

# *Santayana on the Role of Religion in Society*

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## I

In *Essays on Religion and Education*, R.M. Hare reprints his 1973 article, "The Simple Believer," where he writes that the philosophy of religion is "a subject which fastidious philosophers do not like to touch."<sup>1</sup> Equipped by his empiricist progenitors, Hare is not afraid to enter the field to confront what he takes to be an enfeebled Christianity defended only by its simple masses. From the outset he assumes that the educated man can not believe in the supernatural, a belief which he equates with superstition. He does not argue for this position but regards it as so well established that he, at least, needs to provide no evidence. Hare then asks, "Can religion do without the supernatural?... Suppose someone produced an interpretation of Christianity that could be accepted by the best humanists; would this necessarily be a bad thing?"<sup>2</sup> An informed reader might respond, such interpretations are plentiful and have existed from the early centuries of Christianity, and they exist also for Judaism.

Lenn Goodman, in a recent work entitled *On Justice: An Essay in Jewish Philosophy*, provides a purely naturalistic interpretation of the books of the *Torah*.<sup>3</sup> Though wishing to salvage the moral teaching of the Hebrew prophets,

Goodman cannot bring himself to acknowledge either an immaterial reality or an afterlife. This should give us pause. If Goodman can carve out a role for a secularized Judaism, and Hare is willing to embrace a Christianity which has no reference to the supernatural, what is there about religion that makes even the non-believer reluctant to discard its trappings? "I believe," says Hare, "that matters are so ordered in the world that there is a point in trying to live by the precepts to which Christians subscribe."<sup>4</sup> One may ask, are the biblical religions, Christianity and Judaism, to be respected merely for their moral teaching?

Attitudes toward religion indicate not only personal acquaintance with religious structures and practices, but also deep-seated metaphysical outlooks as well. Obviously, from the examples offered above, one can be agnostic or flatly deny the existence of God and yet be appreciative of the role of religion in society, although consistency would seem to dictate the opposite. As the intellectual and cultural influence of religion wanes in a nation once thought to be Christian, it may be instructive to examine the thought of a major American philosopher, George Santayana, who was in no sense a believer, but who was nevertheless appreciative of the role of religion in society.

Etienne Gilson, the historian of phi-

losophy, once ventured the opinion that the fortunes of metaphysics are bound to the fortunes of religion. It may be that the current attack on the Western literary canon is not unrelated to the demise of religion as an intellectual catalyst. Under the banner of multiculturalism the West is challenged to abandon the very standards which historically have served to make cultural judgment possible. The legacy of Greece and Rome, not to mention Jerusalem, a legacy which provided those time-transcending truths in the light of which religious belief is rendered intelligible and which historically provided the intellectual framework for the emergence of modern science, is challenged as if it were one among equals. Of course, calls to look elsewhere, particularly to the East, are not a late twentieth-century phenomena. Arthur Koestler in his *The Lotus and the Robot* compares East and West and finds little that is viable in the East which has not been imported from the West and much indigenous to the East which can be faulted.<sup>5</sup>

With the ascendancy of the secular outlook as the dominant intellectual force in the university and in the media, religion has effectively been removed as a cultural leaven. The consequence is plain for all to see in the crumbling moral order. Religiously inspired calls to self-restraint, piety, and fidelity have not been duplicated by a civic philosophy. As a matter of record, philosophers and even theologians have been in the forefront of the march toward a permissive society. As moral chaos has led to discernible social effects, a number of political observers, from Beatrice Ask, Sweden's minister of education, to Richard Neuhaus and Irving Kristol, have called for a re-examination of the role of religion in personal and communal life. It must be acknowledged that religion is such a multifaceted social phenomenon that, apart from specific ecclesiastical

structures, it may be difficult to identify it as an object of study.

