

PETER BELL IN SEARCH OF A RELIGION

A primrose by a river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more.

Peter Bell

BY WILLARD L. SPERRY

I

A WINTER'S evening in Michaelmas Term at Oxford. The year does not matter, but it antedates these hectic days of *vers libre*, and is already slipping into the middle distance of the dark backward and abysm of time.

A don's room in one of the colleges on The High. The don himself just out of Balliol with a double first, an archiepiscopal tradition behind him and an episcopal destiny ahead of him, but for the moment little more than a healthy, hearty, overgrown undergraduate, much preoccupied with Plato in particular and with the romance of life in general. The usual after-dinner crowd of boys who habitually gravitated to that room of an evening, to bask in the radiance of the double first, and to share with its possessor the immemorial Oxford pastime of plucking at the elusive hem of The Mystery.

A generous fire of good pit-coal burning in the grate, innumerable basket chairs, a fresh tin of 'John Cotton,' the whole night long, and — Robert Browning. After much wrestling with Pacchiarotto and his works in distemper, with Ferishtah and Fifine, the ardors of this discipline are rewarded with a taste of shameless romance, 'By the Fireside.' The poem 'dates' — certain-

ly it dates. Somewhere midway between the disembodied Eros of Shelley and the masterful male who is the pace-maker for modern letters. But it had its place in the total economy of things. And as the echoes of Big Tom, pounding out the end of day, died away over the Towers of Oxford, the voice of the don boomed out the tender lines, —

Oh, the little more and how much it is!
And the little less and what worlds away!

Then 'Silence — eldest of things' fell on the room. The spell lingered unbroken, until the coals settled in the grate with an irreverent restlessness, and the stirring flames lighted up the awed faces of the circle. Finally, the don roused himself out of the chair, heaved a vast sigh, and turned to the prosaic business of academic life, with this tremendous conclusion to the whole matter: 'It must be very jolly to be in love!' Looking back, one does not know whether it is to laugh or to cry.

On the shelves of all respectable libraries there are the classical books of first-hand religion. In any measured five feet they are inevitable and inescapable. In some hour when we are obsessed by the 'too-much-with-us-ness' of the world, we take down one of these books and dip into it. There is *The*

Little Flowers of the Glorious Messer Saint Francis and of His Friars. It must be very jolly to have a religion like that. Even the most two-fisted of us could not have made better work of the wolf of Gubbio. And hanging out suet for the passing grackles is a poor secular substitute for preaching a sermon to our sisters, the swallows.

There on the same shelf is John Woolman's *Journal*; for Charles Lamb and Doctor Eliot have said so, and who shall say them nay. There are the poignant volumes of *Confessions* — Augustine's and Tolstoy's. There is Piers Plowman standing at the heart of his Fair Field Full of Folk, and there, too, Brother Lawrence possessing God in the sacramental tranquillity of his kitchen.

There, just added, is the Edith Cavell edition of the *Imitation*, with its entries on the flyleaf and its markings on the margin. This is holy ground, where no modern mind can walk irreverent along the King's Way of the Holy Cross. That flaming spirit passed on the morning of October 12, 1915. How much of the tragedy and glory of human life live in the three heavy black lines and the brief entry, 'St. Gilles, 11 Oct.,' which stand against the text: —

'I indeed labour in the sweat of my brows. I am racked with grief of heart, I am burdened with sins, I am troubled with temptations, I am entangled and oppressed with many evil passions; and there is none to help me, none to deliver and save me, but Thou, O Lord God, my Saviour, to whom I commit myself and all that is mine, that Thou mayest keep watch over me, and bring me safe to life everlasting.'

There, also, is Pascal's *Pensées*, with its matchless meditation upon the greatness and the littleness of man, prefaced by that memorable inscription on the bit of parchment found next his heart when he had died.



This year of Grace 1654
Monday November 23rd,
From about half past ten at night, to
about half after midnight,
Fire.

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of
Jacob,

Not of the philosophers and the wise,
Security, security. Feeling joy, peace,
Deum meum et Deum vestrum.

