

The Dark Side of Religion

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(1880-1947)

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The *advocatus diaboli*, as you know, is not a lawyer employed by the Prince of Darkness. He is a faithful member of the Church whose duty it is, when it is proposed to canonize a saint, to search out all the opposing considerations and to state them as cogently as possible. This wise institution compels the advocates of canonization to exert themselves to develop arguments vigorous enough to overcome all objections. In this symposium on religion, I am asked to serve as *advocatus diaboli*: to state the Dark Side so that those who follow may have definite positions to attack and may thus more fully develop the strength of their case.

While there have not been wanting atheists and other free thinkers who have attacked religion root and branch, these assailants have often shared the indiscriminate or fanatical intensity which has characterized so many upholders of religion. It has therefore been possible to pass over the argument of men like Voltaire, Bradlaugh, or Ingersoll, as inaccurate, superficial, and too one-sided. The truth, however, is that religion is something about which men generally are passionate; and it is as difficult to be patient with those who paint its defects as it is to listen attentively to those who point out our most intimate failings or the shortcoming of those we love most dearly, of our family or of our country. Indeed, to most people religion is just a matter of loyalty to the accepted ways hallowed by our ancestors; and to discuss it at all critically is just bad taste, very much as if a funeral orator were to treat us to a psychoanalysis of our lamented friend.

A curious illustration of the confusion resulting from the absence of a critical discriminating attitude in the discussion of religion is the fact that the heterodox opponent of the established religion has often much more

real faith than most of its followers. Thus Theodore Roosevelt was probably representative of Christian America when he referred to Tom Paine as a "filthy little atheist." Yet a comparison of their respective writings can leave little doubt that Paine had far more faith than his contemner in a personal God, in the immortality of the soul, and in moral compensation hereafter. But Theodore Roosevelt never said a word against established religion or the church and so remained respectable -- though his conception of religion as identical with such good works as the taking of Panama and the building of the Canal¹ literally ignores the whole spiritual essence of the historic Christianity which our churches profess. The common identification of religion with the unquestioning acceptance of traditional conventions or good manners is shown in the popular distrust of anyone who thinks about religion seriously enough to change his religious affiliations or to depart from the religion of his fathers. Even lower in general esteem are those who think out a religion for themselves. Thus the Russians say: "The Tatars received their religion [Mohammedanism] from God like the color of their skins; but the Molokans are Russians who have invented their faith."²

The general disinclination to conscientious or scrupulously logical examination of religious beliefs is shown by the way even educated people judge religious doctrine by their labels rather than by their content. Thus we talk about Spinoza as a God-intoxicated man because he used the *word* "God" and the language of traditional piety. But those who repeat his opposition to that anthropomorphic theism which is the essence of all popular religion, and who do not write nature with a capital N, are just atheists. Indeed a writer who has made a considerable impression on our contemporary public by his books on religion identifies the latter with a belief in *Something*. What should we have thought of his doctrine if we merely heard it, or if we had only one case of type?

One of the effective ways of avoiding any real discussion of religion or discriminating its darker from its brighter side is to define or identify it as "our highest aspiration." This is very much like defining a spouse as the essence of perfection or our country as the home of the brave and the free. Some particular religion, like some particular wife or country, may perhaps deserve the praise. But we must first be able to identify our object before we can tell whether the praise is entirely deserved. To define religion as our highest aspiration, and then to speak of Christianity, Islam, or Judaism as a religion, is obviously to beg the whole question by a verbal trick of definition.

In the interests of intellectual honesty we must also reject the identification of religion with the mere sentiment of benevolence or with altruistic conduct.

This is the favorite vice of our modernists and of scientific leaders like Millikan who try to harmonize religion with science in general (not with their own special field). We may dismiss these harmonizers as plainly ignorant of the history of religion. For to identify all religion with vague altruism³ rules out not only all the historic tribal and national religions, Hinduism, and most of the Old Testament, but also Christianity of the Orthodox, Catholic, and Fundamentalist-Protestant type. All post-Hellenic cults have insisted on sacraments like baptism and on the acceptance of dogmas about the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Fall of Man, the Atonement, eternal Hell, etc. Worse than that! This "liberal" or nondogmatic view is logically bound to apply the term "religious" to philanthropic atheists and Communists who, in the interests of humanity and to stop the exploitation of the masses by the clergy, are the avowed enemies of all religion. And indeed there are many who do speak of Communism as a religion. But this surely is to cause hopeless confusion. There is no real liberalism in ignoring the historical meaning of words; and no one who knows anything of the historical and general use of the word "religion" can well use it to include atheists like Shelley or Lenin and exclude men like Torquemada, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. Such "liberalism" does not really strengthen the case for religion. Consider the vast varieties of religions ancient and modern. Are they all expressions of our highest aspirations? Is each one an effort at universal benevolence? If so, why do they differ? And since they do differ, and each regards the others as inferior, can they all be true? Nor is the case improved if we say that each religious group seeks what is highest or noblest, for there can be no question that error, ignorance, stupidity, and fanatical prejudice enter into what men think.

