Thinking

A Vet*

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Abstract

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by "a Vet"

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"I am not aware of any compelling need for religion," he said. "I have left the most personal and loving of Gods in the cave behind me, but I have no desire to return. For all my contact with Him, I was a lesser man.

"However, I abandoned my belief in a God primarily not because it seemed unnecessary or of no particular value but because it appeared to me untrue; and I could not keep, by faith or by reason, a belief in what was visibly false.

"Also I was driven by a thirst for knowledge and understanding that must be quenched, wherever my quest might lead me. I felt sure that a pursuit of truth could not end in self-destruction, yet, even though it should, there was for me no conceivable alternative—I had rather be a knowing young suicide than a credulous old patriarch.

"Furthermore, I had come to see faith as defined by the Apostle Paul—the proof of what cannot be proved—as a dishonest and untruthful process, an obstacle to knowing, and a violation of the spirit of sincere thinking.

"Such believing seemed to me not a means of scaling sheer cliffs of truth to dizzy heights inaccessible by more dogged intellectual means, but rather a means of exhaling about me an artificial fog of illusions that would shield me from the awareness that there were any new heights to be attained or convince me that they were undesirable in contrast with the pleasantly fanciful fog-forms of faith."

One of the group, a divinity student, dutifully objected, "But
what, may I ask, do you offer as a basis for ethical behavior? You must have one. Otherwise the social implications of your way of thinking are both destructive to yourself and pernicious to others."

The young man smiled still more broadly.

"You are quite right," he said. "Only you must not assume that religion has a monopoly on ethical compulsion. The ethical actions of an individual are the product of two general influences. The first is exterior. It consists of the combined mass of religious principles, civil law, and social and familial mores. It is essentially punitive; the individual knows that he must conform to certain moral standards if he is to avoid the censure or outright punishment of society or the avenging God, or if he hopes to receive the rewards promised him by society and the deity.

"The second is interior; it is fundamental to the personality. It cannot be deliberately cultivated nor consciously imposed by the individual himself or by his associates, though it may make him look for exterior forms and rationalizations in principles of ethics that seem conscious and calculated. I call it the facility of empathy.

"Most simply defined, it is the habit of imputing our own sensibilities to those with whom we deal in such a way that we cannot help treating them with the maximum consideration, since the good that we do them is directly satisfying to ourselves and the evil directly displeasing as though we had done it to ourselves. The more we are capable of empathy, the less we need any exterior controls, for we of our own natures excel all that ethics may demand of us. We violate no just laws, we offend no valid mores, and we far surpass the narrow righteousness of religion."

"Your empathy is really the essence of the Christian principle embodied in the Golden Rule," the divinity student said.

"Not at all," said the young man. "Your Golden Rule says 'Do thus and so!' to those who presumably might otherwise not do thus and so. It requires as motivation either the divine reward-punishment or the cold self-satisfaction of adherence to principle. "The facility of empathy is not a principle. It is the reason why people do thus and so without needing to be told or coaxed or wheedled to do thus and so. It requires no motivation because it is itself a motive."
"It is a reaction learned in childhood when the child first emerges from the narcissistic phase to the realization that the people about him are selves like his self. He comes to possess it before he is able to understand religion as anything other than a part of the vast lore of fancy in which Santa Claus and the Easter Rabbit, assorted brownies and fairies, and the fabulous characters of children's literature live together as equals.

"Empathy is not to be acquired in later life by self-indoctrination. For those who have been so fortunate as to grow up without it or without an appreciable degree, it must ever appear inscrutable, even ridiculous."

The divinity student beamed. "Doesn't it occur to you that what you are proposing is a sort of natural religion, that you are religious after all, whether you like it or not, and that your benevolent irreligion may yet be a byproduct of your religious training?"

The young man returned the beam. "I am no more religious in expressing my views on a trait of human character than a psychologist is in expounding upon the universality of sadistic tendencies. If you so loosely define the religious that it includes all ethical action, you may call me religious, and by the same standard you will have to exclude much of the church-going, creed-believing 'religious' public.

"But I might well quarrel with your definition. If religion is, as I think we usually understand the term, the acceptance of a body of principles of action together with less practical elements of dogma and folklore presided over by some form of supernatural power, I may plead 'not guilty' and sustain my case. I was acting ethically by virtue of empathy before I knew what religion was, during the time when I was deeply preoccupied with it, and, if anything, still more so now that I have left it behind."

The divinity student frowned. After a moment's silence he ventured, "There's a good deal more to be said about this matter."

"Granted!" The earnest young man rose to go. "Much more than we have time for this evening. I have tried to show you why I need not believe; I have yet to tell you why I cannot believe. Some other time. . . ."

He took leave of us. For a long time we sat in silence, each deep in the thicket of his own private thoughts.