All this is more than 'jolly': it is austere and imperious.

The noisy traffickings of the world are silenced. Here are exultations, agonies, and love, and man's unconquerable mind. Even the pagan and the outlander realize that the banked fires of all that is imperishable in human experience slumber on such pages. Both the meaning of life and its central energy are found in such authentic lines.

To have known such hours in one's own life is to have lived in the eternal moment; to have missed them is merely to have existed through the appointed threescore years and ten.

These myriad days, these many thousand hours,
A man's long life so choked with dusty things,
How little perfect poise with perfect powers,
Joy at the heart and Beauty at the springs.
One hour, or two, or three in long years scattered,
Sparks from a smithy that have fired a thatch,
Are all that life has given and all that mattered.

How much of the profounder pathos of contemporary life is to be heard in the voice that still echoes in the sombre recesses of the prison of St. Gilles in Brussels: —

'I thank God for this ten weeks quiet before the end. . . . Life has always been hurried and full of difficulty. . . . This time of rest has been a great mercy. . . .'

II

Of the need of recovering the central tempers and energies of religion there is no possible doubt to-day. The pulpit cushion is not the only piece of furniture that has been threshed to pieces as the mute victim of our perplexity. The thing cries out to high heaven from all the world. A man wastes his time and breath, who seeks to vindicate the axiom that what the world needs to-day is a religion.

To the description and recovery of the 'Grand Perhaps,' which never ceases to invade our minor moods of cynicism and candid materialism, the more serious mind of the time has read-dressed itself. The philosopher of religion reviews the content of this experience in history, and announces with due solemnity that 'Religion affirms a supreme *Is-ness*.' The writings of the mystics are rescued from old neglect and republished in limp leather. Psychology meticulously classifies the phases of the standard episode, so that we now know a great deal about the neuroses and complexes of the saints, which, happily for them, they did not know. But still the wonder tarries.

The initial presumption is that the thing can be taught, 'line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.' Surely the master of the correct pedagogical method can turn the trick. Else what is he for? From the far countries of our own ignorance, we appeal our case to the Imperial Cæsars of the schoolroom. We vest the hope of our salvation in the process which we call religious education.

William James once propounded the theory that the sole object of a college education is to enable us to recognize a real man when we see one. The longer we reflect upon that conclusion to the whole academic matter, the more adequate it seems. In the same spirit, we

may go on to say that the sole object of a religious education is to enable us to recognize God when we see Him, and to have communion with Him. Voltaire was once walking the streets of Paris with a friend, when an ecclesiastical procession went by, bearing the Holy Eucharist. Voltaire lifted his hat as the sacred elements passed. His friend remonstrated to the effect that he had not supposed the great atheist recognized the existence of God. To which Voltaire replied, 'We bow, but we do not speak!' It is not enough for religion that a man have a bowing acquaintance with the Divine: God must be addressed and communed with.

Now, the fundamental fallacy of most of the religious pedagogy of the present time is the assumption that learning certain ecclesiastical and historical facts is the equivalent of communing with God. Most of us have carried over from youth the impression of one or two wholesome and invigorating teachers in the Sunday School. But, so far as the stuff of instruction was concerned, there lingers a chaotic memory of unassimilated facts, more or less reconciled to modern learning, and made the occasion for certain rather far-fetched moralizings.

There was the Creation story, arbitrarily readjusted to the body of knowledge covered by the first hundred pages of Mr. Wells's *Outline of History*. Maps of Egypt and Arabia, with a consideration of the plagues of a semi-tropical river basin, and occasional low tides in the Red Sea. Incidental attention to the pyramid of Cheops and the mummy of the great Rameses. The Conquest of Canaan, giving ample opportunity for an excursus on the effects of geography on history,—in this particular case, a phenomenon that may be noted quite as clearly in the Coast Range, the Sierras, and the desert of California,—in short, a