Instead, then, of darkening counsel by beginning with arbitrary and confusing definitions of religion, let us recognize that the term "religion" is generally used and understood to apply to Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, etc., and that these represent certain forms of organized life in which beliefs about God and a supernatural realm enter more or less articulately. Religion is first of all something that makes people do something when children are born, when they become mature, when they marry, and when they die. It makes people go to church, sacrifice, fast, feast, or pray. A religion that does not get so organized or embodied in life is a mere ghost, the creature of a cultivated imagination. Generally speaking, people get these habits by social heredity, according to the

community in which they are born. The beliefs thus involved are more or less tacitly assumed. But such tacit beliefs do become at times explicit, and when this happens men cling to the verbal formula with the most amazing intensity and tenacity. Men are willing to burn others and to be burned themselves on the question whether they should cross themselves with one finger or two, or whether God is one person of various aspects or natures, or three persons of one substance.

Now if we thus view religion as an historic phenomenon in human life, we are prepared to believe -- from what we know of human nature and history -- that religion like all other social institutions has its darker as well as its brighter side.

I. RELIGION STRENGTHENS SUPERSTITION AND HINDERS SCIENCE OR THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH-SEEKING

Since the days of the Greek philosopher Xenophanes, theistic religion has been accused of foolish anthropomorphism. And since Epicurus and Lucretius it has been identified by many thinkers with superstition. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers like Voltaire, Gibbon, and Condorcet, Lecky, Draper, and A. D. White have so traced the history of the conflict between scientific enlightenment and religious obscurantism as to make this point a commonplace. But the attempt has been made to make it appear that this conflict is not between religion and science, but between the latter and theology. This seems to me a cheap and worthless evasion. In the first place, none of the religions that are in the field today ever have dispensed or can dispense with all theology. What would be left today of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam without a belief in a personal God to whom we can pray? In the second place, we do not understand the roots of religion if we do not see that the historic opposition to science has not been a vagary of wicked theologians but has risen out of the very spirit which has animated most, if not all, of the religions which have appeared in history. We must start with the fact that with rare exceptions men cling to the religion in which they are born and to which they have been habituated from childhood. We inherit our traditional ritual with its implicit faith and emotional content almost with our mother's milk; and we naturally cling to it as passionately as we do to all things which have thus become part of our being, our family, our country, or our language. When religious opinion becomes formulated, it naturally expresses itself in absolute claims. Doubts are the fruit of reflection. To one brought up in a Mohammedan village, it would sound blasphemous to say that there probably is a God, Allah, and that he is

probably more benevolent than malevolent; and that Mohammed has a fairly good claim to be the most reliable of prophets. Similar considerations hold in the case of every other simple religious person. But science regards all established truths (other than the logical methods of proof and verification) as subject to possible doubt and correction. Consider the attitude of a simple man or woman to anyone who offers to prove that we come from an inferior stock, or that our country is inferior in merit to its traditional rivals. Who can doubt that the first and most patent reaction will be resentment rather than intellectual curiosity? And the same is bound to be our attitude as regards religion, so long as the latter integrates in simple piety all traditional and habitual loyalties to the sources of our being. Thus arises the fierce intolerance of religion as contrasted with the cultivated open-mindedness of science. To religion, agreement is a practical and emotional necessity, and doubt is a challenge and an offense. We cannot tolerate those who wish to interfere or break up the hallowed customs of our group. Science, on the other hand, is a game in which opposing claims only add zest and opportunity. If the foundations of Euclidean geometry or Newtonian physics are suddenly questioned, some individual scientists may show their human limitations; but science as a whole has its field widened thereby, great enthusiasm is created for new investigations, and the innovators are objects of grateful general homage. Science does not need, therefore, to organize crusades to kill off heretics or unbelievers. Science, like art, enjoys its own activity and this enjoyment is not interfered with by anyone who obstinately refuses to join the game or scoffs at what the scientist has proved. The scientific banquet is not spoiled by our neighbors' refusing to enjoy it.

Thus it comes to pass that religion passionately clings to traditional beliefs which science may overthrow to satisfy its insatiable curiosity and its desire for logical consistency. The conflict between religion and science is thus a conflict between (on the one hand) loyalty to the old and (on the other) morally neutral curiosity about everything.

Let us glance at some actual forms of superstition that have been strengthened by religion.

(1) *Demoniac Possession*. Whatever be our theories as to the origin of religion, there can be no doubt about the antiquity and persistence of the belief in disembodied spirits, benevolent and malevolent; and all existing religions involve the belief in such supernatural beings, called gods, ghosts, spirits of ancestors, demons, angels, etc. Organized religion is largely based on and develops credulity in this domain. It insists on certain approved ways of conciliating these spirits or obtaining their

favor by some ritual of sacrifices, prayer, incantations, the wearing of amulets, or the like. Priests are experts in these rituals and their influence is certainly not to destroy the belief on which their occupation rests. Consider, for instance, the oracle at Delphi, based on the belief that the raving priestess was possessed by the God Apollo who spoke through her. Religious people like Plato or the Platonic Socrates believed this and held the oracle in great awe. Yet even contemporaries realized that the managing priests were manipulating the final answer under the guise of interpreting the raving utterances of the priestess. The sober Thucydides went out of his way to remark on the only occasion on which the oracle guessed right. Similar observations may be made about the raving prophets mentioned in the Book of Samuel. We find their analogue today in the dancing dervishes of Islam.

One form of this superstition of demoniac possession plays a prominent role in the New Testament. The power of Jesus and his disciples to cast out devils was obviously regarded by the writers of the Gospels as a chief pillar of the Christian claim. The New Testament, to be sure, did not originate this ancient theory of the nature of certain mental aberrations; but its authority has certainly hindered the effort to dispel this superstitious view of the cause of insanity and hysteria -- a view that resulted in a most horrible treatment of the sick.

