

AFFIRMATIONS

*God in the Modern
World*

MY RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

by Hugh Walpole

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MY RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

1

The first conscious memory I have of this world of light and sin was being held up in my nurse's arms to look at the flowers that blazed along the walks and lawns of the gardens of the Bishop of Auckland, New Zealand. I was, I suppose, three or four years of age at the time, but my memory must be sufficiently vigorous because my parents have afterwards admitted that my description of the high walls and the terraced walk is near enough to truth.

I was connected then with the Church from my earliest years, and it is related of me that the first time that I was given a prayer-book I wanted to scribble a story over the pages of it, so that from the beginning I was trying to unite those two opposites—the mystic sense of life and story-telling.

It is the fashion nowadays for everyone to unbare his soul, and on the whole it is being done, I think, in a very handsome natural manner. This impulse towards a confession of religious experience breaks out in the world every now and again, and is not to be denied. The last one in England, I fancy, was somewhere in the late sixties and early seventies; it was oddly mixed up with the Oxford Movement, a late frenzied kind of evangelicism, spiritualism and the Brownings, the poets. It lasted, I fancy, for some ten years or so up to about the year of my birth, 1884; art was dragged into it, the pre-Raphaelites had something rather light-headed

to say about it, William Morris worked it into his wall-paper socialism, young Oscar Wilde discussed it while he broke stones on the Oxford road with John Ruskin, and down in my own native Cornwall the wildest prayer-meetings were held with the sea pounding on the rocks in an ironic echo.

I may be confusing my dates—I expect I am—but I was born into the middle of just that medley of a strict Church of England dogmatism, a recognition of the poetic frenzies of Methodism (because on my mother's side we were Cornish for centuries), and a self-consciousness about art that began with Tennyson, ended with Browning, and crowned G. F. Watts and Burne-Jones with hieratic glory.

In the Colonies, indeed, I suspect that religion was of the rough-and-ready kind. I know that my father was the first rector of that funny, dumpy, little Auckland church a picture of which I saw for the first time only the other day. He was a young idealist, brought up in the sternest discipline by a father who was for the greater part of his life an officer in the English Army and only towards the latter part of it a clergyman, and this stern discipline had given him a tough hide, so that he could face any kind of trouble or difficulty with sturdy courage. But this toughness was strangely lit with a simple, direct, and unflinching faith which, through all the hardships of his boyhood among the long shadowy water-logged Norfolk fens, he had acquired with such certainty that it has never faltered for a single instant through the rest of his life.

My mother's religious faith was, I fancy, of a different kind, more imaginative and poetic, more nervous and, at

first, more questioning. She had had a very sheltered childhood, one of a happy family all of them leading the easy, light, simple life of English girls and boys in a secluded English town during the sixties and seventies. She wasn't prepared—how could she ever have been?—for the rough, clumsy, good-natured hardships of the colonial life of that time. She had witnessed at home the opening years of the life of a great cathedral—my father had been one of the cathedral officials; she must have missed sadly the ceremonies, the fine preaching, the Handel festivals, and all the social festivities inevitably springing from such a centre. She had now socially to make bricks with very little straw indeed, and to find that life's discomforts, physical and social as well as spiritual, demanded all her strength.

I am sure that my mother's religious faith in these New Zealand years was never for a moment shaken, but it acquired another colour, and that colour had afterwards a great effect upon myself. Her religion became a little fierce, a little defiant, although always quiet and gentle because she was herself quiet and gentle; but I think that she hid a great deal in her heart because it seemed to her that very easily her faith, which was then and always the most important thing in life to her, could be cheapened by a public exposure, and that led her in its turn to be in these first years a little ironic about her fellow human beings. They were not after all, as once she had thought them, gentle, kindly, and wishing you well; God must be terribly disappointed in some of them.

I left New Zealand when I was five years of age, and went home for a year to Truro in Cornwall while my parents started a fresh experience in New York. That winter in

Cornwall was possibly the most formative religious influence in all my life. Truro was still then in 1890 a little country town clustered about its cathedral and taking all its conscious life from that beautiful building. I lived with my grandmother and several aunts, and these relations might be said to be soaked in the Church of England. No movement in daily life but had the Church of England stamp upon it; no fun, no discipline, no exercise, no conversation but the Church of England played its proper part. It was neither a grim nor an austere world; everyone was kind to me and wanted me to be happy; but I could be happy, it was plainly understood, only through the medium of the Church of England. I was but six years of age, but sharp and noticing; I was going to a kindergarten in the town and already was preoccupied with colours and sounds, with making coloured mats and drawing with coloured chinks and moving in squares and circles to the rhythm of the piano. These things very quickly seemed to me to be more important than anything else in the world, more important, I privately was certain, than the Church of England. I soon had a sharp experience which caused me to make, all unwittingly, my first affirmation.

