A Matter of Belief

Edwin J. Sidey*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

"No!" He said, sharply, "I'm not going." In the quiet of the little kitchen his voice was so loud and harsh that it startled him...
"We cannot rest
This night,
Beneath our cross,
Our star.
Have you forgotten us?
We haven’t forgotten.
We can’t forget.
We walk with you
Who do not work
Tomorrow."

—Robert Gold, Eng.

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"No!" he said, sharply, "I’m not going." In the quiet of the little kitchen his voice was so loud and harsh that it startled him. My God, he thought, it’s starting again. Another fight. He stabbed at his half-finished dessert, then changed his mind and laid his fork down on his plate. Just the thought of the coming quarrel made him lose his appetite.

"But William." His mother spoke gently, pleading. "This is the last night that Rev. Johnson will be here. He’ll be gone tomorrow." She was sitting stiffly in her chair now, her hands folded in her lap. Only his father kept on eating, saying nothing, seemingly unconcerned.

But he was concerned, Bill knew. These bitter quarrels, that had come up so frequently in the last few weeks, hurt both his parents. And they were about such little things. Things like going to church tonight. He could avoid them so easily. All he had to do was just pretend a little, that’s all. Just hide his beliefs deep inside himself and become the obedient son he’d been when he left for the army three years ago.

He clenched his fists under the table. No! He couldn’t do it. Not anymore. He’d tried, but something inside him wouldn’t let him lie to himself.

"Your father is going with me," his mother said. "This is the most important meeting of the series, you know." She picked up her fork again and began picking at her food.
"Yeah, I know," he said, "This is the one where they call all the sinners down in front to repent and be saved. Well, here's one that's not going to be there." He looked out the window, his face hard, his lips thin, tight-pressed. Why do I have to hurt them like this, he thought. Why can't I do the things they want me to do, think the things they want me to think?

"Rev. Johnson is such a good man," his mother said. "He's saved so many souls."

"Yeah. Hundreds," he said, "I read the posters. What bothers me is how he counts all of them. I suppose he peeks over Gabriel's shoulder when he's writing their names down in the book of life." He was conscious of the biting sarcasm in his voice and he knew even without looking that his words had stung.

"I don't see how you can joke about it," said his mother. "You didn't used to think it was a laughing matter. I don't know why you've changed so much." She sighed.

He said nothing. He had changed. He knew it. People did change, whether they wanted to or not. And it wasn't just the army that did it. It would have happened anyway. But his parents couldn't see that. They had expected him to fall back into the same pattern of life, to become that other person again. When he hadn't, they had been puzzled and hurt.

"It will only be for an hour or so," his mother said. "Surely you can take that much time for God."

"It's not the time," he snapped. "I just can't stand that guy shouting and blubbering. 'Are you saved, brother!' That isn't religion. Not to me, it isn't."

"But it's so true." She made a helpless gesture with her hands. "Unless we are saved..."

He turned away from her deliberately and her voice trailed off. It was the same old stuff. The same empty phrases. Saved... Born again... Washed in the blood of... To him they made no more meaning than the slogans on cigaret ads. But they meant so much to his mother. And she was only thinking of him when she wanted him...

"Aren't you interested in salvation, William?" she asked. "Doesn't the promise of eternal life mean anything?"

Eternal life, he thought. That was the bribe for being good; the reward they had to offer to attract their followers. They all
did it. Christ, Mohammed, Buddha—they all promised that as the pay-off. He shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"Remember, you took some vows when you joined the church," she continued persistently, "Don't those mean anything to you, either?"

"Look," he said, "I joined the church when I was twelve years old. I didn't know anything about all that creed and doctrine. I joined the church because everyone expected me to. How much do you think any kid of twelve knows about religion?"

"But you don't need to know," his mother insisted. "All you need is faith."

"Faith—Faith!" He wadded his napkin up and slapped it down on the table. "Just have faith and let the big shots in the church do all the thinking. They've got all the answers." He was angry now, not at his mother, but at religion—all of it, all the doctrines and creeds and beliefs that had made slaves of men. Religion, in whose name more blood had been spilled than in any other cause. Religion, which had fought bitterly against scientific truth.

"Oh, you're not fair," his mother said. "It's all so simple. Christ died for us. ."

"Lots of men have died for us," he interrupted her. "I saw some of them die and it was just as bad as being hung from a cross. We don't worship them, do we?" He heard her gasp and his anger faded immediately into regret. Why do I have to take it out on her, he thought. What does it matter to me? What does it matter what I believe? I can still go to church, go through the motions, to make her happy.

He looked across the table, first at his mother, dabbing at her eyes with a tiny handkerchief, then at his father, bent and gray-haired, still eating slowly. Somehow they suddenly looked older, more tired, than he'd ever seen them look before.

His mother spoke. "It used to be so nice when the three of us went to church together. We had such good times then."

"I—I," he started to say something, then stopped, lost in indecision. "I'm still not going," he said at last. "I—I just—"

His mother stood up quickly and hurried to the sink at the other end of the kitchen. She stood there, her back to him, and began to scrape the supper dishes. She's crying, he thought, and it's my fault.
He got up and carried his plate down to the sink, wanting to help her, comfort her, say something that would patch up the quarrel. "I'm sorry, Mom," he said. "I can't—I—"

"Don't you believe in God at all, William?" she asked. There was pain in her voice and a deep sadness. It's just like I was dead, he thought. That's what I am to her. Worse than dead.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I believe in a God. But not the kind—"

He stopped. What's the use, he thought. How could he explain that his God was a nameless force, a being that didn't demand worship or ritual or faith, who never laid down a set of commandments, who offered no rewards of eternal life or punishment of eternal damnation. His mother never could understand that. To her, there was but one true belief. He walked quietly out of the kitchen and into the living room and stood staring out of the front window. He'd better get out of the house before he said anything more he'd regret.

Behind him, he heard his father enter the room. "Are you going anywhere tonight, son?" He turned then and there was pain in his father's eyes, too—pain and sympathy, as if he understood all that couldn't be said.

"To the library, I guess," he said, reaching suddenly to pick up a book on the end table. It was only half-finished, but he had to get out of the house.

"Why don't you go with your mother and me?" his father asked softly, "It would make her very happy."

Bill stood there a long moment, with the book in his hand, struggling with himself. "I—I can't, Dad," he said, finally, and then he walked quickly from the room and out the door.

* * *

When he reached the corner, he turned and looked back at the house. His mother had come to the door and was standing there, looking down the street after him and his father was standing with his arm across her shoulders. In the blurred half-light of dusk he could hardly see them.