(2) *Witchcraft*. The fear of witchcraft is a natural outcome of the belief in spirits and in the possibility of controlling or using them. If religion did not originate this superstition, it certainly did a good deal to strengthen it. Indeed, Protestant as well as Catholic Christianity at one time bitterly persecuted those who did not believe in the efficacy of witchcraft. For the writers of the Bible certainly believed that witches could recall even the prophets from the dead; and the Mosaic law specifically commanded that witches should be put to death.⁴

The effects of this Biblical command were quite horrible. Not only were thousands burned within a short time at Trèves, but the torture of those suspected (in order to make them confess) was perhaps even more frightful. The victims of mere suspicion had their bones broken, were deprived of all water, and suffered unmentionable cruelties. Perhaps even worse was the resulting general insecurity and the terrible feeling of fear and of distrust. Yet so clear was the Biblical injunction that enlightened men like More, Casaubon, and Cudworth denounced those who disbelieved in witchcraft. For to give up the belief in witchcraft is to give up the infallibility of the Bible.

(3) *Magic*. Closely related to witchcraft is magic. Recent writers like Frazer are inclined to draw a sharp distinction between magic and

religion. But though the Church hindered the progress of physics, chemistry, and medicine by persecuting magicians,⁵ the belief that the course of nature could be changed by invoking supernatural agencies or spirits is common to both religion and magic. The magician cures you by an incantation, pronouncing a strange formula; the priest or rabbi does it by a blessing; the saint does it posthumously to anyone who touches his relics. The magician brings rain by rubbing a stick, the priest by a prayer. If a formula or ritual invokes the accepted god and is performed by the authorized person, it is religion. If the god, the act, or the agent is not an authorized one, the first is referred to as a devil, the second as a sacrilege, and the third as a magician. The Church regarded the pagan deities as demons. Both religion and magic generally involve the influence of the supernatural -- though the magicians more frequently studied the physical or medicinal properties of the substances they used. The fetish-worshiper attaches magical potency to stones, but so does the Bible. Touching the Ark, even with the most worshipful intention, brings death.⁶ Christianity frowns on idol worshiping but it still attaches supernatural power to certain objects like the cross, relics of saints, etc. Holy water wards off devils. Miracles are a part of Christian faith and are offered as evidence of its truth. But the evidence in favor of the Virgin Birth, of the stopping of the sun and the moon at Ajalon, or of the Resurrection, etc., cannot support its own weight. A small part of mankind finds it adequate, and thus only because of the fear of being damned or anathematized for unbelief. It is inconceivable that an impartial court would convict anybody on such evidence. In fact, no event would be considered miraculous if the evidence in its favor were as cogent as that which makes us believe wonderful but natural occurrences.

Another religious belief that the progress of science has shown to be superstition -- i.e., to have no basis in rational evidence -- is that the rainbow, comets, and other meteorological phenomena are not natural events but special portents to warn mankind against sin.⁷

(4) *Opposition to Science*. It is not necessary for me to recount the fight of Christianity against the Copernican astronomy, against modern geology or biology, or against the scientific treatment of Biblical history. They have become commonplace, and I may merely refer to the works of Lecky, Draper, A. D. White, and Benn. The point to be noted is that the old adherents of religion did not want to know the truth, and that their religion did not encourage them to think it worth while to seek any truth other than their accepted particular faith. Religious truth is absolute and its possession makes everything else unimportant. Hence religion

never preaches the duty of critical thought, of searching or investigating supposed facts.

From this point of view it is interesting to read the testimony of Bishop Colenso as to what led him to write his book on the Pentateuch. When he tried to teach Biblical history to the South African natives, he was amazed at the obvious contradictions which these simple savages discovered in the various accounts of the patriarchs. Yet millions of astute and learned Christians had not noticed these discrepancies. Consider, for instance, the Biblical statement that the hare chews the cud. This can easily be tested. Does your orthodox Christian do that? This disinclination to question things also appears, of course, elsewhere; but nowhere so emphatically and persistently as in the field of religion. Believe in the Koran or be damned forever!

Not only does religion fail to regard critical intelligence and the search for natural truth as a virtue, but the ideal which it holds up frequently makes light of truth itself. Even when God lays down a moral law, He is Himself above the moral law. He sends a lying spirit to Ahab, and his Church for a long time did not think a promise to heretics binding. In the fourth century organized Christianity adopted the view that deceit and lying were virtues if in the interests of the Church (cf. Mosheim). The duty of truthfulness is much more exemplified in science than in religion.

In this respect "liberal" modernism seems intellectually much more corrupting than orthodox Fundamentalism. Confronted by natural absurdities -- such as the sun and the moon stopping in their course, or the hare chewing the cud -- the Fundamentalist can still say: "I believe in the word of the Spirit more than in the evidence offered by the eyes of my corruptible flesh." This recognizes a clear conflict; and the intellectual *hara-kiri* of the Fundamentalist is a desperate venture that can appeal only to those whose faith is already beyond human reason or evidence. But the modernist who gives up the infallibility of the Bible in matters of physics, and tries to keep it in matters of faith and morals, has to resort to intellectually more corrupting procedure. By "liberal" and unhistorical interpretation he tries -- contrary to the maxim of Jesus -- to pour new wine into old bottles and then pretend that the result is the ancient wine of moral wisdom.