One of the customs of the Church of England then was that Sunday must be a completely different day from all the other days: one must clothe differently, one had different food, everyone talked differently, and one was not allowed to play any of the ordinary games. The only game that one was allowed to play was connected with two puzzle maps, one a map of Palestine, the other a series of pictures of the experiences of the Israelites in the wilderness; these were permitted because they were sacred subjects. I hated them,

partly because they were difficult to do and partly because I had done them so often. There came a Sunday when, having brought back with me on Saturday from the kindergarten an unfinished mat that was to be worked in wools of red and yellow and purple, I was determined that Sunday evening should see the mat completed. I was discovered then on a dusky winter's afternoon finishing my mat instead of the puzzles of the children of Israel. A terrible scene followed; the mat was taken away from me, and then, because I refused to be obedient and bit my grandmother, I was sent to bed supperless. Afterwards, when the storm was over, it was explained to me that the mat was work but that the children of Israel were not, to which I could only reply that the mat was beautiful and the children of Israel were ugly. I made then the first affirmation to myself about life, of course subconsciously, without knowing that I was making any affirmation at all; nevertheless what was decided for me then was simply this, that anything that was ugly was against life, interfered with it, frustrated it, and that whether the Church of England agreed with me or not. And I learnt also a further thing, that if one thought something beautiful and someone else did not, the beautiful thing was not less beautiful; but that if one thought something beautiful and someone else agreed, then at once the beautiful thing gained in glory.

Rather sad and lonely years followed for me, partly in New York where I was very unhappy, and partly as an only child staying during my holidays in families that did not really require me, homesick for my parents, who were still pursuing their American adventure. I went at this time to a very bad school where there was a good deal of cruelty of a kind, and acquired there a sense of dread that has, I am told,

appeared again and again in my books. This sense of dread was connected very closely in my mind with God. By this time I had become absolutely certain of the reality of God; I saw him, as I suppose most children do, a large stout man with a white beard sitting on a cloud that was carefully placed so that he could see exactly all that was going on in the world below, and my natural egotism led me to suppose that he had his eye directly and especially upon myself. He was not entirely a tyrannous God, he was often very loving and tender, and let mature years bring what knowledge they will, I have never released myself from a sense of protecting arms and loving benevolence, and this, I am afraid, comes to me when I have done something especially weak or foolish.

It has become a commonplace in these days to trace all mature impulses in our religious instinct to the circumstances, environment, and influences of our childhood. But in my own case, in trying to trace back the stages in my religious life, I am met now by a difficulty, the old, regular, platitudinous difficulty that faces everyone who tries to speak sincerely of his spiritual experience. This is the old eternal question of the origin of influence: how much comes from inside oneself, how much is given one by a contact with outside life, and how much comes from the force and power beyond oneself, beyond this world and everything in it, the power of the spirit? It seems to me when I look at my friends and those whom I know well that the whole course of their lives has been directed by the proportion that they give to these influences. For nine people out of ten of course in this hurried modern life the easiest thing to do is to deal simply with life day by day, not to question any influences but to find the daily bread, do the

daily work, and respond quite simply to the likes, dislikes, friendships, and enmities of one's fellow creatures. In the past most men and women have continued the observance of the dogmatic religion of their childhood because it is by far the easiest thing to do; the busy ones have squeezed a little piece of their childhood's religion into a tiny corner of the week, and have not thought about it at all during the rest of the time. These have been the wage-earners; and the women, in England at least, being greatly in excess numerically of the men, and having until the war by English tradition very little to do, have spread their religious instincts over the whole week in order to avoid sudden death from boredom.

