

# George Santayana:

## CATHOLIC AGNOSTIC

*by Richard Butler, O.P.*

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO a boy was born in Madrid, and sixteen days after his birth he was baptized in the Church of San Marcos. He retained his Spanish citizenship until his death eighty-nine years later; yet his fame was achieved as an English writer, a poet and a philosopher, unexcelled in style among his contemporaries. He never received another sacrament in the church of his baptism, nor did he accept or practice its faith; yet his critics and commentators still classify him as a Catholic.

George Santayana was a man without roots, in a country or a culture or a creed. He never had a sense of belonging, to a family or an environment, to a school or a tradition or a profession. He had no place, in a church or a system of philosophy or a social movement. He was the unorganized man, the uncommitted man, the man who defied everyone else's impulse to label and categorize. He fitted no convenient slot or prefabricated pigeon-hole; he was unique.

For that very reason George Santayana labored most of his life in the careful articulation of a philosophy intended only to accommodate his own individual inclinations and the particular preferences peculiar to him alone. And he spent most of his life applying that personal philosophy to his practical behavior, with apparent success and contentment, until the uncertain and unsatisfying end of his celebrated career as an aloof and detached observer of the human drama. His last years were filled with doubts and inner disturbances. His last word was "desperation".

Some witty critic—was it Will Durant, or was he merely repeating the original phrase?—said of Santayana: "He believed that there was no God and that Mary was His mother." This most remembered and often repeated sentence does imply the strange relation of George Santayana to the Catholic Church.

HE WAS AN ATHEIST in the sense of rejecting orthodox belief in a personal God and a divine revelation; although he would have preferred the designation of agnostic or, better still, a man humbly ignorant of the ultimate mysteries of nature. He insisted that he was not a materialist. For he firmly acknowledged—in fact, constructed a philosophy on—the existence of spirit in men. But this was a naturalistic concept of spirit as blindly evolving from a chance blend of matter. He did, of course, *like* Catholicism; but his was an esthetic appreciation, a pure affection and admiration and not a conviction of mind or commitment of will. He wrote: "My faith was indeed so like despair that it wasn't faith at all; it was fondness, liking. What in Spanish is called *afición*; I indulged in it, but only north-north-west, and keeping my freedom."

Why did so many people consider him a Catholic? Because he did have a circumstantial affinity to the Church of his baptism. The formative years of his childhood, until he was nine and a half years old, were spent in Spain and this influence of Catholic culture remained with him permanently. He was even tempted to go all the way into a religious commitment; but as he described poetically his agony of indecision, he remained "at the Church door"—looking in, and liking what he saw, but never sharing that other life and transcendent thought of the believers in the pews.

He wrote much in a religious vein, especially in the early years when he expressed in poetry his spiritual struggle, the "wrestling with Christ", until he fell back exhausted and defeated and took his stand in *Interpretations of Religion and Poetry* (1900), posing the theme that religion was poetry "intervening in life". In his last letter to me, written only a few months before his death, he admitted: "It is true that, as to religion this book had struck the keynote".

One of his early publications was a lengthy poetic drama called *Lucifer, Or The Heavenly Truce, a Theological Tragedy* (1900). His sonnets of this period reflect the sorrow of rejection and the apparently painful choice of naturalism: *And though His arms, outstretched upon the tree, Were beautiful, and pleaded by embrace, My Sins were loth to look upon His face. So came I down from Golgotha to thee, Eternal Mother; let the sun and sea Heal me, and keep me in thy dwelling place.*

A much earlier poem, written when he was fifteen or sixteen and never published, was recalled in part in his memoirs:

*Ah, if salvation were a trick of reason  
How easily would all the world be saved!  
But roses bloom not in the winter season  
Nor hope of heaven in a heart enslaved.*

Santayana in later life said of this first poetic effort: "It was full of pessimistic, languid, Byronic sentiments". In fact, it is a remarkable expression, from one so young, of the affective involvement in the confrontation with faith. Mere logic cannot effect a conversion, for the heart has attachments which reason very well knows but will not forsake.

