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The Religious Dissension of Babbitt and More

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G. R. Elliott

In reading the excellent essays written upon Irving Babbitt after his death by two old friends of his, Paul E. More and W. F. Giese, I was struck by a curious point of contrast. More says of Babbitt as a graduate student at Harvard: "I can remember him stopping before a church in North Avenue and, with a gesture of bitter contempt, exclaiming, 'There is the enemy! there is the thing I hate!' Undoubtedly that sentiment was softened as time went on . . . but it never disappeared." Now, if such intense hostility to the Church was characteristic of Babbitt in his graduate days, surely it would have appeared also in his undergraduate years. For it is then, usually, that youthful hatred of the Church is most assured and declarative. But nothing of this appears in Professor Giese's careful, as well as humorous and charming, record of "Irving Babbitt, Undergraduate";* though the author stresses Babbitt's inclination to supernaturalism during his four undergraduate years at Harvard.

Quite mystified, I wrote a questioning letter to Professor Giese. He replied in part as follows:

More's quotation, "There is the enemy" . . . puzzled me quite as much as it does you. The North Avenue Church, which I.B. and I must have sauntered past a few hundred times, seemed in my day to find in him neither

* The American Review, November, 1935.

a friend nor a foe. His attitude appeared only aloof and indifferent. For example he was given to quoting a number of the heretical utterances of Emerson about the narrowness, the dogmatic rigidities, the inanity and ineffectiveness of the Church – the "pulverization" of its doctrines and the ideas that would "make the conventicles groan". But all this seemed to me dissent rather than outright hostility. I should incline to think that the more lively hostility that More surprised in him was an expression of that profound disgust which Babbitt felt at the substitution of humanitarian preoccupations in the contemporary church for genuinely religious ones. That weakness of Protestantism Babbitt used to descant on not a little when I first knew him, just as he did later. I never felt that he at any time, early or late, exceeded these limits or condemned the Church except for its worldliness, much as he disliked its obscurantism.

That, I am sure, is a very accurate account of Babbitt's characteristic attitude towards the Church. "However," Professor Giese adds, "I drew him out very little on those matters; while More evidently discussed them to a finish in his talks with him." The phrase "to a finish" is right. Those of us who had personal relations with both More and Babbitt can testify that each of them served to accentuate the other's point of view. In their discussions they sharpened their wits upon each other; they sharpened their agreements as well as their differences. They abetted each other stoutly from first to last in forcing upon the attention of a hostile age certain deep ethical principles. But – such is the way of strenuous thinkers – the very intensity of that moral agreement heightened the intensity of their religious discord, heightened it "to a finish". This fact has to be borne in mind in reading

More's memorial paper on his friend; now included, by a mournful irony of fate, in his own last volume.* He confided to various persons that in writing it he took extraordinary pains to avoid saying anything that might appear at all unfair. And the essay is not only careful: it is warmly inspired. It is a rare union of acute criticism with magnanimous appreciation; it is indeed one of the most attractive of all More's writings. But, inevitably, he presents Babbitt's religious views in a categorical way which is on the whole more precise than accurate.

He contends that Babbitt believed in the supernatural but not in the superhuman; pointing out that his writings never draw a clear distinction between those two; and alleging that in Buddhism, by which he was much influenced, "the supernatural is, properly speaking, not superhuman". Probably this allegation would not be accepted by some students of Buddhism. But in any case it does not follow that Babbitt absolutely rejected the superhuman – insisted, that is, on submerging God in the supernatural "storey" of the nature of man. I know from my own conversations with Babbitt that he certainly did not do this. But I can well imagine that he would make a strong appearance of doing so in his disputations with More. In the course of his essay on his friend, More defines religion, over against Babbitt's humanism, as "an attempt to live in a plane where the supernatural departs from the natural into its own citadel of imperturbable peace". Well, I can hear, not without silent laughter, Babbitt's fulminations against such

* *On Being Human*, New Shelburne Essays, Vol. III (Princeton University Press, 1936).

transcendentalism. I can see him thrusting his jaw towards More while astringently emphasizing an "ethical will" that is *not* superhuman, in the sense that it does not seek to escape the world by departing "from the natural into its own citadel of imperturbable peace".

