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Freshman Barb Haupt, in this award winning essay, defines mankind's constant search.

A RE-EXAMINATION OF FAITH

by BARB HAUPT

*"Till the gossamer thread you
fling catch somewhere, O my soul."*

Walt Whitman

The question "Can we have a religion without God?" sounds preposterous to many people. Religion seems to be rooted in the conviction that God is, that He is primary and transcendent. And it seems almost as natural to assume that He must be known in a historical figure—a Jesus, A Buddha, or a Mohammed—who is God Himself or His sole spokesman. Yet for almost everyone there must come the frightening experience of real doubt, and out of this doubt comes a re-evaluation of faith and a broader perspective. Like all growth, this new experience may be painful; and it is often impossible to return to the comfortable confines of a static faith.

Everything we do is prompted by values—physical, intellectual, and spiritual. We work to eat, and our daily bread seems to be an obviously objective value, solidly material. We are driven to think and to inquire, and the universe seems to hold the rationality and order that we seek; but even modern science challenges the objectivity of these values, by recognizing that the apparent "laws of nature" are at least in part imposed on reality by the human mind. Geometry and causation become relative, practical formulas; and we lose the security of scientific absolutes. From here it is but a step to the realization that every value is relative to the valuer. As spiritual beings, we seek a greater Something which contains all life and in which we can lose ourselves. God, our highest value, is the reality of our wish for order, meaning, and security; and His existence is assured by the affirmation of our other values. But if these values are relative and subjective, what can God be?

There are at least three ways to adjust oneself spiritually to the subjectivity of values. Like the positivists, one can dismiss as futile all loyalty to a higher Something and direct his sympathies to a "religion of humanity," deriving his inspiration from the sciences. All spiritual values and even most of the intellectual values must then be to him not only subjective, but worthless: whereas the physical values become insistently real and worth one's total commitment. Devotees of this religion can point proudly to such wonders as fourteen-hour jet flights from London to Capetown, crease-resistant orlon, Salk vaccine, and the hydrogen bomb; but they have not found a cure for spiritual disillusionment.

If positivism seems glaringly inadequate, there is the still-more-modern religion of men like Edwin R. Goodenough, who, defining all spiritual values as only subjective creations of man, resolve to live bravely in faithfulness to their own best myths or wish-projections, knowing that mankind has no spiritual support beyond its own dreams. For these people, Jesus and God are man-made symbols in which men have concentrated their long-venerated ideals and cherished hopes; and each man must find his own spiritual strength in the adequacy of his symbols and of his allegiance to them. Paradoxically, this credo demands more faith than either positivism or orthodox religion. It makes God as subjective a combination of human values as Santa Claus, and every human hope a construct of imagination deriving its authority solely from those who believe in it, and it therefore demands the sort of trust which is most difficult to achieve—trust in oneself. Like the positivists, the Goodenoughists have a religion, but it is a religion without God. It is a moot question whether such a stand is the only valid one for the mature modern man who is honest with himself and with the world.

A third way to approach the problem of the subjectivity of spiritual values is a qualified return to orthodox faith. It is a belief in the objective reality of God and spiritual truth, of salvation and grace, as *spiritual* realities which are known only imperfectly by men and which become veiled in subjectivity as soon as they are communicated to other men. In this light, knowledge of "truth" is for every man an individual experience which must involve the total person. If God is infinitely deeper and broader and higher than I am, as He surely must be, then it must take every facet of my being to know Him—sense and intellect, heart and imagination. And still I

must know only a very small part of what He is, even if by the experience I am transformed in every part. Then how can I reduce Him to words—mere tools of the intellect—and say to another human being, "This is what God is like"?

Poetry comes closest to communicating such religious experience, because through imagery it informs the total person, not just his intellect. In fact, this is probably the only way it is ever done. But through this necessity comes endless confusion, for, although poetry itself is not deceptive, it becomes so when it is taken for something else. A Moses on Mount Sinai or a Saint Paul on the road to Damascus may be grasped by a direct spiritual experience; but in reducing the experience to communicable, concrete symbolism, the symbol itself may become the truth—and then it is no longer the same thing. A spiritual relationship between God and man is equated to the stone tablets of the Decalogue or to a historical Jesus. Thus orthodox faith in its own terms is for the believer in a qualified orthodoxy only a string of subjective constructions which veil the real, though elusive, experience.

If a believer, in examining his faith in the light of the subjectivity of values, has succeeded in preserving the reality of his God and of personal religious experience, but not of their mythical embodiment, he is likely to have a complaint against the dogmatism of historical religion. He can no longer agree that salvation consists in accepting certain spiritual truths in one historical context, and in commitment to these as historical truths which alone are God's Truth, His direct and once-for-all revelation. Historical circumstance in a faith is for him merely part of its subjective symbolism. The miraculous birth of Jesus, Mithra, or Lord Krishna cannot be irreducible dogma, but rather the poetic embodiment of spiritual understanding.

