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What Does the Church Stand For?

Barbara Wilkinson

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WHAT the Church stands for is of special importance to me because of the distance I have had to travel to find it. Methodism happened to be the faith in which I was reared, but I often used to attend other churches, especially the Congregational Church, and my friends ranged all the way from one or two avowed agnostics to several devout Roman Catholics.

I had grown away from "orthodox" Protestantism during my college years. Its establishment of a complete dichotomy between the spiritual and material universes had caused my first questioning of its doctrines. Further, I had grown distrustful of its emphasis upon emotion and on self and individualism. It seemed to me to smack of utilitarianism: one was religious in order to achieve bliss for oneself in the here-

after. Finally, I had rejected it because its doctrine of salvation, while providing a definite spiritual technique through emotional conversion, explained salvation in mechanical or magical terms. Even though we were sinful, if we believed that Jesus was God's Son and tried to do what God wanted us to do, then, in return, God would bestow His grace upon us and let us go to Heaven as soon as we died, to live with Him forever. I don't pretend to be a theologian, yet that, stripped to its essentials, is how orthodox Protestantism appeared to me. At no point was there any vital relationship between man and God. They were separated by an impassable gulf and the only point of contact seemed to be that man would somehow be happier if he could live forever near this unapproachable, incomprehensible Being. Atonement was thought of as Jesus' suffering on the Cross which, because it had been so horrible and because Jesus Himself had been divine, was sufficient sacrifice in God's eyes to admit all human-kind thereafter to eternal bliss. A rather diabolical doctrine, I decided, quite apart from its fairy-tale like unreality and naïveté.

In college I met the liberal Protestant point of view. Its rationality commended itself to me from the start. Its emphasis was upon intellectualism as opposed to emotion. Moreover, it avoided the egocentricity of the orthodox faiths by its emphasis on the social gospel, its insistence upon the economic and social fulfillment of the prayer, "Thy will be done on earth." Here was a program of action, something a young person could get his teeth into. Its doctrine was understandable and concrete rather than esoteric and mystical. Redemption and salvation were explained in psychological terms. There was no magic about it, no superstition. It consisted of losing one's life in some great, controlling Loyalty or Cause and thereby achieving personal integration. Jesus was looked upon as a Man of Supreme Genius, divine in the sense that He stood at the apex of human development. He had achieved, more completely than anyone else, personal integration by losing His life utterly in the cause of humanity's development. Moreover, He possessed unsurpassed insight into the psychological and social needs of mankind and had probed more deeply than anyone else

into the causes of this world's ills and into the techniques of personal redemption and salvation.

Such a viewpoint is challenging. If a person accepts the responsibilities implied in such a philosophy, he is at once caught up in a tremendous round of intellectual endeavor, and in activities centered in the sociological, economic, and even political aspects of modern life. He finds emotional dynamic in the thought that he, along with the thinkers and prophets of all history, is doing his bit toward lifting the world a little closer to that ideal life of which it is capable. He eschews belief in personal immortality, rather scorning those who are unable to wrest meaning from a life dedicated to a noble ideal unless they themselves are assured the personal reward of eternal bliss.

I often used to marvel at both my orthodox Protestant and my Catholic friends. The former I understood, for I had begun my religious life as one of them. Almost without exception they were intellectually unawakened or culturally provincial. They had simply accepted without question the faith which had been handed on

to them. Confronted with scientific facts and modern thought such persons faced a trying dilemma. Some simply shut their minds and adhered doggedly to their beliefs. Some could "compartmentalize" their thinking in a schizoidic attempt to accept both areas of thought at once. Others repudiated their faith entirely, becoming atheists or agnostics, usually with severe emotional and psychological reverberations. Still others managed to hang onto the old with ever decreasing tenacity until they had built or found a new faith on which to stand—a faith that was consistent, logical, that squared with the facts of the universe as revealed by science, and that provided a constructive, dynamic outlet for emotion. I used to pride myself on being among this group.