As for More's picture of Babbitt as a young college graduate giving vent to a bitter hatred of the Church, I must advance the hypothesis that this unusual outbreak was due to some provocative speech uttered by More himself but not recalled by him. For, as noted elsewhere by More, Babbitt's reactions were sometimes so overpoweringly vivid that they printed themselves on one's memory to the entire exclusion of what one had said by way of provoking them. But in any case the picturesque outburst of the youthful Babbitt against the North Avenue Church was momentary and exceptional; though naturally it seemed to More thoroughly characteristic, especially when he looked back upon it from his later standpoint of absolute Catholic dogma. Like Professor Giese and others, I found in Babbitt's talk, as in his writings, a very critical but never fundamentally hostile attitude towards the Church. He talked about it as I suppose Socrates might have talked if he had been a Harvard professor nineteen centuries after Christ; with the Protestant Reformation instead of the Homeric Age four or five hundred years behind him; and, close at hand, Emersonianism, instead of the humane mythology of the great age of Athens. In other words Babbitt maintained in modern Yankee garb the age-old bearing of the humanist, or man of critical good sense, in respect to organized religion.

But I must confess that at one time I harbored a

doubt of Babbitt's consistency in this matter. Stirred by a rumor set on foot by his controversy with More, I wrote to him – as American citizens write to Presidential candidates – demanding a black-and-white statement of policy on a certain point. He replied, October 4th, 1929: "I agree with you that humanism should not be presented as a substitute for religion or as including religion. The notion you seem to ascribe to me that 'organic Christianity is done with' I should regard as the height of presumption. I am much concerned with building up and fortifying the third storey of my edifice." (First storey, naturalism; second, humanism; third, religion.) "I am, however, unable to assume a definitely theological position along Anglican lines; and I fear that nothing short of this would satisfy you and P.E.M., in his latest phase." The final clause of this pronouncement may be termed a countercheck courteous, penned with tongue somewhat in cheek: Babbitt knew that I did not see eye to eye with "P.E.M." For P. E. More, after cross-examining me by word of mouth and by mail as to my "theological position along Anglican lines", had pronounced me a heretic. Thus I came between the incensed points of mighty opposites; like plenty of others who refused to take sides definitively in the religious dissension of "B & M".

"B & M" – thus some of their admirers abbreviated their names in the considerable correspondence evoked by their disputes. And that abbreviation, belonging as it does also to a well-known American railroad, struck me as a happy symbol of the mental habit of both of them. One day when Babbitt was talking to me about his friend with affectionate and extremely generous

admiration, he concluded: "But as for More's theology – have you ever happened to watch him walking along the street? He marches ahead in a straight line, never looking to right or left; and that's the way he thinks." This seemed to me a pretty good description of Babbitt's thinking also: it went straight ahead like a railway. In some ways, to be sure, he was more circumspect than More, notably in regard to theology. In this field More was trying to build tracks, forward from Plato, and back (let's say) from Princeton, to fifth-century Chalcedon, that grand central station. But both "B & M", accelerated by the impulsion of their divergence from each other, passed by at express speed a certain medial station in religion which, since the later nineteenth century, has been coming more and more to the fore.

At present its least misleading label is Liberal Catholicism. This term, to be sure, has sheltered a large variety of experimental and sometimes hopelessly heretical notions. But the main intent of the movement is the gradual building up of a modern Christian orthodoxy. That is, a religious outlook based upon the most catholic ideas and, especially, the most catholic experience and conduct discoverable in the world, no matter when or where. Discoverable supremely and awfully, however, in the words and life of Jesus Christ; and best maintained, very generally speaking, by the doctrines and practices of Christian Catholicism; which of course are not confined to those branches of the Church that wear the name of Catholic. Obviously Liberal Catholicism is an evolution from, not a revolution against, traditional Catholicism. But Catholicism ceases to be catholic in so far as it

clings to concepts that are at variance with the continual revelation of truth in life. The Liberal Catholic holds the conviction that truth, like life, is never miraculous in the sense of "unnatural" or "lawbreaking". He holds this conviction, not because it is modern, but because it is catholic. He rejects as uncatholic the modern notion that the deepest laws of life are comprehensible (not just apprehensible) by the human mind, are clearer now than ever before, and are to be opposed to the Christian revelation. He rejects so-called "Modernism" in religion, whether Protestant or Catholic. But he knows that the doctrines and practices of the Church must be modernly revised.

That summary of the Liberal Catholic position, which I suppose has had its fullest scope so far in the Anglican Communion, is certainly very inadequate. But it will serve for my present purpose, which is to point out that this position was not taken into account, properly and critically, by our two leading American critics, Babbitt and More. They passed it by on the other side — on opposite sides from each other. More, however, in the upshot, gave it a wider berth than Babbitt. Such at least is my opinion, paradoxical as it may seem to some, and as it would certainly seem to Babbitt and More themselves. My own experience of them in this matter is typical enough to be recounted without apology; incidentally it is not unamusing.