prospect neither more nor less religious than the view either way from San Bernardino. Samson, to be half-furtively enjoyed for all those qualities which distinguish him from the saints, and which would relegate him, in a modern reincarnation, to the police blotter. The Kings of Judah and Israel, a kaleidoscopic confusion of hard names, certainly less real to the average American child than the ritualistic 'Washntonadamsjefferson' of the day school, and probably yielding nothing more distinctly religious than the latter. The morass of the prophets, almost unintelligible to any but the severe student of history. A whipped-up interest in the dramatic values of the Book of Job, for healthy young pagans who have never so much as heard whether there be a problem of evil. Later on, much navigating the eastern Mediterranean with Saint Paul, to conclude with a glorious shipwreck tale.

To all this the gospel story of Jesus forms an inevitable exception, simply because Matthew Arnold was right when he said that Jesus is greater than his reporters, interpreters, and critics. But in the main the conventional discipline yields a strange potpourri of geography, dissociated happenings of varied ethical content and implication, much honest romance, and some dubious moral realism. It is not suggested for a moment that this is the content of the Bible, but merely that something of this incongruous sort is the actual product of the routine system in a vast number of cases: the whole to be read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested, as the substance of a religious experience.

Yes, it must be very jolly to have a religion. But in so far as most of us have achieved anything approximating to that consummation, we do not owe it to God seen, recognized, and directly communed with, in the story of Sam-

son's escapades or the nautical information as to Euroclydon and the coast line of Malta.

III

It will be at once said by the apologists for up-to-date religious pedagogy, that nothing of this sort is going on in the modern theological information factory; that all dubious material has been expurgated, and all permanently valuable material carefully reëdited, with a view to the needs of the time.

Persons of the Wells cult call attention to the forthcoming new scriptures of the race. But it is hard to suppress all advance skepticism. To begin with, there is a certain stable and reassuring somewhat in the very press work of Humphrey Milford, or of Eyre and Spottiswoode, which one fears the latest revisers will neglect. Moreover, the literary flavor will certainly fall far wide of the square-toed English of the King James translators. That version is vital with concrete Anglo-Saxon words that lie near the primal human emotions. The new version will almost certainly be done in the passionless language of universals and abstractions. Furthermore, the new scriptures will be a *tendenz* thing. Samuel will no longer be allowed to hew Agag to pieces before the Lord, nor Solomon to loll in luxury, because the editors have an advance eye already squinted toward a pacifist communism. In the place of Ezekiel prophesying over the valley of dry bones, we shall have Karl Marx desiccating reality for classroom consumption. In short, the new scripture may be useful, in the jargon of the modern office, 'as a matter of record'; but it will not capture, in its imminent pages, the elusive secret of religious education. Indeed, the better it turns out to be, the greater liability it will become. For the greater the burden laid upon it, and the more confidence vested in it as a

pedagogic tool, the farther away we get from the reality of the religious life. It is not, finally, the content of any scriptures, ancient or revised, that is under condemnation, but the process in which it is used, and our dull mechanical faith in the process. For learning facts, however venerable and venerated, is not getting religion. And what Henry Adams said of his 'futilitarian' search for an education holds true as a criticism of the pedagogic method, no matter what its particular content. 'Nothing in education is so astonishing as the amount of ignorance it accumulates in the way of inert facts.'

We might as well assume that mastering a standard textbook on eugenics, and exhausting the *Golden Bough* is the equivalent of falling in love. Whereas there is absolutely no connection whatsoever between the two. Somewhere in the hinterland of our natures, sex and religion short-circuit. The experiences of the one may be used to interpret the mysteries of the other. A man may read Havelock Ellis's five monumental volumes on *The Psychology of Sex*, and become a sadder and a wiser man; but he will never see on those pages 'the face that launched a thousand ships,' nor will he meet there his Helen, who shall make him immortal with a kiss. In short, it does not matter whether our pedantically accumulated information concern the love of woman, or the love of man passing the love of woman, or the love of God — the thing is not to be had from pedagogy pure and undefiled. The wife and the friend and the God that you got from a printed book go with you, Tomlinson!