The war has changed all that, and to this change I will come later; but what I am trying here to emphasise is that for most mature people around me in my childhood the religious influence was a dogmatic one accepted from childhood without thought. A very beautiful and virtuous life of course can be led without any definite spiritual thought; the best living man I know to-day has no conscious religion, never goes to church, and thinks very seldom if at all about God or Heaven; he has thrown over the dogmatic teaching of his childhood, and he has not consciously acquired any definite train of religious thinking for himself, but the spirit of good works through him quite naturally, and he seems to one as one watches him to be always moving in unison with something that is deep and underlying in life, something quite unknown to himself that would instantly be spoiled if he were aware of it.

I was not very old, I think, when I divided the people around me into these three classes, those (and as I have said

they were greatly the majority) who accepted a dogmatic religion that had been given to them in their childhood without questioning, because that was by far the easiest way; secondly, those who were always questioning whether they wanted to or no; thirdly, those who, like my friend whom I mentioned above, seemed to have a kind of spiritual life not from desire, but generally without any awareness that they had it, as though they had been chosen and were able without struggle or fear to move grandly and rightly through life. These are generally very simple people—St. Francis of Assisi is their patron saint—and I must confess that they are for me the only people really to be envied in the world.

I discovered, however, very quickly that there was an eternal war between the other two classes of my division, a war inevitable for which neither party was to blame. I lived during my boyhood in a world where this discovery was very easy to make. My father had a professorial post in an English cathedral town, and this town was, at that time at any rate, riddled through and through with a religious pharisaism, pomposities and conceited vanities; there were of course some good Christians there—one of the finest bishops the English Church has ever known and one of the purest and most devoted of the saints of the world had only just died when I came there, and his influence was still to be felt; but one had only got to see the Cathedral staff strut into their grand stalls in the choir at the commencement of the service, only got to listen to the conduct of that service with its deadness, its pervading chill, its self-righteousness, to realise that something was very wrong here. And, boy though I was, as I continued to live there and gradually learnt of the minute jealousies, the bitter squabbles about tiny dogmas, the greed

and selfishness, I arrived at my third affirmation; namely, that in the world of the spirit the letter killeth, and from this I have never in my later life seen any reason to retract.

But while on the one hand I was beginning to question every single dogma that my childhood had insisted upon, I was beginning, without the slightest desire on my part, to be conscious of a God very different indeed from the earlier benevolent and kindly guardian of whom I have already spoken. This was a God terrible, vengeful, maliciously cruel, but possessed of a startling beauty. I led a lonely life during these years from twelve to eighteen, very largely of my own fault, thinking myself grossly misunderstood, wanting apparently all the things that I was forbidden to have. I both read and wrote frantically, not because I expected any good to come from these pursuits, but because I was lonely and, a more emphatic reason still, because I could not help myself. I was aware for the first time in my life that there was a strange and mysterious beauty in the world, that this was always present, that it had nothing to do with my personal moods or desires, that it went on always regardless of me. Everything I did indeed seemed in conflict with this world of beauty: the stories that I wrote were miserable failures, everyone declared them to be so, I knew for myself that they were; the books that I read were perpetually eluding me, having in them something deeper than I could touch; and the life that I led was ugly, sterile, and useless. I was like someone always on the wrong side of the wall: if I could only climb over or get through the door, what a world I would find myself in! But something always prevented me, and this something was a mean, teasing, revengeful God.

This God as I then saw him was not the God of the ridiculous ecclesiastical world around me; I used to fancy that he despised that world as greatly as I did. He was a God, as I have said, of a flaming and wonderful beauty, but he had no use for me at all, was determined to keep me outside all his glories and wonders, and delighted in teasing me by giving me many hints of the lovely things that he had; but it was he who had created me, and I concluded therefore that he had done this simply with a kind of honourous malice. You will recognise that I was a very complete little egotist, but hadn't sufficient personality to become a fine bold rebel.

This has been exactly the attitude of many of the intellectuals in the ten years that have followed the war: cynical scorn of a power that has created the world only to laugh at it. But I must confess that my egotism was not so all-pervading as that of these modern intellectuals; because I was myself a misfit I thought God a nasty creature, but I had just enough modesty left me to perceive that there were others who were not misfits, who moved beautifully in a beautiful world. How I envied them and how I longed to be like them!

