

ULTIMATE AUTHORITY IN MORAL TRUTH.

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One of the characteristics, if not one of the causes of the period of transition through which we are now passing is the diffusion of what may be roughly called the scientific spirit. Men are interested to know, and assume the right to know, what makes the wheels go round. This assumption is not confined to any sphere of inquiry or any class of men. Our scientific, economic, political, social, educational and religious creeds are alike summoned before the bar of the common man and required to give a reason for the faith that is in them. Professor Coe truly says that "in view of the influence of tradition and authority in other times one may well be astounded at the extent to which untrained men assume to think about the profound problems of human destiny."

Lamentations that men no longer listen to erst-while authoritative voices are a twentieth century commonplace. But the loss of potency in the editorial column, the lack of an authoritative voice in the pulpit are not so much a change in editor and preacher, as in reader and hearer. And Romanist misgivings concerning an infallible Church are balanced against Protestant questionings concerning an infallible Book.

Because the commanding voices of yesterday no longer speak with unquestioned authority, and questionable authority is not authority at all, we are face to face with this problem: Is each man absolutely a law unto himself? If not, where is the authoritative voice, where is the court of final appeal? What is the ultimate authority on questions of moral truth? It is that problem which this paper essays to consider.

Authority is of two kinds, inherent and extraneous. These terms are sufficiently self-defining. A crude illus-

tration of the two types is the familiar story of the new teacher who was asked by the board of trustees whether he taught the round or the flat theory of the earth, and who answered promptly, "Which do you prefer?" Inherent authority was a question of fact. Extraneous authority depended on a majority vote. Here as elsewhere the verdict of extraneous authority is easier to ascertain and easier to follow. Questions of truth are frequently elusive and difficult of solution. Extraneous authorities are usually loud-voiced and dogmatic. Moreover, they have the power of excommunication.

Mental and moral indolence cries out for an authoritative voice. And mental and moral indolence is a common racial heritage. You recall the familiar statement of Huxley, "I confess that if some power would agree to decide for me what is right and enable me to do it on condition of my being wound up like a clock every morning, I should instantly close with the offer." Needless to add, this was hardly Huxley's normal attitude of mind.

But we cannot be wound up like a clock. And we must not follow an extraneous authority which cannot justify its right to speak. We must therefore examine the credentials of claimants to the throne. Unless in truth we hold that there is no finality anywhere, that we drift blindly on an uncharted sea. Then ours is the creed of despair, "Let us live on our doubts and do nothing." What then is the authority extraneous to truth to which truth may appeal for an endorsement which shall be final?

Perhaps the extraneous authority which to-day finds the greatest number of thoughtful advocates is the authority of the individual. So Royce, "My duty is simply my own will brought to my clear self-consciousness." And again, "In one form or another this fact that the ultimate moral authority for each of us is determined by our own rational will, is admitted even by apparently extreme partisans of authority." This statement is un-

doubtedly correct to this extent, that each man must necessarily determine for himself upon what basis he shall conduct his life, or in other words, what he shall hold to be true. Even if he determine to hold true whatever another shall declare, his is still the determination.

But surely all that we can possibly mean here is that the individual recognizes truth. That he, for himself, is the court of final resort whether he shall hold a thing to be true. No one believes that his verdict makes it true. No one believes that his is the final judgment as to its intrinsic truth. He can not be considered ultimate in any sense. Sabatier confesses that the individual is not the final court of appeal when he says, "While tending to individuality the world tends neither to anarchy nor to disaster. Individuality does not exhaust the phenomenon of consciousness. In every consciousness there is a new principle of unification. * * * Solidarity, which in nature is a ruthless fact, becomes in the realm of spirit a moral ideal, a holy obligation." If solidarity is a holy obligation the individual is not ultimate.

But this I hold: That the man who loyally sets himself to find that which is true in order that he may do it, shall with utmost certainty come to know the truth. Or to use an older phrase, If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching whether it be of God.

May we find in the Church the end of our quest? The Church here means one of two things, either the Church universal or the Roman Catholic Church. The first is an intangible entity, a tribunal no one has found, and if found incapable of rendering a verdict. As to the second: The doctrine of the infallibility for the Roman Church, or for its head, the pope, rests either upon decree or upon proof. If upon decree, then the Church or Church Council has declared the Church or its head infallible and we have a vicious circle. If the claim rests upon proof, then the Church admits its claim to be infallible at the bar of reason and reason becomes the ultimate authority.

To-day many if not most enlightened Romanists regard the infallibility of the pope as a convenience of church government. He is ultimate as the United States Supreme Court is ultimate in the sense that in the set system of government there is no appeal from his decision.