IV

For the essence of religion is a certain 'given-ness.' And in spite of all our earnest twanging on the well-worn iron string of Self-Reliance, we cannot

improve upon the elder doctrine of the arbitrary and irresistible Grace of God. You cannot whip yourself up to falling in love. Either the thing is done on you by the beloved, or it is not. And religion is like that. 'My mother, the Holy Spirit,' says an old apocryphal gospel, 'took me by the hair of my head and carried me to Jerusalem.' The figure is painful to contemplate in imagination, but is vividly faithful to a certain drastic imperiousness which marks the ways of Reality with man. Either religion does step out of the picture one day and lay its masterful hand upon you, or it does not.

Vision will mate him not by law and vow;

Disguised in life's most hodden grey,

By the most beaten roads of every day

She waits him unsuspected and unknown.

The hardest pang whereon

He lays his mutinous head may be a Jacob's stone.

A very unecclesiastical friend ventured the other day the confession that he had been given a direct insight into the joy of the Creator; that he had shared for a moment what he could only suppose must be the transcendent pleasure of the Divine mind. It was a late afternoon on the Charles River Embankment. The waters of the basin lay flat and motionless, mirroring the flaming red and gold of the sunset and the black shadows of the Harvard Bridge. To the east the great gray curve of the West Boston Bridge bounded the quiet of all around. Suddenly, down this still beauty came a Metropolitan Police boat, moving swiftly and noiselessly, straight as a flying arrow. The little waves from her wake troubled the reflected colors of the sunset and the dark shadows, and the face of the waters moved like the systole and diastole of some great heart. Then the basin returned to its untroubled dreaming. Here was joy in color and pure line, in motion and rest—the divine aspect and the eternal temper of things.

It is in some such homely way that every real revelation comes to men. It comes in the familiar scene at the unexpected hour. It is gloriously free of all the conventions. It is supremely simple and natural, bringing with it the sufficient credentials of its own authority. The God whom we have fashioned out of the patient pedantry of the classroom or the sermon hour seems hopelessly artificial by comparison. And he yields place to One so utterly natural and wholly credible, that we wonder how we could have ever doubted that He was there. The thing that is given is never without these mingled elements of surprise and recognition, and utter satisfaction at authentic reality. We simply look out on the world and say, 'Surely God is in this place and I knew it not.' The profoundest thing that was ever recorded about this whole matter of getting a religion was said long ago, and once for all: 'The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.'

But at the heart of this experience there lies a paradox, namely the deepening conviction that revelation is never given without a commensurate insight on our human side of the transaction. It is true that

Men have oft grown old among their books
 To die case-hardened in their ignorance,
 Whose careless youth had promised what long
 years
 Of unremitting labour ne'er performed;
 While, contrary, it has chanced, some idle day,
 To autumn loiterers just as fancy free
 As midges in the sun, gives birth at last
 To truth.

But that mood, deliberately courted, means quietism pure and simple. And it is a fair question whether any revelation is ever given to the Simon-pure quietist. In the case of that 'autumn loiterer' on the Charles River Embankment, exactly the reverse was the case.

He was one who had read of 'the rest most busy of God'; who knew that matchless tale about the world held in the hand as a very little hazelnut; whose mind echoed with the old affirmation, 'All shall be well, and all shall be well.' He was one whose outlook on life had been much colored by the poetry of Wordsworth; who brought with him a heart that watches; who sought to see into the life of things; who listened in the vast sea shell of being, and heard there its authentic tidings of 'central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation.' Had it been otherwise, a Metropolitan Police boat by the river's brim a Metropolitan Police boat was to him, and it was nothing more!

A friend once happened upon the painter Turner before one of his glorious sunset canvases. 'I don't know how you saw that sunset,' he said. And Turner answered only, 'No, don't you wish you did?' Henry Adams, dabbling in water colors out in Samoa, complained that La Farge, working by his side, could see sixteen different shades of red in a sky that to him was just pure cobalt blue. The flaming sunset and the subtle colors of the blue sky were undoubtedly given to those artists as indubitable revelations. But they brought to that ultimate 'given-ness' an initial and disciplined insight, which had been won by years of drudgery in the studio.