## II

Although George Santayana (1863-1952) was a contemporary of John Dewey (1859-1952) and exposed to many of the same cultural, literary, and philosophical sources, his attitude toward religion may be contrasted with that of Dewey. Dewey, whose philosophy was to play an influential role in the development of American educational philosophy and social policy, was clearly a child of the Enlightenment. In his educational philosophy, Dewey provides no role for religion or religious institutions, whatever roles they may have played in the past. Religion is an unreliable source for knowledge, Dewey believed, and, in spite of contentions to the contrary, even of motivation. Many of the values held dear by the religious are worthy of consideration and should not be abandoned, but a proper rationale ought to be sought for those deemed commendable. Through his critique of religion, Dewey sought not merely to eliminate the church from political influence, but to eliminate it as an effective agent even in private life. Religion is deemed socially dangerous insofar as it gives practical credence to a divine law and attempts to mold personal or social conduct in conformity with norms which look beyond temporal society.

No less a materialist than Dewey, Santayana nevertheless maintained an appreciation (albeit a purely secular one) of the role of religion in society. He could say, where Dewey could not, "Religion when seen to be poetry, ceases to be descriptive and therefore odious...[and] becomes humanly more significant than it seemed before."<sup>6</sup> In his *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, Santayana wrote, "Religion and poetry are identical in essence, and differ mainly in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it

intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry.”<sup>7</sup>

Santayana’s Catholic upbringing was clearly a factor in his appreciation of the role of religion in society. Born in Madrid, he spent the first nine years of his life in Spain. By his own account, as an adolescent he oscillated between solipsism and the Roman Catholic faith. But John Dewey was no less religious as a youth. One of his first lectures as a young teacher at the University of Michigan was entitled, “The Obligation to Knowledge of God,” a lecture delivered to the Student Christian Association in 1884. One cannot say that the difference between Dewey and Santayana is the difference between a New England Puritanism and a Spanish Catholicism, since from age nine until his resignation as a member of the Harvard faculty Santayana was a resident of Boston. The difference may lie much deeper in conflicting theories of knowledge, perhaps in conflicting theories of being.

As a cultured non-believer, Santayana provides for the contemporary reader an interesting witness to the personal and communal effects of religious practice. While denying literal truth to Christian doctrine, his interpretation of religion accords it cognitive value. Almost apologetically, he was to remark that the believer may not relish his interpretation of religion, but considering what he has said about its rivals, the believer should not be chagrined.

With the possible exception of William James, Santayana wrote more about religion than any other American philosopher of his period. Intelligence, learning, and experience, bolstered by an unflagging honesty and courage, fuse to make him one of the most interesting and perhaps timely philosophers of religion in the twentieth century. He was especially perceptive in writing about Christianity; he even wrote a book, albeit heterodox, entitled, *The Idea of Christ in the*

*Gospels*.<sup>8</sup> He understood the difference between Protestantism and Catholicism and recognized the internal inconsistency of the modernist’s claim to authentic Christianity while attacking the magisterium and the authority of tradition.

It is not difficult to identify the source of Santayana’s cultural appreciation of religion. Throughout his life he could recall with fondness his early experiences of religious pageantry, of the many feasts, such as Corpus Christi, celebrated in his boyhood Avila. Strangely, in later life, he claimed never to have practiced his faith. His estrangement seems to have occurred during his college years when he began the study of philosophy, particularly the works of Spencer, Hume, Mill, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. While he was enrolled at the Boston Latin School he continued to attend Mass, but at Harvard College his faith in the literal truth of Christianity began to fade. After studying with William James and Josiah Royce he subsequently spent two years in Germany and then returned to Harvard for graduate study, eventually joining its faculty. It was Royce who directed his doctoral dissertation on Rudolf Lotze (1817-1881). Santayana relates that he wanted to write on Schopenhauer, but Royce prevailed.