I went to Cambridge and everything superficially changed. For the first time in my life I had friends, I played games more or less successfully, I accepted life for a time quite normally, and with that normal acceptance God swung into line too. I began to keep company once again with that old benevolent God of my early childhood, I accepted once more all my early dogmas, I conducted services in the slums of Cambridge on Sundays, I entered with my friends into what I thought were abstruse arguments about the Trinity, the Virgin

Birth, and so on. It seemed to me quite natural that I should become a clergyman: this was the only period of my life, I think, when I was definitely self-righteous and felt that I was one of the chosen people. I thought that I was generous, gay, exceedingly tolerant, but on looking back now I can see that I was at that time priggish, conceited, and sure that my group of friends were heading more directly for Heaven than anyone else in the world. This stage was, however, only superficial, as I very shortly discovered. To prepare myself for my clerical life I went for a year to work on a Mission to Seamen in Liverpool; this was a very gallant little affair conducted by men who were brave, single-minded, and deeply wise about human nature. I went there, I remember, with a very firm conviction that I was to be a leading light, a pillar of smoke by day, a pillar of fire by night. Everyone was very kind to me and I started confidently on my way. I made then certain discoveries: first, and this was extremely painful to me, that I was a physical coward. It was our duty to go down the Mersey in a little tug and enquire of the captains of the big vessels whether they would like a service performed on board; the answer was sometimes kindly and polite, but more often rude and even physically violent. I dreaded these visits to these ships as I had never dreaded anything in my life before, and it soon happened that I avoided them whenever I could. I noticed, I was forced to notice, that some of the men on our staff performed these duties with a vigour, a certainty, and an evidence of character that put all my little cowardices to shame; but I also noticed that these same men were mentally very different from myself: they questioned nothing while I was beginning once again to question everything, they moved with a quiet calm certainty about their daily task, God for ever at their side.

Even in the midst of my envy I asked myself, "How can they be so sure?" I was rather a good preacher of a Sunday, having a lot of eloquence and a certain power over words, but more and more as the Sundays passed I neglected the dogmatic side of my religion and emphasised moral questions of conduct. Then, after a time, these too began to break down. Who was I to talk of morals to these men of the sea who had been tested by every kind of life, who had suffered every sort of hardship and discomfort, who could teach me everything about the world? So my tongue began to falter, and I found myself at last sympathising with their misdeeds rather than criticising them.

Then there arose out of the dark tumbled waters of the Mersey a new God, a God mysterious, deeply wise, far beyond any kind of estimate that my ignorant personality could form, a God who was both kindly and terrible, a power in short about whose personality or kingdom any kind of dogma was impossible, but a God too who was, it seemed, most easily to be discovered in the simplest places, the simplest acts, the simplest human beings. This was surely now to be the most absorbing purpose of life, to achieve some kind of contact with him; so I left the Mission to Seamen.

2

I expect that there were very many people during these years 1908 to 1914 whose interest in spiritual things sank

very low indeed. Looking back now we all seem, with the wisdom of the after-event, to discern a kind of hush rather resembling the sort of tired selfishness that comes among a group of children towards the end of a picnic when they have eaten too much, played too much, and have become, because of submissive nurses and indulgent relations, too certain of their own importance.

I frankly treated God during this time as a kind of boon companion who was out on a spree with me, and was lucky to have me with him. I certainly had a lovely time. Is there anything so amusing in anyone's life and at the same time so dangerous as that period when one finds that, in the opinion of others as well as oneself, one has chosen the right career; when one little success leads to another little success; when it appears that one has nothing to do but to sit back and allow other people to do the work for one? I felt supremely confident at that time of doing anything I liked. I remember Arnold Bennett saying to me just about this time: "Jolly few novels there are when one's finished them that one doesn't say to oneself, 'Oh well, I could have done that if I'd wanted'"; and I really felt that, felt that I had unlimited powers in unlimited directions.

I made in these early days some wonderful friendships: with Henry James, with John Galsworthy, with H. G. Wells, with Norman Douglas (who had the best brain of them all), with old William de Morgan, with Max Beerbohm, with George Moore. A wonderful experience for a young man, and now at this disillusioned middle age I know how lucky I was; at the time it seemed my right. But it happened that none of these men cared at all for what seemed to me at that

time to be religion, and it began to appear to me that you couldn't both have a first-class brain and be also religious, and it needed my years in Russia to teach me how false this was. I found that it was taken for granted in all the circles that I frequented that the Christian religion was hopelessly out-moded. They were naturally all of them concerned with æsthetic problems; Henry James, whose influence over me was far stronger than any other, was concerned so far as I could discover with only two things, the technique of fiction and the technique of friendship, and he worked both of these to a depth seldom approached by any human being before. He was at heart, I think, a mystic, that is, he was deeply conscious of other worlds beyond the one in which he lived; such stories of his as "The Turn of the Screw" prove this, but he never discussed this, at any rate with myself. In all the years that I knew him he never spoke of God nor of immortality; there was always present with him a fear of, as it were, raising ghosts; one incautious word and who knew what company one might be forced to keep, and so he covered everything with a kind of patina of intellectual courtesy.

