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## RELIGION: THE COMMON DENOMINATOR

BY JONAH B. WISE

THE expression of religion in mathematical terms is unfair. Still, one might be excused if one borrowed the exact terminology of the most exact of sciences to describe part of the most exacting of experiences. Religion makes enormous demands. It makes them on more people than any other social factor; it sets a greater task for the individual and the mass. It makes more loyalties and more inherited affiliations than any art, science or political experience of the human race. It functions equally amongst cultured and crude, civilised and savage, white, black, brown and yellow. When men meet they may find few experiences common to all which establish a contact, hostile, friendly or neutral; but religion offers such a meeting place.

Religion is, has been, and will continue to be, a common experience for all people, positively or negatively, actively or inactively, touching every life somewhere, somehow. No door leading to human effort has ever been successfully closed to it.

It has changed because it has touched the arts, the sciences and the policies of human society. Where it did not originate it profoundly influenced, and where it did not destroy, it radically altered. For evil or for good, religion has coloured every phase of human endeavour. This is true among the most as well as the less and least enlightened. Its influence is as significant and as certain in an enlightened English or American gathering as it is in a Coolie meeting or a Hottentot conclave. In fact, religion is so subtle an element in human society that it functions more forcefully when freed in a more aspiring culture than it does when confined in a less enlightened one.

Josiah Royce says, "A man's religious faith, whatever more special items of doctrine it may involve, means for me essentially his faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be explained."

All religions are, at bottom, one, in their origins in man's native tendency to a more buoyant interpretation of himself in his world. The gross as well as the refined find an inspiration or a challenge to a better adjustment to life in religion. It is, therefore, the one experience known to all ages, all types and all circumstances, and is in itself the great common denominator of man's life.

A pressing necessity of our age is to find a universal fact, some common factor, which will establish a

conscious kinship between men. Religion has had a hectic and tumultuous career. It has united groups with a power inherent in no other social phenomenon. The Koran and the sword of the prophet transformed an anarchic crowd of Yemenite Bedouins into a world conquering unity; the assumption of the symbol of the cross and the idea of rescuing the Holy Sepulchre made for a union of European peoples, staggering in its firmness and theretofore impossible and unthinkable.

There is no part of the world, no section of human history, that has not found in religion a means for securing what was wanted or needed, things for which the common powers of men were often inadequate. The early settlement of America has a conscious religious background reflected in every colonial group, and recognised by Burke in his speech on "The Conciliation of the American Colonies."

A curious tribute to this inevitable background to human history is the following: Bishop Agostino Guistiniano of a patrician family of Genoa, commenting in an Italian 1516 edition of the Psalms in Hebrew, on Psalm 19, verse 6, "His line goeth out to the ends of the earth," says, "In our own times, by his wonderful daring, Christopher Columbus, the Genoese, has discovered almost another world and a new congregation of Christians. In truth, as Columbus often maintained that God had chosen him as

the instrument for the fulfillment of this prophecy, I deem it not improper here to refer to his life." (David Amram's translation.) Lincoln's reference to the same Psalm in his Second Inaugural Address in the use of the words, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether," carries the thread of religious potency from Genoa to Washington, from a Bishop barely escaped from mediævelism to the free mentality of the great emancipator.

Great accomplishments by masses of humanity must be motivated by profound impulses. Trivial forces have no place in history. Where a great need arises, a great power must be employed. Despite all his intellectual possibilities, man is a clumsy and fumbling creature. He has succeeded only at a cost which is often ridiculously out of proportion in effort to the end attained.

To-day he has consciously or unconsciously set as an objective the attainment of peace between men and nations. The latter are more difficult to hold in check than the former. International relations are grotesquely old fashioned and childish. Napoleon tried to create a means of contact between states which was direct and candid. His failure to do so was his real Waterloo. Our Balkanised international relations are the result of archaic terms in the hands of hopeless valetudinarians. As between men, an es-

tablishment of a better order is potentially within the power of a greater and more intelligent force.

The Prophet Micah once wrote about a universal force which would bring peace to men. He believed that it was religion but, curiously enough, not necessarily his religion, for he says (Micah 4:1-5)—

"But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the hills; and people shall flow unto it.

"And many nations shall come, and say: Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths: for the law shall go forth out of Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

"And He shall judge between many peoples and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

"But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the Lord of hosts hath spoken it.