In any case, religion makes us cling to certain beliefs, and often corrupts our sense of logical evidence by making us afraid to regard arguments in favor of religion as inconclusive or to view arguments against it as at all probative. The will to believe even contrary to demonstrative evidence, *credo quia absurdum*, is often lauded as a religious virtue.

It has often been claimed that the superstitions of religion are merely the current superstitions of the people who at the time profess that religion. If this were true, it should only prove that religion is powerless to stop superstition -- that it is intellectually parasitic and not creative. But the intimate connection between religion and supernaturalism, and the passionate attachment to the old ways which every religion intensifies, cannot but strengthen superstition and hinder the progress of science towards the attainment of new truth as to human affairs.. And this is altogether independent of the personal profit in power, prestige, or even revenue which leads many in and outside of the churches to exploit the credulity of the multitude.

II. RELIGION AS AN ANTI-MORAL FORCE

It is often claimed that religion is the protector of morals and that the breakdown of the former inevitably leads to breakdown of the latter. While there may be some correlation or coincidence between periods of moral change and periods of religious change, there is no evidence at all for the assumption that the abandonment of any established religion leads to an enduring decline in morality. There is more evidence to the contrary. Those who break away from religion are often among the most high-minded members of the community. The chaplains of our prisons do not complain of the prevalence of atheism or lack of religious affiliation among the criminals to whom they minister, while there certainly has been uncontested complaint that religious leaders, high priests, popes, and cardinals have led rapacious and most licentious lives. As faithful a son of the church as Dante puts popes in Hell, and it was in an age of general religious faith that Boccaccio put into the mouth of a Jew the *mot* that the Church of Rome must be of divine origin or it could not stand despite such government. But this is an ungracious task from which we may well turn.

Let us look at the matter more philosophically. What do we mean by morality? Generally we mean those rules of conduct that appeal to people as generally conducive to a decent human life. It follows therefore that, as the conditions of human life change, the content of wise moral rules must change accordingly. Religion, being passionate and absolute in its claim, formulates moral rules as inflexible taboos. It thus prevents needed change and causes tension and violent reaction. But science, studying the principles involved, can distinguish the permanent elements of human organization and safeguard them amidst necessary adjustments to new situations. It is secular social science and philosophy

rather than religion that have the wisdom to see the necessity of conserving human values in the very process of facilitating desirable changes.

The absolute character of religious morality has made it emphasize the sanctions of fear the terrifying consequences of disobedience. I do not wish to ignore the fact that the greatest religious teachers have laid more stress on the love of the good for its own sake. But in the latter respect they have not been different from such great philosophers as Democritus, Aristotle, or Spinoza, who regarded morality as its own reward, like the proper playing of a musical instrument. But the great body of established religions have emphasized extraneous punishment. In the religion of the Old Testament, as in that of almost all Oriental and classic Greek and Roman religions, the punishment meted out to the individual or people is entirely temporal, and the rewards of virtue are in the form of prosperity. When people realize that this is not true, that the wicked do prosper and that, contrary to the pious Psalmist, not only the righteous but their children are often in want of bread, they either put the whole thing in the realm of theological mystery (as in the Book of Job) or else resort to the pious fiction that the bad man is troubled by his conscience. But the latter is obviously not true. Only those who are trained by religion to cultivate their conscience are troubled that way. The bad man gloats over his evil if he succeeds, and is sorry only if he fails. For this reason, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have developed and stressed the doctrine of Hell, of eternal and most terrifying punishment. But it is doubtful whether the deterrent value of all these terrors is really large. Living in the presence of a constant terror does not eliminate carelessness. At best, fear secures only conformity. The development of enlightened inclination or disposition depends on educational wisdom and science. Some religions have talked much about love. But the predominant emphasis on the motive of fear for the enforcement of absolute commands has made religious morality develop the intensest cruelty that the human heart has known.

Religion has made a virtue of cruelty. Bloody sacrifices of human beings to appease the gods fill the pages of history. In ancient Mexico we have the wholesale sacrifice of prisoners of war as a form of the national cultus. In the ancient East we have the sacrifice of children to Moloch. Even the Greeks were not entirely free from this religious custom, as the story of the sacrifice of Iphigenia by her father testifies. Let us note that while the Old Testament prohibits the ancient Oriental sacrifice of the first-born, it does not deny its efficacy in the case of the King of Moab (II Kings 3:1) nor is there any revulsion at the readiness with which

Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. In India it was the religious duty of the widow to be burned on the funeral pyre of her late husband. And while Christianity formally condemned human sacrifice, it revived it in fact under the guise of burning heretics. I pass over the many thousands burned by order of the Inquisition, and the record of the hundreds of people burned by rulers like Queen Mary for not believing in the Pope or in transubstantiation. The Protestant Calvin burned the scholarly Servetus for holding that Jesus was "the son of the eternal God" rather than "the eternal son of God." And in our own Colonial America, heresy was a capital offense.⁸