I never did understand my Catholic friends. They were not at all articulate about their religion and what little I knew of Catholic ritual and dogma made me wonder even more at the mental gymnastics my Catholic friends must have been obliged to go through in order to justify their religion. The baffling thing about it was that some of the Catholics I knew were far

from being intellectually unawakened or culturally provincial. Neither did they seem to be facing the emotional upheavals which my Protestant friends went through in trying to reconcile science and religion. I chalked up the solution chiefly under their ability to compartmentalize their thinking. I also attributed it to the combination of fear, superstition, and highly emotionalized drama which the Church had so skillfully woven into its religion.

Then there were the Episcopalians. Of the three Episcopal churches I had known, none was large, and all were definitely "low church." I thought of them as Protestant churches with an extra ritualistic "hangover" from Catholicism. Almost every Episcopalian I knew was an eminently respectable individual, usually on the intellectual side, conservative both in economics and politics, and moderately well-to-do. These facts alone were rather damning in the eyes of a young protagonist of the social gospel. I knew almost nothing about their Church. The few times I had attended their services I had found much of dignity and beauty, but had become hopelessly lost in the maze of uprisings and

downsittings, irritated at being unable to find my way about in their Prayer Book, and frustrated at having strange hymns sung to tunes I had never heard from a hymn-book without music.

It was with somewhat mixed emotions, then, that I found myself falling in love with an Episcopalian who was also a devout Anglo-Catholic. When we decided to be married, almost the first thing we settled was the matter of religion. I would become an Episcopalian, I said, for the church I belonged to did not matter as much to me as his seemed to matter to him. As for being an Anglo-Catholic, we could even go to a "high" church, I thought. So long as we were worshipping the same God, what difference did the outward form make? I was to learn a great deal, in the months that followed, about the relationship of form to ideas.

We attended such churches as The Church of the Transfiguration and The Church of St. Mary the Virgin in New York, and The House of Prayer and Grace Church in Newark. The first few services were bad enough, although I was then thoroughly occupied in getting through the ritual

properly and finding my place in the Prayer Book. Once that was accomplished matters grew rapidly worse. I found myself, to my amazement and chagrin, balking at every step. I had considered myself far above rancour or emotional upheaval over such "minor irrelevancies" as form and ceremony. Yet I found myself in the grip of the most unreasoning impatience and resentment and a wordless, confused fury whenever I attended a service in these churches.

I was impatient with what seemed to me to be the intellectual obtuseness if not actual hypocrisy of the worshippers. How could intelligent, educated persons go through an hour or more of kneeling, bowing, genuflecting, and crossing themselves and actually believe that such "antics" got them nearer to God? And if they didn't believe it, why did they do it? I was resentful that I could not receive communion, and that I had to be confirmed before I was considered a good enough Christian (so I thought) to be admitted to full membership in the Church. I was filled with inarticulate fury at what seemed to me to be the condescending complacency of the clergy and church leaders as to

the superiority of the Anglican Communion over various Protestant denominations. In my highly sensitive state casual witticisms, voiced purely in the interest of jovial conversation by clergy and other new friends in the Church, seemed peculiarly pointed. The humor of "It's nice to welcome these Methodist sheep back into the true fold," simply left me seething.

I tried to tell myself that these strange forms and attitudes didn't matter, that it was the Spirit which counted. Yet week by week I found those very forms pushing me nearer to a wall of desperation, uncertainty, and confusion. My "faith that was consistent, logical, that squared with the facts of the universe," my concept of the Church as a vehicle of social evolution, indeed my whole concept of God and of religion began to crack. I found myself in the same intellectual and spiritual morass I had gone through as a college student in trying to think my way out of my childhood faith, and yet not lose the precious and vital things about it.

My confusion was increased by the fact that just before I was so precipitately introduced to Anglo-Catholicism I had begun to have uneasy

suspicions about the liberal Protestant faith which had for several years been wondrously meaningful to me. I felt that a Church should be something more than an ethical culture society, yet I began to realize, vaguely, that if I took my faith seriously the Church was reduced to just that. If the Church was chiefly a vehicle of social evolution, then were not social workers, consulting psychologists, sociologists, and economists far better trained than ministers to perform such a task? Moreover, once this social ideal was reached in some far-distant future, and all men had achieved personal integration and a state of brotherly love, what would be left for the Church to do?