"For all people will walk every one in the name of his god, and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever."

Micah was a liberal. He claims that the essential corollary to his peace pact is to "walk every one in the name of his god." Here is to be found the key to the use of religion as a factor for good-will. Strange that it should have been so well stated such a long time ago, and so little used even in our day! One cannot escape the logic of it. Religion is a barrier to human unity which is insurmountable when it permits its motives and methods to shrink to the level of other partisan programs. The selfish salvationism which produced an inquisition is a type of religious littleness not peculiar to Rome, but common to all sects which demand a monopoly of the right to chaperone humanity into heaven. Such thinking has seared men's bodies to save their souls.

The question naturally arises as to whether the religions of men can ever be big enough to render the service demanded to-day, or whether they will continue in the light of cultural democracy to shrink more and more into cruel and warring sects. One cannot dismiss religion. Its most discouraged ministers and most disillusioned votaries must finally come to that conclusion. One can and must utilise it. To do so it must be liberal. That is the first step.

What is Liberal Religion? One might say without irreverence, "The Lord only knows." Is it a revolt against forms and customs? Not at all. Those things are mere incidents and the dislike of them can hardly

be sufficient cause for intelligent opposition. Is it rebellion against priests, prelates, pastors and presbyters? Not at all. They are the human machinery, despite the claims, and dissent from their authority is not the basis for a positive movement. Is it disagreement with dogma? Not entirely. Dogma and convictions are often miles apart. A dead dogma or a distasteful one will disappear of itself.

Liberal religion is the democratisation of faith. It is the high spiritual achievement of our day. It is not a cheap alloy of concessions, quarrels and emendations. It is the natural result of actual, vital religious experience. A liberal in faith can conceivably be a pope, a Methodist bishop or a country vicar. For to be such he need not concede the validity of another sect's ideas, but its right under God to have them. That doctrine has been fought for with blood and tears for centuries. It is, however, basic to religion's place as the common denominator in human good-will, and until it is accepted in principle there can be no such thing. Liberal religion is the recognition of the inherent right of every man to "walk, every one in the name of his god." From that standpoint there can conceivably come a service which faith is capable of rendering, in that it will unite men while retaining for each its own best powers.

There will never be a universal religion in the sense that there will be no sects. It is not only impos-

sible, it is undesirable. Man interprets himself best by groupings which are naturally different. Life is a game. One of its reasons and helps is the interplay of healthful rivalries. While one cannot foresee the time when religions will be sportsmanlike, one can predict the day when they will be mutually tolerant.

The serious clash of religious experiences will vitalise life. It will release energies which it alone has in the past been able to command. They exhibited themselves in crusades, in missions to unexplored regions; in ministrations to the sick, the poor and the disinherited. It has done tremendous things.

Liberal religion takes religion seriously. It is unwilling to give it up because of the criticisms mentioned before. It believes in this eternal reaction of man to his environment and God. The things which divide men and parties are the little ones. Gulliver's Lilliputians warred over opening an egg at the big or little end. The animosities and jealousies of life arising from rivalries in business, love and ambition are endless and inevitable. The palliatives for these are not to be found in them. A greater and a nobler than they must intercede, and that better or even best in human affairs is undeniably religion, but only religion raised to its best powers. It is hopeful that all will eventually concede that freedom to all which will make for good-will between men, with faith as the common denominator.

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#### WALTER PRICHARD EATON

(DRAMA: A BOND OF FELLOWSHIP)

*Walter Prichard Eaton is perhaps the dean of American dramatic critics—certainly among those who keep abreast of the developments made by our native drama. His outspokenness was detrimental to the advertising columns and is said to have lost him at least one lucrative position, but that same episode gained him a host of followers. He has reviewed with equal authority both plays and music. For the past two decades he has been virtually a free lance, but all the more ardent in his efforts to contribute creatively to the development of American playwriting. The little theatre movement owes much of its virility and fine promise to the encouragement received at the hands of Mr. Eaton. His essays and books on the subject have stimulated almost national response to this wholesome movement in America—and in Europe, too. A keen lover of Nature, Mr. Eaton has written extensively, in a lucid style and with an outlook infectiously optimistic, on the allure of the beckoning outdoors.*