Each of them said to me, separately, these identic words: "I cannot see how you can call yourself an Anglican." But Babbitt meant, "Aren't you embarrassed?" More meant, "I am sure you are wrong." He said, in effect: "You and others like you are really

breaking away from the Anglican and Catholic form of the Christian faith, but you refuse to face this fact, thus deceiving yourselves and others." Now, More's own religious views were in many ways liberal and in a few points, I believe, decidedly heretical (which sounds, of course, like tit for tat). But in certain respects which seemed to him fundamental his standpoint was opposed uncompromisingly to that, I should say, of Liberal Catholicism, though he himself would not put the matter that way. He believed that his standpoint was as liberal as was possible without ceasing to be Catholic.

But it is with Babbitt's case that I am here mainly concerned. He said to me, in effect: "Of course, these matters are outside my province, but I find it hard to understand how anyone holding your very modern views can go in for the creeds and exercises of the Episcopal Church." I tried hard on various occasions to unravel this mystery for him, but he kept me explaining my explanations and the process had no end. At times I fancied that he was grasping my point of view, but soon some or other remark would make me see that (in a phrase from Frost's poetry) his mind had let go of it. Once he informed me that the species of Christianity with which he had been "surrounded" during his boyhood in the Middle West had alienated him from ecclesiastical forms of worship. "But apparently," he added, comically trying to subdue the irony in his voice and eyes, "your luck has been much better."

By temperament and circumstance, though not at all "in principle" (as the diplomats say), he was averse to the Anglican Communion. And I found that he had

practically no acquaintance with the considerable literature of Liberal Catholicism. Otherwise he might have discovered that this movement had much in common with his own humanism, particularly with his doctrines of the religious imagination and the higher will. Also he would have found that the direction of that movement was away from the kind of Christology which More had come to consider essential but which he himself was far from able to accept. In spirit, More was further from the Liberal Catholic outlook, and Babbitt closer to it, than either of them realized.

So far as I could discover, the only modern theological books with which Babbitt was really familiar were those of More! This situation seemed to me at once natural and odd, amusing and pathetic. Natural enough was his lack of familiarity with theology in general. It was outside his "field of concentration", as the phrase runs in our American universities; and owing to Harvard – and Babbitt – his leisure was abnormally slight. But it was natural that he should make an exception in favor of the work of More, his old friend and new theological enemy. However, it was very unfortunate that he should miss the significance of such religious writers as Von Hügel and A. E. Taylor – his contemporaries and, I think, his natural allies – while studying the later books of More with an extreme though antagonistic deference. In conversation he would praise with bated breath More's ability as writer and thinker – then sharply attack his latest point of view. "But as for you Episcopalians," he would say to me with grave reproach, "you ought to regard More as a new tower of strength to your cause." He could not forgive the failure of the Anglican Communion to welcome with great *éclat* the accession of More to the fold. And he was inclined to deem that failure typical – one more instance of a certain dubiety in the Anglican position, of a certain lack of grip and force in the Anglican mentality. He could not see how the new Anglican, More, could be less important than the lifelong Roman Catholic, Von Hügel, for current Anglican thought, or, more widely speaking, for Liberal Catholicism.

From such enigmas his mind would turn with relief to the spectacle of the Roman Catholic Church with its clear-cut dogmas and wide social efficiency. He contrasted it, to its great advantage, with the Orthodox Church of the East, which had made such a dreadful mess of things in Russia. As for the great Christian federation that might in time ensue from the growing rapprochement of the Anglican and Orthodox Communions – well, we must hope for the best. Babbitt did not (T. S. Eliot to the contrary) place all the hopes of humanity on one institution, the Roman Catholic Church. I recall his swift rebuke of a person who asserted in his presence that the Protestant churches were doomed. Such a pronunciamento, he said, was highly presumptuous; such an attitude of mind was far from humanistic. His point was simply that, so far, the Roman Catholic Church had shown more capacity than other religious bodies to face social reality and to uphold civilized standards. However, it is undeniable that his admiration for that church as a working institution helped to confirm his opinion that Christian doctrine, to be workable, had to be old-fashioned.

This opinion appears in certain passages of his post-

humous volume, *The Dhammapada, Translated from the Pāli with an Essay on Buddha and the Occident.* But before dealing with those passages I must remark upon the very special value of this book as a whole. For those who read between the lines it reveals more intimately than Babbitt's previous works the things by which he daily lived. His translation of the ancient poem – the Buddha's Sermon on the Mount, as it has been called – throws its English predecessors into the shade. They suffer heavily from romantic coloration. His version, though sometimes awkward, has a powerful simplicity that takes hold of the reader and does not let him go. The prose in which the old verses are rendered is a fine kind of modern poetic prose; though that statement would doubtless surprise Babbitt himself. Aiming only at truth, he here attains poetry also. The spectacle of Babbitt in this rôle is striking and refreshing; but only on the surface is it strange and surprising. Babbitt the man had a richer love of poetry than Babbitt the critic could show. And this beautiful translation is the natural result of his close familiarity with Buddhist scriptures; it is the ripe fruit of long love and deep conviction.