Cruelty is a much more integral part of religion than most people nowadays realize. The Mosaic law commands the Israelites, whenever attacking a city, to kill all the males, and all females who have known men. The religious force of this is shown when Saul is cursed and his whole dynasty is destroyed for leaving one prisoner, King Agag, alive. Consider that tender psalm, "By the rivers of Babylon." After voicing the pathetic cry "How can we sing the songs of Jehovah in a foreign land?" it goes on to curse Edom, and ends "Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the rock." Has there been any religious movement to expurgate this from the religious service of Jews and Christians? Something of the spirit of this intense hatred for the enemies God (i.e., those not of our own religion) has invented and developed the terrors of Hell, and condemned almost all of mankind to suffer them eternally -- all, that is, except a few members of our own particular religion. Worst of all, it has regarded these torments as adding to the beatitude of its saints.⁹ The doctrine of a loving and all-merciful God professed by Christianity or Islam has not prevented either one from preaching and practicing the duty to hate and persecute those who do not believe. Nay, it has not prevented fierce wars between diverse sects of these religions, such as the wars between Shiites, Sunnites, and Wahabites, between Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and Protestants. The fierce spirit of war and hatred is not of course entirely due to religion. But religion has made a duty of hatred. It preached crusades against Mohammedans and forgave atrocious sins to encourage indiscriminate slaughter of Greek Orthodox as well as of Mohammedan populations. It also preached crusades against Albigenses, Waldenses, and Hussite Bohemians. And what is more heartrending than the bloody wars between the two branches of the Hussites over the question of the communion in two kinds? This war desolated and ruined Bohemia. The Inquisition is fortunately now a matter of the past. Let us not forget however, that the Church has not abandoned its right and duty to

exterminate heretics; and it will doubtless perform its duty when conditions permit it. Spanish and Portuguese saints have expressed deep religious ardor in burning heretics.¹⁰ Ingenuity in inventing means of torture was the outcome of religious zeal on the part of the pious clergy who belonged to the Office of the Holy Inquisition.

The essential cruelty of religious morality shows itself in the peculiar fervor with which Protestant Puritans hate to see anyone enjoy himself on Sunday. Our "Blue Sunday" legislation is directed against the most innocent kinds of enjoyment against open-air games like baseball, concerts, or theatrical plays. And while there may be some serious social considerations in favor of liquor prohibition there is little doubt that an element of sadism, a hatred of seeing others enjoying beer or wine, is one of the motives which actuate religious fanatics. For that is in the great historic tradition of the Protestant Church.

Cruel persecution and intolerance are not accidents but flow out of the very essence of religion, namely, its absolute claims. So long as each religion claims to have absolute revealed truth, all other religions are sinful errors. Despite the fact that some religions speak eloquently of universal brotherhood, they have always in fact divided mankind into sects, while science has united them into one community, which desires to profit by enlightenment. Even when a religion like Christianity or Islam sweeps over diverse peoples and temporarily unites them into one its passionate nature inevitably leads to the development of sects and heresies. There is no drearier chapter in the history of human misery than the unusually bloody internecine religious or sectarian wars which have drenched in blood so much of Europe, Northern Africa, and Western Asia.

Even in our own day, a common religion of Christian love does not prevent war between Christian nations. Rather do the churches encourage the warlike spirit and pray for victory. If the conduct among the various creeds of Christianity in our own country is not so bloody, it is not because the spirit of intolerance has disappeared. The Ku Klux Klan and the incidents of our presidential campaign in 1928 are sufficient indications to the contrary. The disappearance of religious persecution is rather due to the fact that those who would persecute do not any longer have adequate power. It is the growth of science, making possible free intercourse among different peoples which has led to that liberation which abolished the Inquisition and has made it possible for freethinkers to express their views without losing their civic and political rights.

The complacent assumption which identifies religion with higher morality ignores the historic fact that there is not a single loathsome human practice that has not at some time or other been regarded as a religious duty. I have already mentioned the breaking of promises to heretics. But assassination and thuggery (as the words themselves indicate), sacred prostitution (in Babylonia and India), diverse forms of self-torture, and the verminous uncleanness of saints like St. Thomas a Becket, have all been part of religion. The religious conception of morality has been a legalistic one. Moral rules are the commands of the gods. But the latter are sovereigns and not themselves subject to the rules which they lay down for others according to their own sweet wills. In all religions, the gods have been viewed as subject to flattery. They can be persuaded to change their minds by sacrifices and prayers. A god who responds to the prayers of the vast majority of people cannot be on a much higher moral plane than those who address him. And what would become of religion, to the majority, if prayers and sacrifices were cut out?

It is doubtless true that some of the noblest moral maxims have been expressed by religious teachers -- the Buddha, the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, and Mohammed. But in organized religion, these maxims have played but an ornamental part. How much of the profound disillusion and cultivated resignation of Prince Gautama is to be found in the daily practice of the Bhikkhus or beggar monks, or the common ritual of prayer-wheels and talismanic statuettes of the Buddha? This, however, is too long a theme. It would require an examination of the actual practices of the various religions which would exhaust many hours.