The thus-qualified orthodox believer attempts to understand the "embodiment" in which a given religion is expressed by studying the historical development of religious concepts. The fact that St. Paul was originally a member of the esoteric Gnostic sect is, for instance, significant to an understanding of Christianity. Again, study of the myriad changes undergone by a "revealed" religion as it is influenced by its cultural environment makes one less credulous about any particular creed. The pattern by which Zoroastrian and Hellenistic religion merged into the eastern mystery cults seems to be mirrored in the Immanuel embodiment of both Hebrew messianic hopes and the Greek Logos.

Once the historical and mythical elements of religion are defined as incidentals, their value comes into new focus. For a thorough skeptic they are only the strands of a phantasy, but for an earnest believer they are the tools of spiritual understanding. Just as a folk epic combines the cultural experience of a whole race, a religious myth focuses the spiritual experience of a whole civilization. A single man's direct experience is rarely so unified and inclusive; in fact, it can never be isolated from the spiritual heritage of the race. The American is likely to know only the God of the Bible or the Torah. For each individual the religious myth or imageric faith is a source of truth, the raw material from which he distills his own faith. The soul-shaking experience of Jesus' disciples with the Pentacostal fire can stir individuals today into the realization of spiritual rebirth. Thus faith is reconverted into faith: the actual religious experiences of mystics are reduced to symbolic expressions from which the individual believer reconstructs his own religious experience. In this light, the particulars of Christian mythology and miracle-story are seen as the symbols of spiritual realities which have gripped men as vital and meaningful. The Feeding of the Five Thousand comes to mean the efficacy of God's love in quickening selfless human love and sharing. The Resurrection is the expression of God's miraculous grace. Thus images are still indispensable to a faith, because they are the media of religious experience.

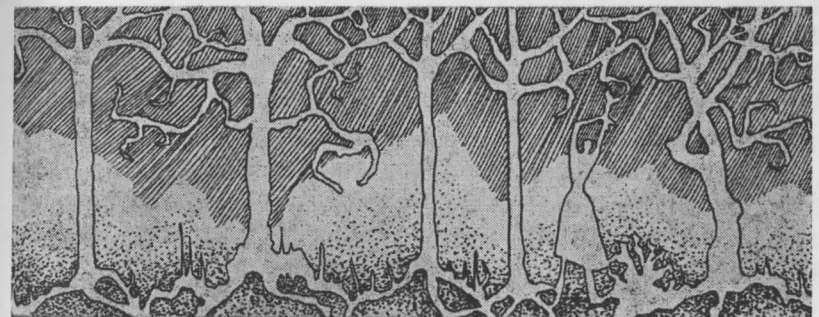
The analytical process of divesting a religion of its imageric dress has almost always been considered heretical, and with reason. Once symbolism is probed, the religious experience itself, which is very elusive, easily dissolves. Symbol-grasping man will not easily believe, without a symbol, in a salvation which is equal to a growing relationship with God. Without the Covenant story, the ancient Hebrews' intense encounter with God would not have been understood by succeeding generations of Jews; and without the story of God's incarnation in Jesus, the Gentile world would lack a traditional faith in the same experience. The tradition in each case is a historical one, but the experience is always personal and fits into the context of history only so far as personal experience is individual and specific. The human race is not converted, but individual men are.

But rational distinction between the subjective and the objective easily goes a step further; and here it destroys an essence. It seeks certain universal or absolute truths which exist in some outer noumenon ready to be discovered by enterprising men. Morality,

justice and truth are thought to exist as objectively as protons. The method of discovery may be either reason or intuition, or even practical experience (the kind which is followed by induction, not the direct experience of revelation); but the essence is purely metaphysical. Lacking personality—that is, Personality—it becomes pragmatic, since teleology is natural to man; if truth cannot be divine will, it must at least suit human purpose. At this point the "Be still and know that I am God" aspect of religion is modernized away. The "saving knowledge of God" of which the Bible speaks is reduced to the status of a subjective and therefore purely imaginary value; and absolute truths, which are now flat and objective, require no more commitment of spirit than the proton does, and are useful in about the same way.

In rejecting a static *historical* view of revelation and the religious relationship, one has also thrown out *personal* relationship and revelation. He no longer believes that a transcendent God encounters individual men. Human concern is limited to purely human values, collected and idealized, and men turn to the new social religions. The Marxists and the men of the Enlightenment have drawn such a following because men need a spiritual point of gravitation, and a transcendent God is readily replaced by the idol of a perfect society.

Ultimately, questions about the place of history and concrete figure in religion fade into the starker question about God's reality. If He is only subjective, then man stands in a cosmic loneliness with nothing higher than himself on which to depend. As a human spider, he flings his thread into an emptiness which can only hollowly echo his own loneliness; and he must either acknowledge himself to be the most miserable of insects or, with the courage of his own imagination, he must create his own points of gravitation and himself become the Titan of the universe.



Barbara Russ