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A Non-Ecclesiastical Confession of Religious Faith

By
LOUIS F. POST

ADDRESS delivered at All
Souls' Church, Chicago, Ill.,
August thirteenth, 1905

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I HAVE been honored several times with invitations to speak to this congregation on a vacation Sunday, and I always respond with a great deal of satisfaction to myself because I have a sense of freedom here which is not usual in all religious gatherings. Perhaps it is a poor recognition of your generosity that I should inflict upon you what may be regarded as a doctrinal address, embodying doctrines that may be objectionable to some of you. If this is so, I will apologize in advance, and then go on with my doctrines. For after all, doctrines with reference to truth may be likened to streets with reference to a city. They are the paths by means of which we get about. Some streets are too narrow, some are too broad, some are only alleys, and blind alleys at that; and so it is with doctrines. But streets we must have if we have cities, and doctrines if we would explore truth. And what I shall offer you in the way of doctrine is only a map—my map—which you can accept or reject as you please. As long as we accept and make our maps of doctrines honestly, and alter them when we find them wrong, we have no reason to think contemptuously of doctrines merely because they are doctrines.

While I am apologizing, perhaps I ought also to apologize for the extremely personal character of the address I am about to make. But, after

all, do not personal experiences offer a better method of conveying one's ideas than mere abstract statement? It seems to me that I can make this confession of faith best by telling you how my faith came to me.

Let me say at the outset that I am not a member of any religious denomination. I have no church connections; and, because I have no church connections, it might be inferred that I have no religious convictions. Yet the differences in religious opinion between myself and my friends of the churches are probably neither so numerous nor so radical as might be imagined. In the final analysis our disputes would hinge, I think, chiefly upon questions of ecclesiasticism. For I reject what my friends of the churches are pleased to call their spiritual authorities, and rest my religious faith upon what I am pleased to call my own perceptions and my own reason.

Most cordially do I grant you that this medium of spiritual light is of dubious value. But its revelations, while not inferior to those of the churches in the humanities, may be superior in the harmonies; and as this is the only channel of communication the universal Father has ever established between Himself and me, so far as I know, I prefer it to all others for my own use.

Once upon a time I too belonged to a church. Although not born in the Presbyterian "persuasion," as we used to say, I was plunged into it at an early age, so early that my "memory runneth not to the contrary." In the primitive society of my native hills—and swamps—Presbyterianism and respectability were synonymous. Methodism, the only other organized sect in our region, was condescendingly approved, because, by interesting the lower classes, it operated as a moral police force. Catholics were despised by Presbyterians and Methodists alike, for being "low Irish," very foreign and therefore very

dangerous as well as very godless. Even the Methodists couldn't coax Catholics away from the "scarlet woman," whom I recall as an old hag in a red hood riding on a broom stick. Of Jews, I remember a vague notion that there had been none on earth for 1,800 years—except the Wandering Jew, and an occasional peddler who couldn't crucify you if your Presbyterian grandfather was at hand. Unitarians, Universalists, free-thinkers and atheists were all classed as "infidels" deliberately bound for hell—men of whom it was naively said that their irreligion might be good enough to live by but wouldn't do to die by.

The caloric fate of Catholics, Jews and infidels didn't concern me. Though I have many cherished friends among them all now, they were then hardly more than figures of speech, quite incapable of feeling the exquisite agony of brimstone fire. But I pitied the "mere moral man," a type whom I personally knew; and the funeral sermons when these men died brought me great relief, for they always held out a human hope that the particular "remains" would probably escape the wrath to come.

Often in later years that crudely pious notion about "mere morality" seemed to me absurdly pagan. But I think I discern in it now the distorted image of a spiritual truth. The law of human character is never satisfied with moral behavior alone; it probes the intent. Something more is demanded of the religious man than merely keeping out of jail, or even out of mischief.

To recur to the fire and brimstone hell I have mentioned, it was to me a lurid reality. My selfish anguish, lest I, even I, might not answer roll call among the elect on the last great day, was at times excruciating. Possibly the fault was my own, but I got the notion that faith was neces-

sary to make my election sure, and that faith meant implicit belief in the improbable and unreal. In stark terror, therefore, "I walked the earth a credulous man, believing many things." I was as credulous regarding pulpit utterances as your materialistic fatalist is about inherited criminality.

Perhaps my faith had been over-trained. At any rate, when new experiences disclosed new sets of facts, a new religious vista opened before me. My church friends may not think this vista religious; for it lured me into "free thinking," as it was stigmatized, and thence to agnosticism and atheism. I came to believe that there is no God and no spiritual life. Men seemed to me only as the flame of the candle, which is something and somewhere while it burns, but nothing and nowhere when you blow it out.