Let me, however, consider one point. It is often alleged that the later Hebrew prophets beginning with Amos were the first to introduce a strictly moral conception of God. "An honest God's the noblest work of man." Now it is true that men like Amos, Isaiah, and Micah did among other themes preach social righteousness, feeding the widow and orphan, rather than the national cultus of Sabbaths, holy days, and sacrifices. But will anyone dare to assert that the feeding of widows and orphans, and similar deeds of mercy, constitute the distinguishing essence of the Jewish religion? Surely others before and after the prophets believed and practiced such admirable commandments. Some of the philosophers even ventured to discuss and generalize them so that we might have some clew as to when a given act is just and merciful, and when it is not. Yet if a Greek or a Persian should "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" (the last defined, let us say, in Aristotelian or Spinozistic terms), would he be regarded as a Jew in religion? Surely not

so much as one who should be rather negligent in regard to justice and mercy, but should practice circumcision and observe the dietary laws, the laws of the Sabbath and of the Day of Atonement, etc. So also a Persian who in fact believed in the ethical commands of Jesus would not be considered a Christian in religion if he had not been baptized into any church, and did not subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity or the Virgin Birth. Admirable moral practices on the part of a Hindu or an Inca would not make either of them a Christian. One's religion is judged by the organized group or church of which he is a member. My revered teacher Josiah Royce has justly identified religion, and especially Christianity, with communal life.

In the struggle for social justice, what has been the actual influence of religion? Here the grandiose claims of religious apologists are sadly belied by historic facts. The frequent claim that Christianity abolished slavery has nothing but pious wishes to support it. Indeed, in our own country, the clergy of the South was vigorously eloquent in defense of slavery as a divine institution. Nor was it the Church that was responsible for the initiation of the factory legislation that mitigated the atrocious exploitation of human beings in mines and mills. It was not the Church that initiated the movement to organize workmen for mutual support and defense, or that originated the effort to abolish factual slavery when men were paid in orders on company stores -- a practice that has prevailed in some of our own states. The Church has generally been on the side of the powerful classes who have supported it -- royalists in France, landowners in England, the scientific or exploiting class in Mexico, etc. Here and there some religious leader or group has shown sympathy with the oppressed; but the Church as a whole has property interests which affiliate it with those in power.

III. RELIGION AND THE EMOTIONAL LIFE

Kant has regarded religion as concerned with the great question of *What We Can (ultimately) Hope For*. In so far as hopes are resolutions, they are irrefutable by logical arguments. For arguments can only appeal to accepted premises. But hopes may be illusory or ill-founded -- they may even attach to what is demonstrably impossible. Such, in the light of modern science, is the hope of the actual resurrection of the body. But what is more important is that many of the hopes that religion has held out to men e.g., the Mohammedan heaven -- are now seen as thoroughly unworthy and even sordid.

Does religion enrich the emotional life? It is customary to speak of religion as if it were always a consolation to the bereaved and a hope in times of trial and distress. Doubtless it often is so. Let us not forget, however, the great fact that religion is based on fear and promotes it. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of religious wisdom, and, while the Lord is sometimes merciful, he is also a God of Vengeance, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations. The fires of Hell or other forms of divine punishment are a source of real fear whenever and wherever religion has a powerful grip on people generally. Indeed, when the belief in the Devil or evil gods tends to wane, the belief in a personal god tends to evaporate.

The gods are jealous of human happiness. Schiller has portrayed this in *The Ring of Polycrates*, following the good authority of Herodotus and others. When Jehovah is angry at David, he sends a plague killing seventy thousand innocent Israelites. Indeed, throughout the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings, we have numerous instances of Jehovah's action being above the moral law. In the Book of Job the question is put directly: "Who is man that he dare pass judgment on God's ways?" God's ways are beyond us and nothing is secure for us.

It is the keen dread of the gods and their wanton interference in human affairs that has made men like Lucretius hail the Epicurean joy as a great emancipation from continual fear.

Many of the supposedly spiritual comforts of religion are meretricious. The great elation which people experience when they "get religion" is often a morally disintegrating force, as all forms of irrational or uncontrolled excitement are likely to be. We can see this effect in the religious orgies of Semitic times, euphemistically referred to as "rejoicing before the Lord." And we have ample records in America of the breakdown of morale as a result of the hysteria engendered by ignorant revivalist preachers, leading at times to sexual frenzies. Nor is this a new note in religion. Among the Mohammedans, where the sex element is rigorously removed from religious ritual, frenzies take the form of dervish dancing, which results in complete loss of self-control. Such organized hysteria is to be found in all religions.

No one can read religious literature without being struck by the abject terror that the notion of sin has aroused in human consciousness.

Religious sin is not something that mortal man can avoid. It is a terrible poison which infects the air we breathe and every fiber of our flesh and blood. For our very existence in the flesh is sinful. How can we avoid this body of death and corruption? This is the terrible cry which rings

through the ages in the penitential prayers of the Assyro-Babylonians, Buddhists, Hebrews, medieval monks, and Calvinistic preachers.

Quid sum miser tunc dicturus,
Quem patronum rogaturus,
Cum vix iustus sit securus?

Religion has encouraged men to dwell on the torments of Hell and to inflict on themselves diverse spiritual agonies (see *The Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius Loyola).

Religion breeds terrors of all sorts. Who, for instance, would worry about the appearance of Halley's Comet if pious readers of the Bible did not conclude that this was a warning from heaven and a portent of evil to come? Yet Europe suffered the most agonizing terror, the veriest paroxysm of fear, because of it. This fear strengthened ecclesiastical tyranny and hatred against unbelievers when the pope himself exorcised that distressing sign in the sky.