Santayana’s years at Harvard spanned a watershed period, with an inherited idealism sometimes called “the classical period of American philosophy” on the one side and various realisms and materialisms which were to replace it on the other. Idealism of the Germanic variety was at that time thought to be an adequate prop or metaphysical underpinning for a religious outlook. But confidence in Hegel was soon to erode as achievement in the sciences seemed to entail philosophical empiricism, and as the critical movement in biblical studies cast doubt on the supernatural sources of the sacred scriptures. The new real-

ism and the critical realism, which soon replaced idealism, were materialisms of one sort or another. Santayana's reflections on religion were always the reflections of a materialist and therefore of a non-believer. He was appreciative of Catholicism in the same way that he was appreciative of other coherent systems of belief which produce effects in the practical order. In *Persons and Places* he tells us, "I had never practiced my religion, or thought of it as a means of getting to heaven or avoiding hell, things that never caused me the least flutter. All that happened was that I became accustomed to a different *Weltanschauung*, to another system having the same rational function as religion: that of keeping me attentive to the lessons of life."<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, he said, "I have found in different times and places, the liberal, the Catholic and the German air quite possible to breathe."<sup>10</sup> George Herbert Palmer once said of Santayana that "he had Hume in his bones."

In Santayana's assessment, religion ought to be the highest synthesis of our nature—making room for the gifts of one's senses, of one's affections, of one's country and its history, and of the science, morality, and taste of one's day.<sup>11</sup> He admits that the circumstance of time and place account for much: "The Englishman finds that he was born a Christian, and therefore wishes to remain a Christian; but his Christianity must be his own, no less plastic and adaptable than his inner man; and it is an axiom with him that nothing can be obligatory for a Christian which is unpalatable to an Englishman."<sup>12</sup> That observation is followed by another: "Only a few years ago, if a traveler landing in England on a Sunday and entering an Anglican church, had been told that the country was Catholic and its church a branch of the Catholic Church, his astonishment would have been extreme. 'Catholic' is opposed in the first place to national and in the second place

to Protestant."<sup>13</sup> What, then, is Protestantism? I see in it, says Santayana, three leading motifs: a tendency to revert to primitive Christianity; a call to moral and political reform; and an acceptance of the religious witness of the "inner man." Santayana's appreciation of Protestantism is limited.<sup>14</sup> In this connection, Santayana will say that the "inner man," for the Catholic as for the materialist, is apt to be regarded as a pathological phenomenon.

Santayana's interest in Catholicism was far from superficial. He was appreciative of the integrity of its doctrine and recognized the folly of watering down key elements in the attempt to gain secular acceptance. His criticism of the "modernist movement" in the Catholic Church is as severe as any produced by a Catholic apostologist:

The modernist wishes to reconcile the church and the world. Therein he forgets what Christianity came into the world to announce and why it is believed....Having no ears for the essential message of Christianity, the modernist also has no eye for its history....The church converted the world only partially and essentially; yet Christianity was outwardly established as the traditional religion of many nations. And why? Because, although the prophecies it relied on were strained and its miracles dubious, it furnished a needed sanctuary from the shames, sorrows, injustices, violence, and gathering darkness of earth.<sup>15</sup>

The church, continues Santayana, is not only a sanctuary but a holy precinct where one might pursue sacred learning, philosophy, and theology in the midst of an ordered community life, perhaps within a superior artistic milieu. Speaking of the Catholic Church and particularly of the papacy and its material ambience, he writes: "Much has been added but nothing has been lost." In his palace full of pagan marbles the pope remains faithful to the teaching of Christ, promot-

ing the basic truths of the New Testament. It is within the halls of the papacy that the gospel is still believed, not among the modernists.<sup>16</sup>

Santayana goes on to say that it is open for anyone to claim that a nobler religion is possible without the trapping of the papacy. The ancient Greeks, Hindus, or Mohammedans might well acquit themselves before an impartial tribunal of human nature and reason. But they are not Christians, nor do they wish to be. Neither are the modernists, "men of the Renaissance, pagan and pantheistic in their profound sentiment, to whom the hard and narrow realism of official Christianity is offensive just because it presupposes that Christianity is true."<sup>17</sup> "They [the modernists] think the weakness of the church lies in not following the inspirations of the age. But when this age is past, might not that weakness be a source of strength again."<sup>18</sup> "In a frank supernaturalism, in a tight clericalism, not in a pleasant secularization, lies the sole hope of the church."<sup>19</sup> "As to modernism, it is suicide."<sup>20</sup>

