of awe, fear, and love. In return, that localized God, through its agents, the priests, hands out moral precepts, pious exhortations, and intellectually prepared food for the worshipper. It provides a spiritual table where the hungry soul of man may come and eat, drink and be merry within its spiritual life without special thought or care. It is the easiest way of [meeting] the spiritual demands of life.

But in a moment of adventure, or in a moment of stress, when there is real need, and the soul has become anemic, those things cease to satisfy. Such has taken place in this modern world. A lofty and relentless century has cast loose idles low, and turned us out into the world to find the living food for our souls that these dead gods once

supplied. Let me quote a graphic poetic description of this change.

The din of crashing worlds is in the air.
Stars burst on stars, the hungry earth gapes wide,
Men die, things die, the monarch in his pride,
The slave at toil, the eager priest at prayer,
The poet crying challenge to the wind,
Challenge to chaos from undaunted lips—
They die, creeds die, dogmas and all that stood
Rock-strong through time, before a greater Flood,
A shock, a silence, and a dark eclipse,
Sink, and alone upon an unmarked strand
With burning eyes that dare not look behind,
The noble few survivors stand
To win with torch and spear an unknown mightier
land.³

There stands the picture before you, the crumbling cathedral of Louvain,⁴ with its ancient symbolism, its ancient cherished thought, and its ancient ministry to human life, is but the realistic expression of the crumbling of the symbols, the creeds, the values that in these years are breaking around us. Deeper far than we realize, more searching by far than we yet dream, is the onslaught of the war upon life. Into its maelstrom of destruction are being dragged all. In its burning fire, the God of the Christian Church is being destroyed, with its little sacrificial scheme of salvation; with its unreal Christ as the symbol of human devotion, and human fellowship; and its petty narrow atonement as a substitute of that great vicarious principle that no man liveth unto himself and no man dieth unto himself; with its cult of the

³ Hermann Hagedorn, *A Troop of the Guard and Other Poems*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909, "The Mightier Poesy," p. 19. Hermann Hagedorn (1882-1964) was an American author, poet and biographer. From 1909 to 1911 he was an instructor of English at Harvard. He was a friend and biographer of Theodore Roosevelt and Secretary and Director of the Theodore Roosevelt Association from 1919 until 1957.

⁴ St. Peter's Church, Leuven—or, the Cathedral at Louvain—was first built around the year 985, burned down and rebuilt as a major Gothic edifice in 1425. It was seriously damaged in both World Wars, but notable in this context, in 1914 a fire caused the collapse of the roof.

virgin Mary as symbol of life-giving, and the maudlin substitute for that cult in the so-called mothers' Sunday in Protestant circles. With its sacrament of the eucharist, as a symbol of communion and common interests; and all the rest of the whole artificial thing, once loved by all, and still loved by many, as the channels through which their inner sacred values were fed.

Today nothing is more apparent than the boycott of that very institution. At home, in the trenches, everywhere, comes the same tale. For the time being, the churches have pushed it all aside, and in its place have put a temporary substitute of Patriotism. But nations, however precious, however great and noble, are passing expressions of the eternal values with [which] the religious life of man deals. Here men stand today with burning eyes, that dare not, or will not look back, and in the midst of the crumbling din of war and conflict.

Yet what profit to us, if we have left Christ the idol behind, and have not in our searchings found the living embodiment of that Christ in the living life of today? What profits us if we have left behind the idol of the Virgin Mary, and have found only a sensual passion in the world about us; what profits us if we have left behind the symbol of communion and fellowship, only to find a barren gold-grabbing world about, with its loathsome factories, its unholy marts, and its deadly poverty, and its gruesome destitution? What profits us, if we have left behind the creed of authority, and have substituted in its place the ravings of the daily press, the gossip of the shop, the prattle of the drawing room and parlor? What profits us if we have left behind the symbolism of spiritual purity of soul unless we are baptized in the spirit of the holy life that is about us? At least these symbols gave men a relief from the reality which they saw, but did not understand.

Into this liberty of life, the lofty and relentless nineteenth century has plunged us. What is before us, you ask? What values are there to which men may cling? What does religion mean in these times? What have we to do with religion for ourselves, and for our children? Are we to leave them simply the ruins of a Louvain Cathedral, or are we to lay the foundations upon which, in the years to come,

may be built the cathedral yet more beautiful than the one destroyed?

First it means that we turn away from the museums of religious antiquity as a source of life. There is a great figure of speech that Jesus uses. Put out into the deep and cast down your net.⁵ Here on the shore where the shallow waters of life flow past, there is not much to be found. Out where human life runs deep and strong may its depths be reached. In place of Christ the symbol of God, plunge out into the thick turmoil of life, and find a living soul expressing itself in millions of souls. Measure the world, its length, and its depth. The more I see of it, the more I feel its deep under-currents of hope, devotion, the more do I see a faith that is strength and a love that is God. Breaking through the crust and debris of the shattered fragments of a dying civilization, I see the strong fearless souls, now here, now there, facing their own particular facts as they see [them] with a spirit that defies the past and plunges on in a dauntless faith. On the battlefield, in the prison cell of the pacifist, in the quiet and less dramatic corners of life, that same spirit of purpose, of power, is operating. The same as of old you may say, and yet new, different. It stakes its all, not on a sanction that is past, but on a sanction that is yet to be achieved.

This is the task before us. The field lies fallow for a harvest. It will be a harvest of weeds and passion, greed and tares, unless we shoulder the responsibility with which the possibility of liberty ladens us. God in Heaven; God in history; God incarnate in the world; God in yourself, God in the meanest miserable wretch of all, be sacrificed, crucified by us, just because we have been gazing into the heavens for a return of a dream of good, that never returns. Either backward to a cheap rag of a ritualism, or forward to a living incarnation of God in the soul of man, and in man's relationships one-to-another. Seed planting, labor, toil, effort, dogged persistence, and achievement, or back into a slavery still more devoid of life, than the slavery of today.

⁵ Luke 5:4.

The creed, the symbol of thought, ready-made and handed-out. Do you think that those creeds were written in the study of a pious, dehumanized parson, and printed at so much per thousand. Ye Gods, the creeds of history were written in the battlefields, in the deserts, in the anguish of men's souls, and they expressed a living conviction and an eternal faith. They had teeth to them, virility; they expressed thought. But today we have given up those old forms, or are substituting a washed-out sickly caricature for them. But what we want is not a substitute for the creed; the equivalent for the thought that produced the creed. Liberal religion means not merely the negation of past thoughts, not merely the assertion of personal whims and passing opinions. These are neither creeds, nor substitutes, nor equivalents. What we need, and what we must have, is straight, solid, unbiased thinking, corrected, supplemented and balanced by the wisdom of the ages, and the wisdom of the present.