Consider the terrors which the religious belief in demons and their control of earthly affairs has aroused in the daily lives of simple-minded men and women. We think it cruel to frighten children by threats of the "bogy man"; yet religion has systematically frightened most of mankind through the doctrine of demons, who have the power to make us sin when we do not know it and to torture us at their evil pleasure. What greater terror can there be than the fear of having witchcraft or even a powerful prayer or curse directed against you by some unsuspected enemy? Perhaps the fear of not believing in miracles which seem to us impossible and thus being guilty of mortal heresy is not now widespread. But it is of the essence of religious thought even today that, unless you can get yourself to believe certain inherently improbable propositions, you must abandon all hope. And how can anyone be free from all doubts when opposed views are actively expressed by some of our most respected fellow men?

Consider also the tragedy of enforcing monastic celibacy on young people because their parents promised them to the Church. Or consider, on the other hand, the opposite harms to family life resulting from the Church's opposition to birth control, no matter how rationally indicated by hygiene and common decency. Whatever motivates the Church's opposition, the source of its strength on this point is the old religious taboo against touching the gates of life and death, which science daily disregards. This taboo shows itself in the prohibition of any form of euthanasia or suicide, no matter how hideous or tortured life becomes. Even supposedly liberal clergymen are ready with unfeeling arrogance to brand as a coward anyone unfortunate enough to find life unbearable.

But despite the depth of this religious fear of touching the gates of life and death, we do not or cannot carry it out consistently. We do control the birth rate and the death rate of any community by economic sanitary and political measures. By excluding the Chinese from our own country and confining them to their inadequate lands we force many of them into starvation. The Church does not condemn this way of controlling the birth or death rate. It does not even condemn the wholesale death-dealing and birth-prevention of war.

While religion has encouraged certain feasts and holidays, it has not been the active friend of that more steady enjoyment of life which comes from developing the industrial and the fine arts. The Old Testament and the Koran, with their prohibition against graven images, have repressed sculpture and representative painting; and the record of the Christian Church for the two thousand years of its existence hardly supports the contention that it has been the mother and patroness of the fine arts. The monasteries, to be sure, developed the art of illuminating manuscripts, and many magnificent structures were erected by bishops and popes like Leo X, who in their personal lives openly flouted the Christian religion. But when did religion or church do anything to nurse the arts and bring them into the homes of the great mass of people? Censorship rather than active encouragement has been the Church's attitude.

In regard to the terrors as well as the superstitions and immoralities of religion, it will not do to urge that they are due only to the imperfections of the men who professed the various religions. If religion cannot restrain evil, it cannot claim effective power for good. In fact, however, the evidence indicates that religion has been effective for evil. It might be urged that certain terrors have likewise been aroused by popular science -- e.g., the needless terrors of germs, the absurd and devastating popular theories of diet. etc. But the latter are readily corrigible. Indeed it is the essence of science to correct the errors which it may originate. Religion cannot so readily confess error, and the terrors with which it surrounds the notion of sin are felt with a fatality and an intensity from which science and art are free.

I have spoken of the dark side of religion and have thus implied that there is another side. But if this implication puts me out of the class of those who are unqualified opponents of all that has been called religion, I do not wish to suggest that I am merely an advocate, or that I have any doubts as to the justice of the arguments that I have advanced. Doubtless some of my arguments may turn out to be erroneous, but at present I hold them all in good faith. I believe that this dark side of religion is a reality, and it is my duty on this occasion to let those who follow me do

justice to the other side. But if what I have said has any merit, those who wish to state the bright side of religion must take account of and not ignore the realities which I have tried to indicate. This means that the defense of religion must be stated in a spirit of sober regard for truth, and not as a more or less complacent apology for beliefs which we are determined not to abandon. Anyone can, by assuming his faith to be the truth, argue from it more or less plausibly and entirely to his own satisfaction. But that is seldom illuminating or strengthening. The real case for religion must show compelling reasons why, despite the truths that I have sought to display, men who do not believe in religion should change their views. If this be so, we must reject such apologies for religion as Balfour's *Foundations of Belief*. One who accepts the Anglican Church may regard such a book as a sufficient defense. But in all essentials it is a subtle and urbane, but none the less complacent, begging of all the serious questions in the case. For similar reasons also I think we must reject the apology for religion advanced by my revered and beloved teacher William James.

Let us take up his famous essay on "The Will To Believe." Consider in the first place his argument that science (which is organized reason) is inapplicable in the realm of religion because to compare values or worths "we must consult not science but what Pascal calls our heart."¹ But if it were true that science and reason have no force in defense of religion, why argue at all? Why all these elaborate reasons in defense of religion? Is it not because the arguments of men like Voltaire and Huxley did have influence that men like De Maistre and James tried to answer them? Who, the latter ask, ever heard of anyone's changing his religion because of an argument? It is not necessary for me to give a list of instances from my own knowledge. Let us admit that few men confess themselves defeated or change their views in the course of any one argument. Does this prove that arguments have no effect? Do not arguments which at first they professed to find unconvincing? The fact is that men do argue about religion, and it is fatuous for those who argue on one side to try also to discredit all rational arguments. It seems more like childish weakness to kick against a game or its rules when you are losing in it. And it is to the great credit of the Catholic Church that it has categorically condemned fideism or the efforts to eliminate reason from religion. Skepticism against reason is not a real or enduring protection to religion. Its poison, like that of the Nessus shirt, finally destroys the faith that puts it on. Genuine faith in the truth is confident that it can prove itself to universal reason.

Let us look at the matter a little closer.