What civic task does religion perform that obliges Santayana to defend its integrity against those who would dilute its message? The answer lies in Santayana's conviction that poetic knowledge possesses cognitive value both for the speculative insight it provides and for the guidance it offers in the practical order. Religion when confused with a record of facts or natural laws is deflected from its proper course, but when seen as poetry it becomes a guide to life.<sup>21</sup> Religion has the same original relation as poetry has to life:

Like poetry, it improves the world only by imagining it improved, but not content with making this addition to the mind's furniture—an addition which might be useful and ennobling—it thinks to confer a more radical benefit by persuading mankind that in spite of appearances the world is really such or that rather arbitrary ide-

alization has pointed it....Religion remains an imaginative achievement, a symbolic representation of moral reality which may have a most important function in vitalizing the mind and in transmitting, by way of parables, the lessons of experience.<sup>22</sup>

Santayana saw in Christ an idealization of virtue which men, even with all their wayward tendencies, still recognize as worthy of imitation. The blessing which Christ bequeathed "was the image of himself upon the cross, whereby men might be comforted in their own sorrows, rebuked in their worldliness, driven to put their trust in the supernatural, and united, by their common indifference to the world, in one mystic brotherhood."<sup>23</sup> "As men learned these lessons...they began what they felt to be an imitation of Christ."<sup>24</sup> But religion has its negative side. It is at "the same time an incidental deception; and this deception, in proportion as it is strenuously denied to be such, can work infinite harm in the world and in the conscience."<sup>25</sup> In this judgment Dewey would concur. Santayana continues:

The feeling of reverence should itself be treated with reverence, although not at a sacrifice of truth, with which alone, in the end reverence is compatible. Nor have we any reason to be intolerant of the partialities and contradictions which religion displays. Were we dealing with a science such contradictions would have to be instantly solved or removed; but when we are concerned with the poetic interpretation of experience, contradiction means only variety, and variety means spontaneity, wealth of resource, and a nearer approach to total adequacy.<sup>26</sup>

"The present age is a critical one," Santayana was saying in 1937, "and interesting to live in. The civilization characteristic of Christendom has not disappeared, yet another civilization has begun to take its place. We still understand the value of religious faith....On the other hand the shell of Christendom is broken.

The unconquerable mind of the East, the pagan past, the industrial socialistic future confront it with equal authority. Our whole life and mind is saturated with the slow upward filtration of a new spirit—that of an emancipated, atheistic, international democracy.”<sup>27</sup>

For Santayana, religion as poetry is a way of knowing. As poetry, it is not radically different from other forms of knowing, pre-scientific and scientific, which grope toward but never achieve final adequacy. Santayana acknowledges the distinction between speculative and practical knowledge. Speculative knowledge, as Plato taught, focuses upon the essence of things, but Santayana tempers his Platonic impulse with a bit of realism. Considered abstractly, things have natures which transcend the here and now and our limited awareness of them; concretely, no particular instance exhausts the perfection possible to the class. The nature or “class essence” resembles an ideal which things themselves approximate in varying degrees. The things of experience may be said to participate in the eternal essence which our knowledge approximates in varying degrees. Yet it is things considered in their particular concreteness which are the primary object of our scientific knowledge. Santayana stresses the validity of pre-scientific or common sense knowledge. Science builds upon the pre-scientific. The ancients knew that one of the most useful metals, silver, possesses a certain hue, is malleable, is relatively light in weight, and tarnishes. Modern science differs in that it can tell us why silver has all of these properties. Science itself is open-ended, and is in some sense fragmentary; all human knowledge is approximate. Although these insights may be commonplace, significant is Santayana’s conviction that types of knowledge function differently in specific situations.

Religion as cognitive not only unifies various modes of knowing but also inte-

grates knowledge with emotion. In religion, cognition, both sensory and intellectual, and appetite are unified and given expression in religious constructs from the Sermon on the Mount to the Gothic architecture of the High Middle Ages. Religion as poetry is at once insight and admonition. It can lend appreciation to the beauty of nature and direct human activity. In so doing it sanctifies what perhaps otherwise would be humdrum. Through its rituals, it solemnizes the important occasions of life, *i.e.*, birth, puberty, marriage, and death, and in doing so it gives rise to some of the most delightful feasts of the year. Religion is troubling only when its high priests do not recognize its true character, when they take literally its metaphors, or look upon it as productive of knowledge not garnered from human experience.

