

The Alleged Catholic Danger

ALARM seems to be felt in various quarters about the power of the Catholic church in the United States. After being long obscure and tolerated with a smile, apparently the prelates are beginning to wear their robes in public and to boast that the future of religion in America is in their hands. This assurance is itself more American than Catholic. The tone prevalent in the church from the earlier ages has been (saving the eloquence) like that of the Hebrew prophets, one of lamentation, foreboding and invective; what is good is at best a consolation that may perhaps put off the evil day. But the tone of American Catholics is pleasantly American. It is wonderful how silently, amicably, and happily they live in a community whose spirit is diametrically opposed to that of their religion.

Mr. John Jay Chapman in his "Notes on Religion" explained half of this anomaly. "We have not been interested in religion; we have forgotten the principles of the matter. The extraordinary ignorance of our people in matters of history, their belief in destiny, their inability to stop and reflect about anything, their desire that our politics shall not contain any religious question, their sense of security—all these things have led the Americans of the last fifty years to hide their heads in the sand in regard to the doings of the Roman Catholic Church." But the other half of the anomaly remains unexplained, how the Catholic faith, in persons who hold it so sincerely and affectionately as the Irish do, for instance, can leave them entirely at peace in a land where everything—traditions, government, manners, standards, and hopes—implies a profound disbelief in any such system.

American life is a powerful solvent. As it stamps the immigrant, almost before he can speak English, with an unmistakable muscular tension, cheery self-confidence and habitual challenge in the voice and eyes, so it seems to neutralize every intellectual element, however tough and alien it may be, and to fuse it in the native good-will, complacency, thoughtlessness, and optimism. The American Catholic looks at his inherited religion in this acquired spirit. His church, he feels, is a first-rate church to belong to; the priests are fine fellows, like the policemen; the Sisters are dear noble women, like his own sisters; his parish is flourishing, and always rebuilding its church and founding new schools, orphan asylums, sodalities, confraternities, perpetual adoration societies. No parish can raise so much money for any object, or if

there are temporary troubles, the fact still remains that America has three Cardinals and that the Catholic religion is the biggest religion on earth. Attachment to his church in such a temper brings him into no serious conflict with his Protestant neighbors. They live and meet on common ground. Their respective religions pass among them for family matters, private and sacred, with no political implications.

But this, in respect to the Catholic church, is a fundamental error. All ancient religions are political. Either in spots, like paganism, or thoroughly and minutely, as in the Jewish law and the Koran, they set out to supply divine guidance for the government of society, no less than for the private conscience. Their regimen is held to be the sole means of making men sane in this world and happy in the next. If therefore the Catholic church ever became dominant in America, it would without doubt, by virtue of its concrete mission, transform American life and institutions. In the measure of its power and prudence it would abolish religious liberty, the freedom of the press, divorce, and lay education. Whether there is any danger of so surprising a revolution the reader has doubtless better means of judging than I; but what he perhaps has had no opportunity of discovering is the nature of the constraint which the Catholic church puts upon the life, and especially the religious life, of its members.

Mr. Chapman, for instance, calls it a contradiction that mystical experience, which he finds present in the church, should coexist at all with a system of doctrine and moral government which, as he imagines, intercepts all mystical experience at its source. I see the contradiction between the theory that a thing must be intercepted by certain agencies and the admitted fact that it is not; but apart from infelicities of expression, Mr. Chapman seems to have missed the source of the trouble which undoubtedly exists, and the actual relation between religious experience and religious institutions. The mystical feeling comes first: it can never be intercepted. On occasion of alarming phenomena, like thunder, death, or apparitions, or else welling up without apparent occasion from within, a mysterious emotion seizes the mind automatically. Sceptics may call this experience pathological and say it means nothing, but the person affected always asks what it means. He assumes that it is a revelation of something external or permanent, which it is momentous to take to heart and to report to others. As the senses reveal a material world capable of

being mapped out and reacted upon with increasing accuracy by intelligent people, so mystical experience explores the influences under which it arises. It is always taken to reveal a second world, or rather invisible or distant part of this world, knowledge of which may be accumulated and transmitted. It is just so, with a remarkable fidelity to type, that the mystics wish us to take the records of the Psychical Research Society. Just so, too, by experiment and tradition based on the principle that mystical experience is significant, ancient peoples accumulated their elaborate religions.