It would seem, in our human experience, that authentic revelation from without always matches, and is in some measure dependent upon, an advance discipline and a clear expectation on the part of the recipient. This is certainly true of the 'discoveries' of science. They always have, in the end, the quality of being given rather than achieved. But if you want a duffer at an investigation, as James used to say, get a man who has no idea what he is looking for, and no interest in what he is to find. It

is certainly true of all the artists, that the access of inspiration, the intrusion of the creative power not themselves into their work, follows upon a long struggle to master their own technique. The pages of the 'Prelude' and the 'Excursion' are witness to this fact. They alternate between dreary passages of pedantic versifying and flaming verses of authentic inspiration. A *Golden Treasury* may cull out the latter and ignore the former, for our profit. But the chosen selections that appear in an anthology give an inadequate and fundamentally inaccurate account of the total experience of the poet.

The same paradox holds true of the given-ness of God. The ability to recognize one or another of the revealed aspects of the Divine rests upon a certain drudgery with the stable stuff and the normal technique of the moral and spiritual life. The mind that shirks this discipline and rests its case entirely upon a vacant quietism cannot understand how Brother Lawrence possessed God with sacramental tranquillity in the offices of his kitchen, or what General Booth saw in the ragged children and homeless old men of Whitechapel, or what Tolstoy saw in the peasants among the wheat fields at Yasnaya Polyana. To which they can only answer, 'No, don't you wish you did?' As a matter of fact, they all saw flashes of the Divine, actual, or potential. But the power to see what they saw has its advance price. And this advance price is the mastery of the recognized stuff and technique of this greatest of life's arts, the art of the worshiper. Both the power of initial insight, which prepares the way for the given reality, and the power to consolidate experience and to make it permanently fruitful in character, rest upon the daily unremitting drudgery with the method of the religious life.

Having fallen in love, it is, after all,

a help to have read 'By the Fireside.' Browning gives first aid to self-knowledge and self-expression in that tumultuous hour. He does more than that: he is a very present help to self-mastery and the subsequent consolidation of the experience. One turns to him, as who should say, 'So this was what he meant, and that is what has happened to me.'

So it is with religion. There is a reliable congruity between the reality that is given, and the insight with which we approach reality. Insight, relying upon its own achievements, is blind. Revelation apart from disciplined expectancy is impossible. The strenuous religion of the seeker and the inert receptivity of the quietist are alike unfruitful of themselves. Each needs the other.

Religion is given, not learned. There is no possible doubt about that. But without the learning and the discipline, its very power to give itself adequately is thwarted. An advanced and disciplined knowledge of what history has defined as religious experience, a wise perception of the ways in which men consolidate and utilize revelation, is the only assurance we have that we are fit for the given hour. The event, learned as book-knowledge in the classroom, — the thing that once happened to psalmist, prophet, evangelist, saint, and pilgrim soul, — becomes a medium for making articulate what must otherwise be inarticulate; and beyond that, a kind of grappling-iron of the mind, with which to lay permanent hold upon the given reality.

Without this advance drudgery in the technique of life's greatest art, religion may be given, and even casually recognized as such. But it will be elusive and ephemeral, leaving only a vague bewilderment and light-headedness, but no permanent residuum in the solid content of character.

V

We come now to the point where those two rivals for our Sabbath loyalty, the church and the golf links, may begin to see their interdependence.

The emancipated Sunday golfer is in rebellion against the pedantry of religious education, which would parade itself as the content of the reality. He is in rebellion against the monopolistic claims of churchmen to the sole mediation of reality. He has come to the independent conclusion that the divine is quite as likely to reveal itself on the eighth green as in hymn 349.