From these men then I learnt that it was almost impolite to talk about God and certainly crude. I think now on looking back that they may have found me too young to talk about anything very real, but however that may be, I found that the London world at least did very nicely without any religion at all.

When I was not in London I lived in a very small Cornish fishing-village, and this small village had a little church to which on Sundays I went, and there I sang in the choir and

read the lessons. I loved these little services with the familiar hymns, in the evening the dim candle-light, the faces of the villagers whom I knew so well, and the rumble of the sea beyond the windows. It was obviously on the whole a sentimental liking; I thought that I read the lessons very well and I enjoyed the sense of family friendliness and the continued tradition of my early childhood. I made a kind of snobbish compromise; I thought that my intellectual friends would despise me if they saw me there, but that I was clever enough to make of the service what I pleased, to disregard the collects and canticles that seemed to me obsolete, to smile rather contemptuously at the little sermons that begged all the questions without answering any of them; I was doing God, in fact, a distinct favour by being there. Nevertheless again and again and as it were against my will I got something that was of more value to me as I now perceive than all my intellectual London conversations; it was a value, if you like to put it at its lowest, of quiet and silence and a consciousness of something far older and more enduring than the unimportant evolution of my own personality. It was in that little church that I began dimly to be aware of two truths: first, that one must be tolerant of the religious experiences of all other human beings and never contemptuous; and secondly, that the religious experiences of other people are of no value to one in comparison with one's own.

Then, inevitably, towards 1914 there came the period of disappointment. One wasn't writing as well as one should, one was more limited than one had supposed, one's friends were—surprising discovery—largely preoccupied with their own affairs, one's own adventures, promising so much, ended again and again in disappointment—all the discoveries that

come inevitably to any youth passing into mature manhood. And so it was that when the war came I, like many another, threw myself into it with eager expectancy, thinking that through it I would be able to touch life at its highest and finest. And so in fact I did; many another will admit that with all the horror, fear, dismay, and futility, one lived then at certain times at a pitch finer than at any period of one's life before or since. I tried in my novel "The Dark Forest" to capture something of both the dismay and the vitality. At any rate it was impossible, I think, to touch any phase of that war without being forced to consider over and over again the old questions of God and immortality. For one thing, one was at certain times in momentary expectation of physical death, and expecting death as an actual happening is of course very different from idly supposing that some day or another death will come. Then for four years I was almost constantly in the company of Russians, and whatever is true or false about the Russian (I am speaking of the real Russian and not the foreign Jew variety) this is certain about him, that his mind is so continuously speculative that there are no barriers for him between this world and any other. That is not to say that he is religious—the intellectual Russians with whom I spent a good deal of my time were all definitely agnostic, but in their company you were forced to realise that everything is possible and that God should be seated on a golden throne behind the pearly gates is no more unlikely than that someone in Pittsburg, U.S.A., should be able to speak to someone in Leeds at a moment's notice.

During the first two years of the war also I was continuously tending the dying, and it was here that I learnt for the first time of the utter unimportance of the body by

itself. Something seemed to me always to escape at the moment of death that was of enormous value, and this very often when the dying man was smashed beyond any recognition of human form and far away from the possibility of human thought. My trouble at this time was, as it is my trouble now, that I hadn't the brain for clear philosophic or scientific thinking; there is no experience of mine that I could offer to any clever scientist and he not be able at once to make me feel like a child in a nursery. There was a day during the horrible retreat towards Tarnople when, in an indescribable mêlée of confusion and horror, I succoured a dying Austrian officer. He babbled words that I could not understand, his face, part of which had been blown away, was dreadful, but as he lay in my arms I loved him with a force and conviction that now, after all these years and in spite of all the hundreds of other human beings whom I at this time cared for, remains vivid and intense in my memory. Physically he had no form, intellectually I could have no communication with him, the time of our contact was, I suppose, about half an hour in length, but my spirit and his achieved relationship during that time once and for all. As we rumbled back to our base that evening, our rough country carts loaded with dying and wounded, the sky a lovely fairy blue, the birds singing in the trees, I was certain that I had been led a step further in my spiritual experience. And how little to remember! sentimental weariness after an exhausting and nerve-racking day, an imaginary illusion due to certain physical causes, faint spider-web of experience that one touch would disperse; everything and anything could have shaken away from me that tiny incident, and yet it remains to this day twelve years later as strong as ever.