Readers unsympathetic to Santayana may find his interpretation reminiscent of the Averroistic one, namely, the view that religion is merely philosophical truth made accessible to the masses. The enlightened know that religion taken literally is a lie; and if one has no taste for metaphor, one must reject it. Thus John Smith could write with perception in the Preface to the 1962 edition of his work, *The Spirit of American Philosophy*: “The American mind, as Santayana himself saw, is voluntaristic and not contemplative; it is moral and moralistic rather than aesthetic; it would sooner give up religion altogether than retain it as mere poetry.”<sup>28</sup> Was Santayana something of a prophet, perhaps a prophet without honor? In his lifetime, Santayana produced no disciples, not did he want them. Today, however, there is a Santayana Society and a newsletter, *Overheard in Seville*, and in 1992, there was a major Santayana conference in Avila to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of his death.

John Smith, one of few historians to exclude Santayana from the American

canon, defends his position in his book, *The Spirit of American Philosophy*—a study that examines the thought of Peirce, James, Royce, Dewey, and Whitehead—by saying, “I have not discussed him [Santayana] in this study, for it seems to me that despite his presence in the ‘golden age’ of American philosophy his thought is not representative of the main drift of American thinking.”<sup>29</sup> And certainly it was not; Santayana himself recognized it. At first opportunity he fled New England for Europe, eventually ending his years in the Eternal City. He loved the labyrinth of the old streets of Rome, the Pantheon, Michaelangelo’s Moses, and the Forum from the top of the Capitoline. He loved to meditate seated in the Basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano, the Pope’s own church, amidst the baroque Titans lining its columns. Intellectually he remained a pupil of the Enlightenment philosophy which he learned as a student while at Harvard: he remained steadfast in his materialism, culturally at home only among the artifacts of spirit whose transcendent source he denied. I am certain that he understood and appreciated a statue found in the Borghese Gallery in Rome, a statue carved by a seventeenth-century sculptor, Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1590-1680). In his splendid marble treatise, Bernini captured the ancient reverence for the transcendent as he depicts Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius fleeing Troy—Aeneas in the prime of life rescuing his aged parent who holds aloft the household shrines and his son who carried a lamp with the hearth fire. Santayana would have it no other way in spite of his disbelief.

### III

Although Santayana spent his last years in Rome, his philosophy of religion has little in common with classical Latin writers or with their medieval commentators. Cicero, Seneca, and Macrobius all approached religion not as a cultural

artifact, but as a moral virtue. Piety, they commonly held, is a species of justice, the habit of paying one’s debt to the gods. The religious act is primarily an act of homage, whatever its specific manifestation in prayer or sacrifice. In the words of Cicero, there is “no nation or tribe so uncultured that it does not acknowledge some sort of deity,” and consequently, none without worship.<sup>30</sup> The word “religion” itself implies as much. As Aquinas reminds us, Cicero found the origin of the word in the verb *re legit* (to ponder over, to read again), Augustine in the verb *re eligere* (to reelect), and Lactantius in the verb *re ligare* (to bind back).<sup>31</sup>

From the classical point of view, religion begins in an acknowledgment of several facets of reality, namely, that there is a god or gods, that reality consists in more than spatio-temporal-physical and mental events, that history is guided and controlled by a non-human force, and that individual existence does not terminate with the cessation of bodily processes. For the enlightened Roman, assent to those propositions is generated by philosophical considerations: for the masses assent is produced either by intuition or by a more or less gratuitous act of faith.

The twentieth-century religious mind tends to the conviction, shared by Santayana, that modern philosophy has undermined what was formerly regarded as evidence for the existence of God, and that, consequently, religious faith is a completely gratuitous act. In the eighteenth century, Kant could boast that he destroyed reason in order to make way for faith. In the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard is anxious to leap into the dark.