SANTAYANA's family background was presumed by many to be Catholic. But this was for official purposes only, a nominal allegiance that had no practical effects whatsoever. In a statement of his own beliefs, contained in a "living philosopher" series published by Northwestern University in 1940, George Santayana summed up his own position in relation to his background: "Like my parents, I have always set myself down officially as a Catholic; but this is a matter of sympathy and traditional allegiance, not of philosophy. I have never had any unquestioning faith in any dogma, and have never been what is called a practicing Catholic. Indeed it would hardly have been possible. My mother, like her father before her, was a Deist: she was sure there was a God, for who else could have made the world? But God was too great to take special thought for man: sacrifices, prayers, churches, and tales of immortality were invented by rascally priests in order to dominate the foolish. My father, except for the

Deism, was emphatically of the same opinion".

His mother was a strange woman, dour and dreary and yet firmly fixed in her own determination of propriety. She was the daughter of a Spanish consul to the Philippines and after her father's death there she married a Boston shipping merchant named George Sturgis. Within seven years she bore him five children, one of whom died in infancy. Eight years after the marriage George Sturgis died. After a brief and unhappy attempt to live in Boston with Yankee relatives the widow and children went back to Spain. In Madrid she met and married Don Augustín Ruiz de Santayana. Jorge, or George, was the only child of this union. After nine more years the mother suddenly remembered her promise to George Sturgis to raise his children in America and she promptly left her husband to go to Boston. There she remained and, with the help of the Sturgis family, she raised her children in a modest home in Roxbury.

Uprooted in childhood, George Santayana spent a lifetime of estrangement. Of those early years he said: "I was solitary and unhappy . . . The family was deeply disunited, and each member unhappy for a different reason." Literature stirred his imagination, opened ideal vistas that supplanted the real world of family and friends and the practice of a faith. He preferred imaginary forms to real figures. He said: "The whole real world is ashes in the mouth."

RELIGION FASCINATED HIM as good and beautiful, but only as a dream: "I loved the Christian epic, and all those doctrines and observances which bring it down into daily life. I thought how glorious it would have been to be a Dominican friar, preaching that epic eloquently, and solving afresh all the knottiest and sublimest mysteries of theology."

But the reality of religion altogether escaped him. It was fine, he would say, if you accepted it as poetry but not if you took it for history or cosmology. He never considered a religious alternative. Protestantism, especially as he knew it through Unitarian services he was forced to attend at King's Chapel, appalled him as sterile and barren. He called such a church "a nook for quiet-

ness and a sabbath refuge, feeble in thought, null in organization, animated by little more than traditional or censorious sentiment to be applied to current opinion and to the conduct of lay life."

For him there was only one choice with regard to religion. "For my own part," he wrote, "I was quite sure that life was not worth living; for if religion was false everything was worthless, and almost everything if religion was true . . . I saw the . . . alternative between Catholicism and complete disillusion: but I was never afraid of disillusion, and I have chosen it."

The strongest personal force in his life, he admitted, was his step-sister, Susana. She was older at the time the family moved from Spain and her religious faith was strong. She rebelled against her mother's animosity towards the Catholic faith, and on Sundays before George was taken by the hand to King's Chapel he was pushed by Susana to a nearby Jesuit Church for Mass. She tried to teach him some catechism and church history and urged him to follow her to the sacraments. He was docile to such prodding up to a point, the essential point of a sacramental and practical faith. He wrote: "All my life my sister Susana was a little troubled because, as she said, she feared that I was moving away from God! Yet at heart I was not *moving* at all. I was only *seeing* . . ." And what he saw was only "a symbolic myth."

Susana later entered a Carmelite convent but she was too old and settled for such a fixed routine. She left before completing her postulancy and eventually, at forty-one, she returned to Spain and married a widower with six children. This unglamorous end of an idol elicited a bitter reaction from the reminiscing philosopher: "She couldn't *live* her religion as I *lived* my philosophy."

**H**E DID LIVE HIS PHILOSOPHY most of his life. That personal philosophy, constructed for his own convenience, was first formulated in his *Life of Reason* (1905-1906). It was later refined and summarized in *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923) and elaborated in the mature *Realms of Being* (1942).