I learnt one great lesson during the war, or rather began to learn it—the lesson of passivity. One realised so quickly how helpless one was against the determined purpose of events and gradually perceived that it might be possible that one would always do better if one waited for direction.

Around one incident that occurred to me on the Russian front I must pause for a moment. I have already described this in a little collection of autobiographical sketches published under the title of "The Crystal Box," but as these were privately printed and as the incident in question changed, I think, the whole course of my life, I may be excused for mentioning it here.

It was during the Russian retreat of 1915, and my regiment had halted in a small Galician town and we were passing the night in the ruined château of a Galician nobleman. I remember lying on the dusty boards and looking up at the painted ceiling with the naked gods and goddesses, the pink Cupids and the marble fountains; the place was in a terrible mess, broken furniture lay everywhere, and there was a huge organ half-tumbling to the floor. It was terribly hot, I remember, most of us lay there nearly naked, the sweat pouring from our bodies. Suddenly I was quite certain that in another half-hour I should be dead. I had often of course before in the past years expected death at any moment, but this was an experience quite different from the others; it was as though someone had told me that I was going to die, as a doctor may sometimes tell his patient. I knew exactly the manner of my death: the Austrians would blow up a bridge near us and we should be blown up with it. I knew exactly how it would be, because I have had all my life nightmare

dreams in which I have experienced exactly the sense of sudden death; there would be a terrific noise, a blow in the chest, a momentary agony of surprise, and then nothing more. On this occasion I was quite certain, and I remember thinking of things and people that I was going to leave; I remember feeling sorry that I hadn't written a masterpiece, that I must leave two people whom I dearly loved, but most of all that I must abandon so many beautiful things, tiny things, the sound of running water, birch trees in the sun, a hot day by the sea, music, reading a good book by the fire, a walk over the hills, and so on. Then, with absolute conviction, I was aware that I would be leaving nothing, that whatever I had found lovely and of good report I should still enjoy, that, as Blake said, death was no more than a passing from one room to another. The climax of this little incident was disappointing: a bridge *was* blown up, but not the bridge near us, and I lived to fight another day.

Now what are you to do with an experience like this? It is riddled with platitude. To the people who have had similar experiences it is only a small confirmation of what they know already to be true; for the people who are sceptical it is not evidence of anything; and if I look at it myself with the eye of reason, it comes to nothing more than a nervous reaction. Its only interest in a confession of a general experience like this is the after-influence it had. In the growth of anyone's spiritual life it is not the actual event that is of importance but the long-developing results of that event. It would be quite untrue to say that after this incident I never again doubted the immortality of the soul; I have doubted it many times; but it is also a fact that my life after this was different from my life before it. I was in no way a

better man, no more unselfish nor more noble nor stronger armed against catastrophes and irritations; it was rather that since that night in the Galician chateau my life has been coloured differently, a new strand has been worked into the pattern of my carpet and that remarkably against my will.

This matter of one's will seems to me an all-important factor in one's spiritual life. I have always had the Englishman's ingrained desire not to be taken in, not to be made a fool of; against that I have also had an idealistic nature wishing always to find life good and people noble-minded, and these two quite opposite strains in me have always pulled the one against the other. My intellectual friends had always had an air of being wise old codgers for whom silly traps were being continually laid. In that I had known they were often wrong; the intellectual part of man lays obviously traps for itself, and as I have gone about the world it has seemed to be that the difference between the very cleverest man I have ever known and the stupidest intellectually is so slight in comparison with the all-pervading mystery of life as scarcely to be worth mention, whereas the difference between the noblest-charactered man that I have ever known and the most morally evil is so vast both in their actual psychology and in the effects of their influence that the distance between them cannot possibly be estimated. So in this experience of mine I found that it had intellectually neither size nor shape, but that it had planted a seed in me which all my intellectual determination to kill could never touch.