Cynics and scholarly foes of Christianity have pointed out time and again that most of Jesus' teachings in regard to human conduct, morality, and social intercourse were not new, nor were they especially loftier than those of other great teachers. He may have presented them somewhat more dynamically. He may Himself have had greater charm and potency of personality. He may have synthesized and analyzed with greater genius, but that is all.

If one is honest, one must accept the validity of much of this viewpoint. If, furthermore, one has rejected the hypothesis of immortality, and denied reality to the supernatural, one is left rather flat so far as one's insistence upon the uniqueness of Christianity and the peculiar difference of Jesus from other men is concerned. There is left, if one remains a liberal Protestant, only a sort of semi-atheism, a kind of glorified humanism, lifted by emotional dedication to greater heights of ecstasy than an avowed humanist would permit himself to indulge in. Religion reduces itself, as a result of inexorable logic, to a social ethic backed by an emotional dynamic which can, in turn, be explained in terms of psychological mechanisms. In place of a dichotomy there is complete unity of the material and spiritual universes, but this unity is achieved by explaining or defining spiritual things in material terms.

Furthermore, the Christian doctrine of the supreme value of every individual life was slipping through my fingers. If the present life was all there was, and if individual life had meaning only in so far as it lifted humanity nearer to its final

Goal, then it followed inexorably that the worth of an individual was in direct proportion to the intelligence and ability he happened to possess. Obviously, here was a dilemma that the modernist faith could not answer. Some modernists attempted to do so by pointing out that the quality of relationships between individuals, not the individuals themselves, was the Supreme Value in the world. The words are noble and inspiring, but they leave unanswered the query of the common man who asks why his particular life is important when it embodies little of usefulness or beauty and when in spite of his best efforts he makes a mess of his relationships with others.

My engagement to an Anglo-Catholic brought these doubts to a head. Because I loved him I could not ignore his religious philosophy. Furthermore, he was too intelligent and articulate about his religion for me to dismiss it as childish or inconsistent. Faced by his cool certainty and rationality, my already wobbling structure of religious concepts went down in complete confusion. Once I recovered from the emotional shock of having my religion tumble about my ears, I

began to suspect that it was not religion at all. God and religion cannot be manufactured from a materialistic philosophy, however noble, simply by writing certain words with capital letters and enunciating them with a rapt expression. I was discovering that if I followed the road of liberal Protestantism far enough I was confronted with the choice between two forks: atheism or Catholicism. I even gasped a little when I discovered that, since the road forks in only two directions and I had known nothing about Catholicism, I had travelled several miles down the highway toward atheism.

Nearly two years were needed before I had wormed my way haltingly, sometimes unwillingly, through the maze of opposing ideas and emotions tied up in my own mind with both Protestantism and Catholicism. When I finally emerged with a consistent religious philosophy and took a good look at it, I realized that I had become a Catholic.

As a result of this thinking I now see wherein lay the key to my objections to all things Catholic. It lay in this, that as a liberal Protestant I no longer believed in the reality of the super-

natural. I had made religion synonymous with psychology and social ethics, and I had confused "spiritual" with "emotional" and "intellectual." No wonder that the ritual and ceremony of the Mass seemed like superstitious rites, that the Catholic concept of Holy Communion and the other sacraments of the Church was incomprehensible to me!

A belief in the reality of the supernatural by no means denies reality to the natural, nor does it imply a blind, unquestioning faith in "magic" or things un-natural. Quite the contrary. If one believes that all life is a continuum, from forms on the lowest possible physical plane to the realm of pure spirit; if one believes that all form is the manifestation of some inner reality and bound together by some inner consistency, then one's devotion to science and one's search for Truth are redoubled rather than lessened.

As a Catholic I feel that the Church's chief function is that of providing the spiritual avenue, commanded and ordained by God in Christ, whereby man may attain at-one-ment with God. As a means to that end I see that it has set up and adhered rigidly to certain basic articles of

faith and ritualistic forms. I realize that the Church's prime concern is spiritual—the relation between man and God. Its concern with morals and ethics, social and economic systems, though very real, is always secondary. For these involve relationships between man and man and are, therefore, not primarily religious.