His philosophy was an unusual blend of ingredients and influences: the materialism of Lucretius, the idealism of Plato, the rationalism of Spi-



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noza, the psychologism of James. A dogmatic skeptic, he insisted on two not-to-be-disputed presuppositions: "We must oscillate between a radical transcendentalism, frankly reduced to a solipsism of the living moment, and a materialism



posited as a presupposition of conventional sanity." On these two premises, of basis skepticism and sensism, he composed an ideal and symbolic philosophy, culminating in a contemplation of essences (in the sense of all conscious data). All that was left to a sincere man so convinced was to live apart, quiet and relatively secluded, and enjoy this naturalistic contemplation. And that was what he did.

He disliked teaching, although he was a popular professor at Harvard for twenty-three years (1889-1912). He escaped the formalism of that profession as much as he could, preferring the company of students to his confreres on the faculty and annually traveling abroad. In January 1912, he quit his teaching career and spent the rest of his life wandering around Europe, with regular book and article publications to assure an income to sustain his detachment from worldly pursuits. I once asked him about the truth of an anecdote often told — that he looked out of the classroom window one day in the middle of a lecture, said: "I have a date with spring", and walked out, never to return — but he denied it ever happened, "although," he said, "it makes a good story."

He spent the last eleven years of his life as a paying guest in San Stefano Hospital in Rome. Here in a Catholic hospital, staffed by the Sisters of the Little Company of Mary, he found a final refuge and personal care. Correspondents, interviewing him on the occasion of a new publication or a birthday, colored their stories with reports of his living "a cloistered life" in a "convent", even a "nunnery". With consistent logic they could have said the same of any patient in St. Vincent's Hospital in New York or Mercy Hospital in Chicago. Such inaccurate reporting may have been intended merely as a literary frosting of these facts but such references intensified the confusion over Santayana's religious position.

HE FREQUENTLY USED theological terms in his writing but as very unorthodox misappropriations. He describes natural aesthetic contemplations in terms of Christian asceticism and mysticism: spirit must avoid the classical enemies — the world, the flesh and the devil (symbol of pride, either in knowledge or in power). This

escape demands sacrifice (the Cross) but results in a fresh rising above all conflicting interests (the Resurrection). The perfection of the spiritual life is achieved in three stages (as appropriated from St. John of the Cross): distraction, liberation and union. Union, his naturalistic version of sanctity, is a "blissful" identity with pure essences, "achieved . . . by intellectual worship." Even the Trinity becomes, for him, symbolic of matter, essence and spirit.

He admitted that his philosophy was a lay religion. In a paper entitled "Ultimate Religion," which he read at The Hague in an observance of the tercentenary commemoration of the birth of a kindred philosopher, Benedict de Spinoza, Santayana proposed an ultimate religion "proper to a wholly free and disillusioned spirit" — a recognition and respect for universal power, the love of universal truth, and worship of perfection and beauty. This is the "ultimate religion" of naturalism carried to its inevitable conclusion.

It was during these retiring years at the hospital in Rome that Santayana even turned to a naturalistic exegesis of Scripture. In *The Idea of Christ in the Gospels* (1946), he brilliantly applied the evangelical precepts and counsels to a life of detachment and fulfillment. Except for an introductory rejection of the reality of the Incarnation and the validity of divine revelation, his commentary proceeds with the orthodoxy and insight of a master exegete. (I know of a monk who ignored the heretical introduction and used the book for private meditational reading in chapel.)

He lived simply, almost stoically, during that last decade of his life. As a matter of preference, he even washed and mended his own clothes and shaved himself with an old straight-edge razor. He read a great deal and wrote until he tired—his last book was a lengthy discourse on political philosophy (*Dominations and Powers*, 1951) and his outdated aristocratic ideas on this subject were attacked by his critics. In the end, before his sight failed him, he returned to his first love and particular talent, poetry. His hearing failed earlier and embarrassed him, causing him to shy away from the visits of admirers he used to welcome.

During the final year only three people were close to him: his faithful nurse, Sister Angela,

his secretary, Daniel Cory, and myself. I visited him every week during the last two years of his life and saw the doubts and disturbances that gnawed at him as sharply as the incipient cancer that finally destroyed him. As he changed physically, from the robust figure I photographed on the balcony of his hospital room, to the frail old man huddled under a blanket a year later, he changed intellectually from his insistence on naturalism to a confession of not being sure about anything, the complete and confused agnostic.