The poem prepares the reader happily for the ensuing essay on "Buddha and the Occident". The essay is a final fusion of the many thoughts on this subject that run through Babbitt's works. It is packed, sometimes repetitious and clumsy, but on the whole profound and indispensable. It shows the great service that Buddhistic ideas can render to thoughtful persons in the West at the present crisis of our civilization. More engagingly, it reveals, between the lines, when studied in close connection with his rendering of the

Dhammapada, how much the Buddha meant to the author himself.

As for the religious bearing of the essay, some readers will decide – sadly if they are Christians, gladly if they are anti-Christians – that the author's deep-laid design is to promote Buddhism at the expense of Christianity. That sort of reader cannot be helped. It is clear enough to an unprejudiced reader that the writer's main intention, as indicated by his closing sentence, is to bring out what those two religions have deeply in common. Also he wishes to show how the Buddha's way of thought may act as a corrective for popular Christianity. No doubt this secondary aim is developed disproportionally; but naturally, in view of the fact that the author is first and last a critic; and helpfully, in view of the present problems of Christendom. These considerations ought to be borne in mind while contemplating the three passages which I am going to quote below. For the sake of fairness they ought to be read in their context (see page 80). But my present purpose requires me to extract them and to append some critical remarks.

(1) "It is hard to see how one can affirm, on strictly experimental grounds, a personal God and personal immortality. If a man feels that these tremendous affirmations are necessary for his spiritual comfort, he should turn to dogmatic and revealed religion which alone can give them." Of course, the words "personal" and "comfort" have each a higher and a lower sense which are not considered by the writer. But my main point is that the words "experimental" and "revealed" are thrown into a false, obsolescent opposition. *Experimental revelation*, so to call it, is the

ground of the two "tremendous affirmations" mentioned by the writer. They would better be termed "dim but vital instincts". Certainly they are not *given*, as Babbitt puts it, by dogmatic religion. This merely formulates them.

(2) "What one is able to affirm without going beyond immediate experience and falling into dogma is, in Arnold's phrase, a great power not ourselves that makes for righteousness, a phrase that reminds one of Buddha's conception of the *dhamma*, or human law, as one may render it, in contradiction to the law of physical nature." Certainly "immediate experience", when it is authoritative, affirms that moral "power" or "*dhamma*". But to claim as Babbitt does that immediate experience cannot also affirm divine personality, that this belongs only to the sphere of dogma, is to weaken the authority of immediate experience; thus weakening, implicitly, its affirmation of moral law. Immediate experience, when it is entire, affirms a Being that is at once Personality and Law, in the highest sense of these two words.

(3) "Not being able to find any personality human or divine superior to his own, Buddha got his humility, as he himself tells us, by looking up to the Law." No irony, unfortunately, is intended here. The writer unwittingly makes us feel the limitation of the Buddhistic kind of humility. Certainly it is great and true so far as it goes; this is what one feels in reading the Dhammapada, particularly the present version. But the Buddha's humility is really an abstraction from entire religious humility; just as his supernatural Law is an abstraction from the complete Supernature, wherein Law has life more abundantly. Only when the divine

life is experienced as in the highest sense personal, can human persons look up to it with entire humility.

In short, those three passages are very far from Babbitt's best. They seem to me so outstandingly naïve and weak in comparison with the rest of the essay that I must believe they are due to the heat of his contention with More. Heat checks light when close friends differ. The increasing warmth of More's criticism of Buddhistic thought led Babbitt to make uncircumspect assertions on behalf of it. And, as previously noted, Babbitt believed that the Christian Gospel according to Paul E. More was far more canonical than it really is. In passages (1) and (2) above, the sharp (yet obtuse) opposition between "dogmatic and revealed religion" on the one hand and, on the other, "experimental" or "immediate" experience, is quite in line with More's theological thought. But while More harshly subordinated experience to ancient Christian dogma, Babbitt strove to fortify experience by delimiting and hardening its bounds over against dogma. His stand in this matter was far more occasional than More's; not essential to his main position; comparatively tentative. Hence he begins in passage (1) with the saving, or somewhat saving, clause "It is hard to see. . . ." More, I think, would have written "It is impossible to see. . . ." Otherwise, however, that first sentence might just as well have been penned by More as by Babbitt. Its thought, misleading and antiquated, was one which the two friends, arguing face to face on opposite sides of the fence, helped each other to maintain. In short, a considerable price had to be paid, religiously, for their superb moral cooperation.