James argues that questions of belief are decided by our will. Now it is true that one can say: "I do not wish to argue. I want to continue in the belief that I have." But is not the one who says this already conscious of a certain weakness in his faith which might well be the beginning of its disintegration? The man who has a robust faith in his friend does not say, "I want to believe that he is honest," but "I know that he is honest, and any doubt about it is demonstrably false or unreasonable." To be willing to put your case and its evidence before the count of reason is to show real confidence in it.

But James argues that certain things are beloved not on the basis of rational or scientific weighing of evidence but on the compulsion of our passional nature. This is true. But reflection may ease the passional compulsion. And why not encourage such reflection?

The history of the last few generations has shown that many have lost their faith in Christianity because of reflection induced by Darwinism. Reflection on the inconsistencies of the Mosaic chronology and cosmology has shown that these do not differ from other mythologies; and this has destroyed the belief of many in the plenary inspiration of the Bible. It is therefore always possible to ask: Shall I believe a given religious proposition as the absolute truth or shall I suspend final decision until I have further evidence? I must go to church or stay out. But I may do the latter at least without hiding from myself the inadequacy of my knowledge or of the evidence. In politics I vote for X or Y without necessarily getting myself into the belief that my act is anything more than a choice of probabilities. I say: Better vote for X than Y; although if I knew more (for which there is no time) I might vote the other way. In science I choose on the basis of all the available evidence but expressly reserve the possibility that future evidence may make me change my view. It is difficult to make such reservations within any religious system. But it is possible to remain permanently skeptical or agnostic with regard to religion itself and its absolute claims. The momentous character of the choice in regard to religion may be dissolved by reflection which develops detachment or what James calls lightheartedness. What is the difference between believing in one religion or in another or in none? A realization of the endless variety of religious creeds of the great diversity of beliefs that different people hold to be essential to our salvation readily liberates us from the compulsion to believe in every Mullah that comes along or else fear eternal damnation. James draws a sharp distinction between a living and a nonliving issue. To him I suppose the question of whether to accept Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism was not a living one. But the question

whether to investigate so-called psychological phenomena as proofs of immortality was a living one. But surely reflection may change the situation and a student of religion may come to feel that James's choice was arbitrary and untenable.

The intensification of the feeling that religious issues are important comes about through the assumption that my eternal salvation depends upon my present choice or -- at most -- on what I do during the few moments of my earthly career. There is remarkably little evidence for this assumption if our life is eternal we may have had more chances before and we may have more later. Why assume that the whole of an endless life is determined by an infinitesimal part of it? From this point of view men like Jonathan Edwards to whom eternal Hell is always present and who makes an intense religious issue out of every bite of food, appears to be just unbalanced, and in need of more play in the sunshine and fresh air and perhaps a little more sleep. I mention Jonathan Edwards because his life and teachings enable us to turn the tables on religion by what James regards as the great pragmatic argument in its favor. Accept it, James says, and you will be better off at once. As most religions condemn forever those who do not follow them, it is as risky to accept any one as none at all. And it is possible to take the view that they are all a little bit ungracious, too intense, and too sure of what in our uncertain life cannot be proved. Let us better leave them all alone and console ourselves with the hypothesis -- a not altogether impossible one -- that the starry universe and whatever gods there be do not worry about us at all, and will not resent our enjoying whatever humane and enlightened comfort and whatever vision of truth and beauty our world offers us. Let us cultivate our little garden. The pretended certainties of religion do not really offer much more. This is of course not a refutation of religion, or of the necessity which reflective minds find to grapple with it. But it indicates that there may be more wisdom and courage as well as more faith in honest doubt than in most of the creeds.

Notes:

¹ See his Noble Lecture at Harvard.

² D. M. Wallace, *Russia*, chapter 10.

³ See J. M. and M. C. Coulter, *Where Revolution and Religion Meet*.

⁴ Exod. 22:18; Lev. 20:17.

⁵ It burned Peter of Abano even after his death.

⁶ II Sam. 6:6-7.

⁷ Gen. 9:13; Joel 1:30, 31.

⁸ This, of course, is based on the Bible: Deut. 17:2-5 and 18:20.

⁹ Tertullian, Saint Augustine, and Saint Thomas are among those who have so expressed themselves. See *Summa Theologica Suppl.*, Qu. 94, Art. 1.

¹⁰ In our time Unamuno, while not orthodox, defended the Inquisition because he would not accept the secular rationalism which abolished it.

In this symposium on religion, I am asked to serve as advocatus diaboli: to state the Dark Side so that those who follow may have definite positions to attack and may thus more fully develop the strength of their case. While there have not been wanting atheists and other free thinkers who have attacked religion root and branch, these assailants have often shared the indiscriminate or fanatical intensity which has characterized so many upholders of religion. A curious illustration of the confusion resulting from the absence of a critical discriminating attitude in the discussion of religion is the fact that the heterodox opponent of the established religion has often much more real faith than most of its followers. See more of The Dark Side of Religion on Facebook. Log In. Forgot account? Facebook is showing information to help you better understand the purpose of a Page. See actions taken by the people who manage and post content. Page created - May 20, 2018. Another dark side is when a person believes their religion gives them the right to tell everyone else what they are and are not allowed to do. I know several people that are extremely conservative Christians that believe that the Bible commands us to kill certain non-believers, especially homosexuals. Even though none of them have ever killed anyone (as far as I know), they believe that it would not be a sin, and there are some people claiming to be Christian who have killed people or have tried to. Also, some Muslims believe that are called to kill all non-believers in their faith, and some o