To an interviewing reporter on his 87th birthday, he said: "I find things are not so simple to explain as I had imagined, and so I am not reconciled."

Nor could he reconcile himself with the God of his childhood desire. As an adolescent he had written:

*Perchance when Carnival is done,  
And sun and moon go out for me,  
Christ will be God, and I the one  
That in my youth I used to be.*

There was no going backward or forward, only a static holding to the personal philosophy he had so long proposed to himself. Sister Angela, who had quietly served him and prayed for him for more than a decade, felt obliged in charity to say the obvious: "You are dying. You should see a priest and make your peace with God." His reaction was adamant: "I shall die as I have lived."

HE SEEMED to feel obliged to his profession of naturalism. I recall that in a little debate with him on a philosophical issue, which he ordinarily enjoyed and never quit or admitted defeat, he suddenly stopped and said: "Well, there's nothing I can change now. It's all written down." And he turned to another subject.

I left him in April, 1952, before the sharp decline, and had one letter from him—the arduous script of a nearly blind man. His opening words were: "I am getting weaker and my eyes have failed me". In June he fell down the stone steps of the Spanish Consulate where he had gone to extend his passport. The trauma was effective and during the summer his decline was rapid. Death came slowly and painfully, releasing him from violent affliction in a final comatose state. Just be-

fore the final coma Sister Angela asked him if he was suffering.

His dry lips parted and he hoarsely whispered: "Not physically—no more—but mentally."

"Why?" Sister asked. "What's the matter?"

The last word was: "Desperation!"

Characteristic of this "Catholic agnostic", Santayana had asked to be buried in neutral (unblessed) ground in a Catholic cemetery. On the thirtieth of September, 1952, George Santayana was buried in Rome's Catholic cemetery, Campo Verano. According to a United Press story, "a handful of persons, including dignitaries of the Spanish Embassy and Consulate here, half a dozen American friends, and an Italian admirer, attended the simple non-religious ceremony."



Photography by Mark's Rembrandt Studio.

RICHARD BUTLER, O. P. was born in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1918. He attended Notre Dame and Catholic University, entered the Dominican order in 1942, and was ordained in 1949. Since receiving his doctorate in 1952, Father Butler has published three books with Regnery (Chicago): *The Mind of Santayana* (1955); *The Life and World of George Santayana* (1960); *Religious Vocation* (1961). His latest book, *God on the Secular Campus*, will be published by Doubleday in September, 1963. Father Butler was formerly Director of the Aquinas-Newman Center at the University of New Mexico. He is presently National Chaplain of the National Newman Apostolate.

# Sonnets

**O** WORLD, thou choosest not the better part!  
It is not wisdom to be only wise,  
And on the inward vision close the eyes,  
But it is wisdom to believe the heart.  
Columbus found a world, and had no chart,  
Save one that faith deciphered in the skies;  
To trust the soul's invincible surmise  
Was all his science and his only art.  
Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine  
That lights the pathway but one step ahead  
Across a void of mystery and dread.  
Bid, then, the tender light of faith to shine  
By which alone the mortal heart is led  
Unto the thinking of the thought divine.

**D**EEM NOT, because you see me in the press  
Of this world's children run my fated race,  
That I blaspheme against a proffered grace,  
Or leave unlearned the love of holiness.  
I honour not that sanctity the less  
Whose aureole illumines not my face,  
But dare not tread the secret, holy place  
To which the priest and prophet have access.  
For some are born to be beatified  
By anguish, and by grievous penance done;  
And some, to furnish forth the age's pride,  
And to be praised of men beneath the sun;  
And some are born to stand perplexed aside  
From so much sorrow—of whom I am one.

**A**S IN THE MIDST of battle there is room  
For thoughts of love, and in foul sin for mirth;  
As gossips whisper of a trinket's worth  
Spied by the death-bed's flickering candle-gloom;  
As in the crevices of Caesar's tomb  
The sweet herbs flourish on a little earth:  
So in this great disaster of our birth  
We can be happy, and forget our doom.  
For morning, with a ray of tenderest joy  
Gilding the iron heaven, hides the truth,  
And evening gently woos us to employ  
Our grief in idle catches. Such is youth;  
Till from that summer's trance we wake, to find  
Despair before us, vanity behind.