If the links happen to be laid out in some serene breadth of open ground, along the seashore or through a noble woods, he is probably right. Who shall say that God does not walk on the fairways of St. Andrews? Moreover, there is something approaching a religious experience in watching the flight of a perfectly driven golf ball, for its great arc is drawn by the divine necessity.

But the nub of the matter is here. The ability to see God revealed on the eighth green depends upon the initial assumption that he who plays up to it is approaching with a mind that knows what it is looking for, a mind intently

watchful and expectant. And the ability to see God there depends upon some advance discipline in insight, which is roughly represented by having been to church that morning.

Without that discipline, the eighth hole by the river's brim the eighth hole is to him, and it is nothing more. Of themselves, eighteen holes of golf, apart from a candid struggle to master the recognized technique of the religious life, hold no assurance of any revelation. But given the insight, the golf links, or any other aspect of the daily scene of work and play, may become our very Shekinah — the place of the Presence of the Glory of God. And to give that disciplined insight, that advance intent expectancy, is the whole aim of what we call religious education and of the normal processes of public worship. By all means, let us away with ecclesiastical monopolies and pedantry. Let us not confuse them with what we mean by the given realities of religion. But that we may be able to recognize God when we see him let us not neglect to

Join chorus

To Hephzibah tune, without further apology,

The last five verses of the third section

Of the seventeenth hymn of Whitefield's collection,

To conclude with the doxology.

THE WIND'S WILL

BY CORNELIA GEER LEBOUTILLIER

NOLIE CAROL found small comfort in his pockets as he sauntered through the fields, his hands thrust into them, seeking it. He was nearly a man; but he had n't his full growth yet, and there was a boyishness about him, in the carriage of his shoulders and the loose spring of his step. The warm wind rumbled his Irish crop of curls, which had now for many days and one despairing night been rumbled by his own unquiet fingers.

He came on Ellen sitting in the paddock. The tall grass was waving almost over her head, bright now with the joys of ten bright summers. The sun was yellow on her hair, and in and out among the bare, brown toes of her. Her figure in its little, faded frock was limp with distress. She was in tears.

'What are you doing, child?'

'I 'm crying,' Ellen said.

He sat on the grass and stroked her tumbled head.

'Can't I see that. But what's making you cry?'

'I 've been reading sad, beautiful verses, Nolie.' She raised her wet eyes to his, and sent a pang through him because they were like Kathleen's. She waved a bit of paper at him, and broke down again. 'It 's verses a boy wrote to Kathleen before she was married.'

'Wrote to Kathleen?' he exclaimed; 'give it here to me.'

The frown disappeared as he read. He blushed, and read again. He held his head on one side and ducked his chin to emphasize the cadence. A smile looked out of his eyes.

'Sure, there 's no sadness in them lines,' he asserted with pride. 'They 're beauties.' He read them once more, slowly. 'I 'll keep this.' He tucked it away in his coat.

'Oh,' she explained, 'it is n't the lines that 's sad. It 's the man that set them down.'

'The one that wrote them!' he exclaimed in consternation. 'And what 's sad about the man that wrote them? I think there 's a mistake in this.'

'No.' Ellen shook her head. 'Kathleen was telling me. He was fond of Kathleen, but she would n't have him. She said he was too young!'

Nolie reddened instantly. He rubbed one hand through his curly mop and dug deep into those comfortless pockets.

'It 's a pity about her,' he muttered. 'He was a handsome man, and a man that wrote verses, and a man that has a good chance to rise out of the place he 's in. Kathleen thought a pretty face would bring a duke itself from London. But is Johnnie Fahey from Ennis a duke? Or is he —'

'But Nolie,' said Ellen, with the tears still running down, 'this man is a sad man. He said to Kathleen himself, and Kathleen give it in to me, that there was nothing in him would make a woman want to be kind to him. It was for that I was crying. I think it is sad.'

And Ellen began to weep again, pressing her pale little face against the crook of her arm. Quick tears gushed into Nolie's eyes and were beaten steadily back. He gulped a bit, and hesitated, and ended up by swaggering.