There is no element in the Catholic system, ancient or modern, that is not the expression of somebody's mystical experience, surprising him either in the creative re-telling of legend, when he sees intuitively what further things *must* have happened, or in spontaneous variations in worship, or in the depths of metaphysical contemplation. What the church has done is to gather these mystical experiences together, in so far as their import is cumulative, eagerly welcoming every new inspiration not incompatible with the old. So grotesquely untrue is the notion that religious institutions must intercept religious experience at its source.

Whence then the cruel rebuffs that some mystics meet with in every church? From this, that the wind bloweth where it listeth, and that religious experiences prompt all sorts of fixed persuasions incompatible with one another. Those of us who live happily enough without revelations may be willing to let these discordant mystics enjoy their several harmonies, like so many rival musical composers, each in his unenvied heaven; but the mystics themselves, being inwardly illuminated, are fiercely intolerant. Any contradiction to the voice of God speaking in their hearts is insufferable to them. What then remains for them to say of the contrary inspirations of others? Only that they are the whisperings of Beelzebub: an opinion which saves the situation for each particular seer, but hardly increases the peace of the mystical household. This brave expedient is far from obsolete. Mr. Chapman regards the spontaneous and sincere insights of Nietzsche as diabolical, because they contradict his own. The insults which the author of "Lead Kindly Light" heaps on the Mohammedans are beyond belief. It is not worldly ecclesiastics that kindle the fires of persecution, but mystics who think they hear the voice of God.

The triumph of the Catholic church, if it were possible, would accordingly not suppress religious experience in America, it would immensely increase and intensify it; but it would tolerate only what it could assimilate. All independent pursuits of truth would be over, the truth in crucial matters being supposed to be known. The sciences, history espe-

cially, would have to twist their conclusions to fit the faith, and there would be an end to radical experiments in morals and to the hope of any essential lightening of human burdens. However remotely the church felt that it might be affected by any movement, its fanaticism would be aroused; its intense belief in the supreme importance of its mission would blind it to every other interest; as against its enemies, it would be incapable of so much as the idea of justice, and it would be a placid accomplice to every crime that seemed to make for its ascendancy.

This a frightful prospect enough; failure in all that the modern heart is set upon. Yet the world has survived that ordeal once, and would survive it again; and it could still say with Homer: "Endure, my heart; worse things hast thou endured." As Mr. Chapman observed very justly, the Catholic church requires submission, not uniformity. It suppresses obnoxious conclusions when stubbornly maintained; it is remarkably favorable to the play of mind. You are born to an institution, a tradition, a genial and a rich life; you are not stifled in cant or caught in a formula. If you are a good child of the family, romping is allowed. It is not as if everyone were forced to become a Hegelian and to do the same trick every time he opened his mouth. Dante, Chaucer, and Cervantes were entirely docile but entirely different. All a Catholic need do, in letting his genius go, is to say to himself sincerely: "If this is right, let it be used and built into the edifice: if it is wrong, let it pass for an idle fancy. Who am I that I should insist?" This attitude would have saved him from the stake in the middle ages, and nowadays it might save many a man from suicide or the madhouse.

Such humility, if it binds the mind in one sense, liberates it in another. A wit, a satirist, an artist, a man of passionate fancy, finds more sympathy and more freedom in a Catholic atmosphere than in a Protestant one. Nor is the intellect reduced by this reasonable modesty to trivial undertakings. Of course, a man whose inspiration is hostile to tradition will be starved and persecuted; he will have to face death if he is impetuous, and if he is prudent he will be obliged to leave his discoveries unpublished, to be unearthed perhaps by some sympathetic soul in a later generation. But if his inspiration is in harmony with the organic and traditional system about him, itself a product of inspiration, he is buoyed up at once and lifted on the shoulders of a great past; he is supplied with a function and a standard beyond himself. He is not expected to solve every ultimate question offhand. He acquires authority by submitting to it, he can become a master because he has been a pupil. The dignity of an immortal coöperation and unanimity

raises him above all pertness and folly. That is the reason why great works of imagination appear only in ages of moral unity, or immediately after, when the grand style, the sure gamut, the voluminous passion of that age are still in the air. Our intellectual liberty is itself a great inheritance, but it deprives us of every other. Each little barbarous mind plays with what pebbles it happens to pick up. No subject is beyond anybody's range, and the temple of opinion is like a shop with the alluring motto: *Nothing over ten cents.*