As a Catholic I understand salvation not as a magical transportation of our imperfect souls to a realm of eternal bliss, nor as the achievement of personal integration through psychological insight. Although it certainly includes the latter, it is basically a spiritual process whereby a man's soul becomes perfect, even as God Himself is perfect. This growth toward perfection is a slow, laborious process, beginning in this life and continuing after death. To assist us in the struggle, the Church has provided spiritual "exercises" and "food" in the form of such sacraments as the Confessional and Holy Communion.

I have found this sacramental religion to be very different from anything I had known before. One's progress God-ward is not gauged by the pitch of emotional dedication one may

achieve from time to time as the result of an inspired sermon or a particular moving religious "experience." Indeed, I am finding that such experience may actually hinder spiritual progress by making one think he has found God when he is only on an emotional jag. One may even go to church in order to induce a sense of peace and exaltation rather than to worship one's Maker. The worship I am learning as a Catholic is far different. It is God-centered, not sense-centered. It means that I have to hold wandering thoughts in leash so that mind and soul can come to grips with each other. It requires of me disciplined attention, mental effort, and hard work.

As I get deeper into Catholic thought, I see that the Mass is the very cornerstone of Catholicism. It is a service not of personal rededication but of actual communion with God, the chief means given to man by Christ whereby he can, on this earth, grow into the fuller stature of Son-ship. As such it is so sacred and important that one should partake of the sacrament as often as possible; for by so doing one can share in the continuing incarnation of God into life,

whereby that life is redeemed back to the divine Source of True Reality from which it flowed. Once I had accepted the Catholic thesis regarding the reality of things spiritual and their vital and natural relationship to material forms, the Catholic concept of Holy Communion and the Catholic emphasis on form in worship followed logically and simply. For the Catholic it is only natural and reverent to kneel before the bread and wine which have been spiritually transformed into the very Presence of God Himself. There is nothing magical about it, and if it is idolatrous, then so is life itself. The universe is so constituted that every word, every artistic expression, every action are the expressions in form of an intangible reality. True reality is always spirit; form merely serves to give this spirit tangible substance. If God could make Himself manifest in the physical body of Jesus, why can He not be equally present—not symbolically but actually present, here and now—in the sacrament of bread and wine? The denial of that doctrine can logically be made only by a humanist.

What, then, have I found in the Episcopal Church? What does it mean to me? I have

found a religious philosophy which is intelligent and consistent. I have found a faith which includes all I had gained as a liberal Protestant: intellectual honesty, a deepened social consciousness, and religious beliefs in harmony with scientific truth. I have found a faith which returns to me my childhood belief in the actuality of God as a divine Being and in Jesus as His divine Son, belief in personal immortality and in salvation through atonement.

Yet I have returned to those beliefs on such a different plane! God is no longer an un-natural, magical Being whose only connection with man is that He will reward him with eternal bliss if man believes on Him and does His will. Instead God is a super-Natural Being, spiritual and therefore actual union with Whom is the end and aim of all life. Immortality in this light is not only a quantitative thing; it is qualitative as well. It is not merely the continuous existence of ourselves as we now are. It is the uplifting and transforming of our selves—our souls—till we are indeed Perfect and can dwell in perfect union with God.

Jesus is again divine, not in the magical, me-

chanical sense of my childhood faith, but as the natural—supernatural if you will—incarnation of God by whose continuing incarnate Presence in the Church salvation through at-one-ment with God is made possible.

Through the sacraments of the Church I have found a definite technique for spiritual development. I had known myself before as a physical, emotional, and intellectual person. I have begun, at long last, to discover myself as a spiritual being.

* * * *

P. S.—One of this paper's chief weaknesses I feel to be in its attempt to explain the meaning of spirit and worship and sacramental religion as I understand them as a Catholic. I have rewritten that section several times, only to discover each time that the thing I really want to say has eluded my grasp. The essence of the matter seems to defy language and I feel as if I have been trying to describe air by sculpturing its portrait in marble.