It was after this that, like many another man of the post-war generation, I returned quite freshly to the life and

character of Christ. I had never been able to read books of theology, partly I suppose because they had pressed around me in so many dusty volumes during my youth, and partly because they always seemed to me to start by begging all the questions that I wanted answered. But Papini's "Life of Christ" came out about this time, and although I think it to be a rather hysterical and sentimental work it took me back to Christ's personality as nothing else had done since George Moore's "Brook Kerith." I made also a friend at this time whose whole life was illuminated by this personal sense of Christ. I will not here be tiresome by emphasising all the things that struck me so freshly in this revived encounter with the New Testament—they are only the things that strike everyone else—but beyond the grandeur, the lovable wisdom, the humanity, the astonishingly convincing psychology, I was aware again and again of the emphasis that Christ lays upon passivity. I began to listen for directions, again and again my own impetuosity or conceit or cocksureness kept breaking in; I thought that I was lonely and rushed off to make a new friend; I thought that I was neglected and asked a hundred people to my house; I thought that I was dropping behind in the literary race and conceived ideas of being clever and original and modern, and whenever I thought of my own advancement things went wrong. You may say that it was easy enough for me to be passive when I had health, sufficient income, friends, and a certain position in the literary world, but, as everyone knows, these material successes are sufficiently hollow in actual realisation. Although here it is easy enough to be hypocritical, it is pleasanter to have money than not to have it, it is infinitely happier—and indeed in the physical world it is by far the most important thing of all—to have good health rather than

bad; the point is that, however many material things you have, one tiny trouble, a toothache, an unexpected expense, a quarrel with a friend, can disturb your peace as sharply as though you had no material possessions at all. It is a platitude but the truth that one knows many more happy and contented people among the poor than among the rich.

The realisation brought one was simply this, that there was no security in any of these material things; you could not put your hand on any one of them for more than a moment, they changed their colour and shape even as you looked at them. It came to this then, that by the time I was forty both the intellectual and the material physical life were entirely insufficient for happiness. An ironic observer might say to that, "Yes, because you have neither intellect nor material success enough"; and a further observer might say, "But what is all this talk about happiness? No one is happy"; and further than this again, "Anyone who is able to be happy in this world so filled with pain and disappointment is a non-thinking, non-observant, worthless creature."

Yes, I didn't mean quite happiness, but rather a contact with something infinitely deep, good, and powerful, something of which I was always conscious in the life of Christ, of my mother, of certain friends, and in the autobiographies or letters of men like Walter Scott, Charles Lamb, William James, Walter Page. It was something neither solemn nor serious nor definitely religious; you might say that it was character, but that was not sufficient; it was not of necessity mystical—neither Scott nor Lamb was a mystic—nor was it of necessity unselfishness nor love of friends—both Henry James and Joseph Conrad were among the most

unselfish of men and adored their friends and they had not got it—and the noblest human being I know alive to-day, a man of great fame, of the highest intellect, absolute rectitude of life, passionately conscious of the sufferings of his fellow human beings, always assisting them, has not a touch of it.

It has nothing to do with health nor sickness—some of the healthiest people I know have it and some of the poorest in health. It has oddly little to do with dogmatic religion: one famous man of letters to-day who is an ardent Roman Catholic is filled with it; another, also famous, also an ardent Roman Catholic, has none of it. It does not belong of necessity to virtuous living; I have known it present in scoundrels and absent from many whose lives are beyond reproach. It does not belong of necessity to kindness nor generosity of heart: I have known men who are mean, deeply egoistic, who have it. It can go with cynicism, irony, intellectual arrogance, and be absent from unselfishness, idealism, and humility. It is, I can see now quite clearly, by far the most important thing in life, and yet it is the quality, the possession, the contact, that people on the whole think less about than any other.

In the years that succeeded the war we have all, I imagine, been compelled in one fashion or another to think continually about religion. It seems as though none of us now are allowed to escape it, however deeply we wish. The newspapers are filled with it, it underlies almost all the comments on daily affairs, it crops up continually in private conversation, and we have the old paradox that while we are told on every side that the churches both in England and

America are emptying, there is a more genuinely religious, questioning spirit abroad than in any living man's memory.