The Catholic system has many ancient sources, having been developed by the Fathers to unite and console antiquity in its decline, and it is, by the way, far more Greek than Roman in its religious texture. As Mr. Chapman says, "It is the greatest historic residuum in the world, the most perfect piece of the past, and it gives us a more accurate measure for judging the past than any other extant institution." But it is also modern, the one complete, stable religion alive under our noses. Without a just understanding of it the present is unintelligible and the future, perhaps, is apt to be miscalculated, for we are still in the era of religions. The mind is deeply perplexed about its origin and without trained courage to face the facts. Yet who takes pains to understand this most human of phenomena?

Mr. Chapman himself is at sea in the subject. He tries occasionally to be fair and then suddenly sees red. It is hard in an external view of inward things to say how much is mere foreign accent and how much positive error. Mr. Chapman is disquieted about the plottings of the clergy in Madison avenue; the pathos of distance makes them romantic to him. He says that indulgences "condone" sins. He seems to think that the Jesuits are the only leaven in the lump (I mean poison in the well)—as if all the religious orders did not differ in spirit and function from one another and from the secular clergy. He even imagines that people are "drugged" by incense, candles, and "sensationalism." This is as if some æsthetic traveler, on seeing a patriotic crowd waving flags, should take note that a whole nation could be hypnotized by agitated drapery and crude colors. Those who have lost the instinct for expression cannot imagine that those who retain it have anything to express.

The theory that any religion is the work of politicians or sensualists may safely be disregarded. Not even on its political or aesthetic side has any religion such an origin nor does it serve such a purpose. What happens is the exact opposite. Mystical passion and devout fancy intervene spontaneously and powerfully in mundane affairs, and in so doing they at once quicken and confuse science, morals, and politics.

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Revolution in the Ballet

SYMPATHY with sundry new "revolutions" in art would be more intelligent, perhaps, if the majority of us knew exactly what the revolutionists object to. Restrictions that old forms impose upon musical expression, for instance, can be really understood by none but a musician, or one at least well taught in musical theory. So with verse, with painting, with the drama. The layman is well enough aware that something has changed and is changing, and that the change is reflected in the arts. But when he sets to work to learn explicitly what has taken place, he is likely to find himself involved in considerations whose significance eludes him, because they involve technical knowledge which he does not possess.

The new Russian ballet, however, presents an art whose meaning is manifest without the aid of technical erudition. The old French-Italian form against which it embodies a protest is clearly defined and familiar to all of us; the limitations that it imposed upon free expression are apparent. In the dance the place of the traditional ballet may be compared to that occupied by geometrical ornament in the field of design. The new Russian ballet, in contrast, represents one of those returns which all arts have periodically made to nature for fresh material. Its interest lies not only in the visible character of that material, but in the completeness with which it has organized the material and in the obvious vitality of the result.

A decade ago the Imperial Ballet Academy of Russia was conducted in accordance with the traditions of its prototype in France. In the matter of technique it followed a composite of the French and the Italian schools between which the distinction is negligible in the present discussion. The French-Italian ballet is properly called the classic school of the dance. It defines every step and every movement with mathematical precision. Principles of grace it has sought out and reduced to rules. In style of line it cultivates the quality of architecture: turns describe perfect circles, hands and feet are moved through exact arcs or in severely straight lines. To the unconsidered movements of daily life it concedes nothing. Even when stationary, the body and limbs must conform to conventions which so deny the warm lines of the figure as to dehumanize it.

The French national ballet academy, in which the classic school was evolved and conserved, was founded by Louis XIV. Formality and precision, exquisiteness and a certain delicate spice, are its proper heritage. Within limits it is a happily satisfying medium of expression. But even its admirers have to admit that it falters when called upon to