But it is asserted that the Bible is the ultimate authority. It is the inspired truth of God. If the Bible is to be ultimate, the question immediately arises, What is the Bible? The Quinisext Council, Catholic, decreed that the epistle of James was canonical. Martin Luther, Protestant, declared it was "a veritable epistle of straw." Shall we follow the Catholic Council or the Protestant reformer? And must we wait until that question is settled before we are allowed to declare that "Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

But granting that the canon is known and closed, on what ground is the authority of the Bible asserted? There are several answers. One is that the Bible itself makes this claim; that is it lifts itself to its place of authority by its own boot straps. A second is that the Fathers, or the Church, or tradition have so accepted it; which of course is merely a substituting of the question of the authority of the Fathers for the question of the authority of the Book. A third answer is that investigation has proved its claim; that it has met every test and come out unshaken. But granting that it has met the tests of yesterday, if this be its only claim to power, what proof have we that it will meet the tests of to-day? Is our ultimate authority at the peril of every new ray of light? Shall we live in fear that our Achilles has a vulnerable heel?

The only other answer is the splendid answer of Coleridge, "In the Bible there is more that finds me than I have experienced in all other books put together; the

words of the Bible find me at greater depths of my being: and whatever finds me brings with it an irresistible evidence of its having proceeded from the Holy Spirit." But the words of Coleridge if accepted surrender the claim of the Bible to be ultimate authority. As a matter of fact those who hold most loyally to an infallible book as the court of last resort rest the claim on their conviction that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant word of God, so that even of their own assertion the ultimate authority is not the Bible, but the Giver of the Bible.

We go back then step by step from one court to a higher until at last we reach the throne of the Eternal.

But the authority of the Divine voice is the authority of character. Take from God the attribute of righteousness and He is shorn of His right to command. It may be recalled that in 1631 a careless King's Printer issued the so-called "wicked Bible" in which the word "not" was omitted from the seventh commandment. Let us imagine this to be the only Bible which had come down to us. Immediately we would say "There is some mistake. God issued no such command." But if some one had insisted that because it was in the Bible it was God's law, then the answer would be, If God issued such a command He no longer speaks with authority. Even Omnipotence has not the power to enforce unrighteousness. To attempt it is to abdicate His character and to abdicate His character is to abdicate His throne. So then the familiar query, Is it right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right, is not an idle play on words. He can command only that which is right. With all reverence be it said He has no authority to command unrighteousness.

So then this supreme extraneous authority is not ultimate. We go back of the final external voice. And we are forced to the conclusion that the ultimate authority is not extraneous at all, but inherent in truth itself. This authority moreover inheres not in truth in the abstract,

not in some vague absolute, but in specific truth. Each concrete truth in the moral realm speaks in its own inherent authority.

In other words when we ask Truth by what authority it speaks, it deigns us no reply. It stands alone, secure, unsupported, without desire of credentials, without need of defenders. It is no more concerned to be buttressed by our little props than are the eternal hills. It stands in its own strength. It shines with its own radiance. It draws by its own winsomeness. It subdues by its own irresistible power.

Of course this does not mean that extraneous authority is valueless. On the contrary it has great value. All the knowledge, beliefs, ideals of childhood are accepted on extraneous authority. And extraneous authority which has proven trustworthy in our own experience or in the experience of mankind brings its own cogent weight. "None may with impunity isolate himself from his race and his social cradle." Our ancestors were not all fools; and that which sufficiently commended itself to them to be incorporated in hoary creeds, and confessions of faith is not lightly to be cast away. The traditions of the elders may sometimes transgress the commandment of God, but so also may the innovations of the youths. Professor Royce very wisely says, "Whenever I have most carefully revised my moral standards, I am always able to see, upon reviewing my course of thought, that at best I have been finding out, in some new light, the true meaning that was latent in old traditions. Those traditions were often better in spirit than the fathers knew."

Of the Bible, let Sabatier speak: "What can we say of the Bible which would not fall short of the reality? It is the book above all books, light of the conscience, bread of the soul, leaven of all reforms. It is the lamp that hangs from the arched roof of the sanctuary to give light to

those who are seeking God. The destiny of holiness on earth is irrevocably linked with the destiny of the Bible.”

But extraneous authority, though valuable, is not final. It is noteworthy here that Jesus never appealed to extraneous authority. Three credentials were recognized among His own people: The credentials of the rabbinical courts, of the Scriptures, and of signs. The first of these He never sought, and to the others He never appealed. When the Scribes desired a sign from heaven as a proof of His right to teach, He answered, “An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet;” namely, that the men of Nineveh who heard and received the truth and repented, condemned this blind and hardened generation who loved darkness rather than light.

And His use of Scripture strikingly shows that He believed not in its extraneous authority but in its inherent power. One illustration will suffice. He quotes a verse from the book of Deuteronomy and proclaims it the first and great commandment of the law. Another verse from the same book he quietly sets aside as fitted only for those who were hard of heart. And he acts in each case without argument, knowing that truth’s inherent authority would justify His deed. Jesus indeed sounds the death knell of extraneous authority as ultimate in religion when he says, “God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

This conviction of the inherent authority of truth gives us the freedom of faith. We are at liberty to seek, to inquire, to test, to explore, because we know there is no danger of our upsetting truth. After all, the highest type of faith is not that which rides secure in the haven and sings the praises of the anchor, but rather that which dares to hoist and away, trusting the ship, trusting the sea, trusting the God of the storm.