For myself, once the war had made me realise that I must be receptive rather than positive, that I must place myself in the position of one waiting for news rather than the definite announcer of dogmatic facts, I became aware of a number of things. I found that the differences between various religions became infinitely small to me, that I welcomed any religious school if it led its followers towards that contact with this inner spiritual life of which I was beginning to be so conscious, that you seemed to be able to enter into this life through countless different doors, everyone had his own method of approach. I found too that my own consciousness of increasing spiritual activity was, when I came to define it, too vague to be of much use to anyone else, and I realised how essential it always was for anyone who wanted to share his spiritual life with others to form a very definite creed as Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed, Christ had done, and that these creeds were only a tiny part of all that they themselves were conscious of knowing; and that this inevitably happened afterwards, that the followers of these creeds extended them to cover the whole of the prophet's own experience, magnified words into laws, turned laws into tyrannies, and all this out of only the smallest, the easiest, the least important parts, of the prophet's original experience.

I was no longer vague in myself; waiting and listening I caught more and more the stir and activity of this other life. It might be an imagined activity, it might be purely cerebral, the idealistic longing for something common to us all; but whether it were false or not I began gradually to realise that

everything in my life that was of any kind of value came from this, and that, therefore, even were it a cheat and a nothing, it had great forces of beauty and strength in my own little affairs.

This consciousness of this other life, this increasing sympathy and comradeship with all people of whatever form of religion who were also conscious of it, entered into a new phase with the death of my mother two years ago. We had been very close companions, especially during the last years of her life; I had had no knowledge of or contact with any kind of spiritualism, nor, after her death, did I feel any impulse to be in touch with her in that way, but that I have been in touch with her constantly since her death it would be idle to deny. This contact has been, I dare say, simply mental; it is the result quite possibly only of physical memory and a great love lasting over many years; I am not really concerned with the cause of it, but the results have been, whether I wished it or no, compelling in their effect. I have led and am leading a very busy life filled with all kinds of things, I am not sentimental in my thoughts about my mother, I regret in no way her death—she was weary and tired and in very delicate health—but I am never permitted for any length of time to be unconscious of my contact with her. It is far more active and practical than it was when she was on this earth, and it seems to come always from the other side and not from mine. Again and again I have been pulled up in something that I was about to do, in some conversation, some work, some pleasure, and I have been led quite definitely in another direction; my life has been infinitely richer and happier since her death.

I am not claiming in this any proof of the survival of the human personality, any additional confirmation of any creed or doctrine; I am only affirming what I know, that I am now increasingly aware of the existence of a world of far greater importance than this one. Whether I am cheated mentally, physically, or spiritually I do not care; I am willing to be so cheated, nay, eager to be when the experience leads to a life richer, more tolerant, more understanding. If, as may be the case, the most important thing for us in this world is that we should be woken to a consciousness of another one, then I can understand the persistence in this life of all the instruments that will wake us to this consciousness, pain, sorrow, loneliness, as well as happiness, success, and intimate love. I can understand too the necessity of all and every religious creed; one man is led by one path, another by another; I understand further the necessity that every human being should obey the instructions of his own personal experience; contempt for another's religious belief seems to me now one of the worst of crimes.

I have tried to trace, at any rate with honesty, the successive stages of my religious experience. I am only in the middle years of my physical life and in the very earliest moments of my religious life; I am aware that to anyone who believes in a very definite religious creed my statement here must seem vague and amorphous; I would only ask them to be tolerant towards an experience that is as yet in its earliest stage. If I may take some of the greatest lines in all poetry to explain my present state, here are these from Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking."

"Now I know what I am for," he cries:

*"Nevermore shall I escape, nevermore the
reverberations,
Nevermore the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from
me.
Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was
before what, there, in the night
By the sea, under the yellow and sagging moon,
The messenger there aroused—the fire, the sweet hell
within,
The unknown want, the destiny of me."*

I affirm that I have become aware, not by my own wish, almost against my will, of an existence of another life of far, far greater importance and beauty than this physical one, beautiful and important though that is; that the knowledge of this other life leads to increasing happiness and interest; that it brings one, however slowly and with however many personal stupidities, ignorances, and clumsy faults, to a new tolerance, a new sympathy with every human being alive, a new understanding of the difficulties and obstructions that this life here is continually presenting to us.

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