But to the mind schooled in the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Aquinas, faith cannot be a leap into the dark. Assent must be rational, meaning that what is proposed for belief must be

internally consistent and also cohere with what is known through experience and demonstration.

Against such a backdrop the art of paying homage to the divine, its attendant ritual, feasts, architecture, painting, literature, and other fine arts may be appreciated as human artifacts. But they are robbed of their intrinsic intelligibility when the wisdom, philosophical and theological, which generated them is thought to be mere poetry.

Santayana's materialism leads him to deny the existence of God, yet he remains a cultured non-believer. He cannot bring himself to deny the human worth of the religiously inspired literature and other artifacts which he holds to be among the treasures of the world. No iconoclast is he. Yet even from his own vantage point, one may doubt that those arts, deprived of their rationale, will continue to thrive, though art does not have to be created from a religious perspective to be in some sense sacral. That which is driven by an ideological perspective at variance with the spiritual component of human nature is likely to fail. A cursory acquaintance with the proletarian art of the twentieth century suggests that it exists on a much lower plane than the religiously inspired art of the high middle ages, or of the Italian Renaissance, or of the Baroque. Experience teaches that materialisms of any variety have an almost built-in debilitating effect on the arts.

One is tempted to ask, What would Santayana say if he were writing today? Would he still adhere to the nineteenth-century rationalism which he embraced as a youth? With the methods and assumptions of modern science virtually destroying turn-of-the-century positivis-

tic philosophy, would Santayana adopt a much more comprehensive synthesis, one rationally open to experience, science, philosophy, and revelation? Of course there is no way of knowing.

Perhaps Santayana's greatest contribution as an interpreter of religion is his appreciation of its integrity when it is well crafted and his acknowledgment of the positive role it plays in the lives of many. For the contemporary reader, he remains something of a snob, an enlightened snob, still delightful to read, but not a sure guide.

1. Oxford, 1992, 1. 2. *Ibid.*, 25. 3. New Haven, 1991. 4. *Op. cit.*, 33. 5. The author of *Darkness at Noon* (1941) and the *Sleepwalkers* (1959) writes at the end of a book-length study: "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds: both India and Japan seem to be spiritually sicker, more estranged from a living faith than the West. They are at opposite ends of the Asian spectrum, whose center is occupied by the vastness of China, one of the world's oldest cultures; yet it proved even less resistant against the impact of a materialistic ideology. The nation which had held fast for two and a half millennia to the teaching of Confucius, Lao-Tse and the Buddha, succumbed to the atheistic doctrine formulated by the son of a German lawyer, and has become the most accomplished robot state this side of science fiction. To look at Asia for mystic enlightenment and spiritual guidance has become as much of an anachronism as to think of America as the Wild West." *The Lotus and the Robot* (New York, 1961), 276. 6. Preface to vol. VII, *The Works of George Santayana*, "On the Unity of my Earlier and Later Philosophy," (New York: Charles Scribner Sons, 1937), xiii-xiv. 7. New York, 1921, v. 8. New York, 1946. 9. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1986, 419. 10. *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, (New York, 1937), 189. 11. *Ibid.*, 77. 12. *Ibid.* 13. *Ibid.* 14. *Ibid.*, 78. 15. *Winds of Doctrine*, 45. 16. *Ibid.*, 47. 17. *Ibid.* 18. 47-48. 19. 49. 20. *Ibid.* 21. *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 289. 22. *The Life of Reason*, Vol. IV (New York, 1933), 9-10. 23. *The Idea of Christ in the Gospels*, 250-251. 24. *The Idea of Christ in the Gospels*, 251. 25. *Ibid.*, 10. 26. *Ibid.*, 10-11. 27. *Winds of Doctrine, The Works of George Santayana*, Triton edition, Vol. VII (New York, 1937), 5. 28. Rev. ed. (Albany, 1983), xiii. 29. *Ibid.* 30. *De Legibus*, III. 31. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q 81, a.1.