Night and black skies
Above the brave ship tossing on the foam;
And yet I know somewhere the harbor lies
Radiant with love and home.

This conviction of truth's inherent authority gives us also a superb confidence, a confidence not in ourselves, or our syllogisms, or our system, but a confidence in truth itself. If truth may be shot to death if it lifts its head above the battlements of logic which we have built, we must consider our bulwarks indeed. If truth may be routed unless extraneous authority shall ward off the enemy, we must marshall all the heavy guns of our reasoning. And if one of our guns is spiked or one of our fortresses is vigorously assailed, let us sound the alarm for the sake of truth.

But, says Irving Bacheller, "Truth is a great wrestler. She needs opposition to develop her strength." This is as it ought to be. Gold is not afraid of the fire, nor the diamond of the light. Truth endures. Whether Galileo shall recant or not, whether John Huss shall be burned or not, truth endures. It is not afraid of the scoffers and the skeptics, nor of the self-styled defenders of the faith. It welcomes the light of history and discovery, and learning and investigation of scholar and critic. Truth endures. It is eternal. Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?

We therefore are not defenders of the truth, but heralds of the truth. It is ours to proclaim and not to prove. We do not need to argue or to bolster, "but by the manifestation of the truth to commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." And the truth thus proclaimed will accomplish its own destiny. It will find men and fit men and abide. This was the marvelous confidence of Jesus of Nazareth. With an almost careless hand He flung His precious truths upon the breezes

of the Galilean hills, and said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

This positive proclamation of unprovable truth because of a superb confidence in truth's inherent power, fulfills the mission of the Church and supplies the hunger of the world. To speak truth and dare to trust it, not because I say so, not because a council says so, not because a creed says so, not because a book says so, but because it is eternal truth, this is to teach as one having authority and not as the scribes.

The self-evidencing power of truth is one of the most valuable assets of the true religion. When we turn to our experience we find that the great truths on which we build are believed by us entirely apart from any extraneous authority. And because we also believe, we dare to trust these fundamentals to the world unproved.

The Seminary student, and sometimes his congregation, wades through the ontological, the teleological and other polysyllabic arguments for the existence of God. Whom did they ever convince? What have they ever proved? And how puny and futile and absurd they all seem beside those confident, unbuttressed words of Jesus, "When ye pray, say Our Father."

So also of Jesus Himself. The historical facts of His life are of course to be ascertained as are any other historical facts. It may be well to say parenthetically that much confusion arises because the distinction is not clearly kept in mind between historical fact and moral truth. Testimony is needed to prove that a murder has been committed; none, however, is necessary to prove that murder is a crime.

But what of the claim of Jesus to be the Son of God? What of His claim to be the Saviour and Sovereign of the soul? Must we revert here to some proof-text? Dare we build upon the foundation of our logic? Is the issue determined by a majority vote for *homoiousios* or *homoousios*? Or, shall we not be willing to rest the claims

of Jesus where He Himself rested them? Shall we not send His own message to every prisoner of doubt, "Go tell John the things you have seen and heard"? Shall not the Pharisee of to-day be answered as he was answered nineteen hundred years ago, "The works that I do bear witness of me"? Shall we not be willing to trust Him to men as He trusted Himself to men until, through knowing Him, they shall say, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God"? Can we improve on the message of the disciple whom Jesus loved, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you that ye also may have fellowship with us"? Is not the living Christ in the world to-day His own self-sufficing credential? Henry Drummond has supplied the phrase, "Religion said 'Christ our Life,' Theology said 'Christ our Logic.'" And it is Life and not Logic, Religion and not Theology which will win the world.

From this viewpoint, the truth of the Bible, its inspiration, and what is more vital, its inspiring power, depend not on a proof text here and there, not on the decree of some church council, but truth as revealed in the Bible becomes its own sufficient advocate. It can stand alone. It has no need of Uzzah's steadying hand. In fact, just in so far as it cannot stand alone, to that extent it is not true, no matter what extraneous authority shall bolster it.

A Christian missionary stands before an intelligent Hindu, with a New Testament in his hand. He is urging the Hindu to accept its teaching. "Upon what ground?" asks the Hindu. "This," says the missionary, "is the word of God." "So says the Mohammedan of the Koran." "But millions of men attest its power." "The Koran has as many witnesses." "But God guided these writers; holy men of old spake as they were taught by the Holy Spirit." "But," says the Hindu, "has not the Koran greater claims? The original text is even now in heaven, a 'well-guarded tablet.' The angel Gabriel

brought the words piecemeal to Mohammed on a silken scroll and Mohammed copied them for the world." "But," says the missionary, "this book tells of Jesus, the supreme revealer of God." But the Hindu replies, "Islam teaches that Allah is Allah and Mohammed is his prophet." What is left for the missionary to say? Nothing, save the only thing he ever had: Take the New Testament and the Koran and accept that which speaks to your deepest need.

"I like Christianity," said Arthur Hallam, "because it fits into all the folds of one's nature." Truth's fitting power is its inherent authority.