That all this was really a religious process is part of the faith I am now confessing. To such of you as have come to your religious faith by other ways, the atheistic path may not seem in the direction of religion. But as "there are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays, and every single one of them is right," even if not the way of our tribe, so there are twelve gates into the New Jerusalem, every single one of which is the right gate even if it isn't yours or mine. Some fine morning, my Jewish and Catholic and Protestant friends—aye, my atheist friends also, you of the spiritual purpose—some fine morning after these fleshly garments of ours have been cast into graves, may we not all meet face to face in the New Jerusalem, coming toward one another each through his own gate? Even here and now, do we not come at times into the New Jerusalem, as it were, through our opposite gates, meeting one another spiritually face to face and greeting one another spiritually heart to heart?

Whether or not atheism may be one of the

gates into the New Jerusalem, I think that in my case it was at least a vestibule from paganism to religion. I should think it so though I were sure of its having been atheism. But looking backward, I doubt if I ever was an atheist. I think that the God I denied was only my own distorted apprehension of a theological fetish. I doubt, too, if I ever really rejected the idea of spiritual life. What I revolted at was a pagan hell with its cruel devils keeping the sulphurous fire ablaze, and a pagan heaven with useless angels "loafing about a throne."

Revolting as was my reasonless faith, I found the process of evicting it long and painful. In time, however, this old faith died within me, and I came fully into the stage of irrational negation which I have described as atheistic. Eventually that period, too, passed away. Materialistic explanations of a Godless universe ceased to satisfy me. The evolution of conscious life and moral ideals from unconscious matter and unmoral motion became as absurd to my perceptions as that the stream can rise above its source. It seemed to me more rational to guess that the human brain, as it developed physically, acquired capacity for receiving and individualizing moral impulses, than to guess that it generated them. Ancestor worship impressed me as less likely to have produced God, than to be a groping in the dark for God by beings intuitively conscious of his presence. The principle of averages, which enables us, for instance, to know the result of an election where millions of votes are cast, upon receiving a few bunches of scattered returns, suggested to my mind systems of law back of the physical. And in those laws I caught glimpses of beneficent purpose. As my apprehensions of human brotherhood developed under the influence of Henry George's "Progress and Poverty," my perceptions of spiritual Fatherhood clarified.

I realized that human suffering, which I had once attributed to an angry deity and later to insentient fate, is traceable to human indifference to beneficent natural laws.

So I wandered out of my atheism, if atheism it was, into what I shall presume to characterize as a rational spiritualism—not the spiritism of the mediums, but a philosophy of spiritual life.

Your sense of the incongruous might be quickened if I, after characterizing this philosophy as rational, were to identify it with the name of Emanuel Swedenborg. That was my own mental experience when a friend whose sense of the rational I held in high esteem, assured me that Swedenborg's philosophy was reasonable. And if you dip into some of his books, you may fare no better at first than I did. Their stilted Latin-English; their ecclesiastical phrasing; the wooden pictures of angels always facing the Lord, whom they couldn't see except as a sun in the heavens; the hard, geometrical arrangement of spiritual phenomena as Swedenborg seemed to me to see them—such things as these made his books uninterestingly fantastic. But as I began to appreciate his meanings, somewhat I imagine as one gradually appreciates the strange idioms of a new language, his descriptions which had seemed fantastic and dull revealed to me phenomena of individual and social life animate with rational purpose and replete with human interest. Translate Swedenborg out of the lifeless and colorless Latin-English in which his writings are officially printed, into the living speech that phrases modern modes of thought, and he is not fantastic, not mystical, not irrational.

This is not my view alone, nor the view alone of Swedenborg's followers. James Freeman Clarke may be quoted as saying: "Emanuel Swedenborg became the organ of a new spiritual

philosophy, the power of which is hardly yet understood, but which seems likely to leaven all religious thought and change all arbitrary theologies into a rational spiritualism." Edward Everett Hale has said: "Swedenborgianism has done the liberating work of the last century. * * * The wave Swedenborg started lasts to this day. The statements of Swedenborg's religious works have revolutionized theology." Still another, Ralph Waldo Emerson, is doubtless known to you all to have said: "The most remarkable step in the religious history of recent ages is that made by the genius of Swedenborg. * * * These truths passing out of his system into general circulation, are now met with every day, qualifying the views and creeds of all churches and of men of no church."

Three things about Swedenborg's philosophy are singularly impressive. One of these is the obvious truth of its details. Another is its completeness and homogeneity. The third is the universal adaptability of its principles. Like leaf to tree, or body to mind, or mind to spirit, is any part of this philosophy to any related part. With it as with physical nature, everything fits true. If Swedenborg recorded mere dreams and hallucinations, then he dreamed a philosophy of miraculous consistency. If he recorded no dreams nor hallucinations, but thought out this philosophy—which he might possibly have done, for his was one of the greatest minds of his day; an intimate of Kant's, he was also one of the most renowned scientists of Europe—if he thought out this philosophy, and then as a *tour de force* turned it into allegory, he produced an allegory of marvelous art—one so perfect in its analogies yet so true to human life that the "Pilgrim's Progress" is by comparison without form and void. Yet Swedenborg, unless he did one or the other of those two things, must have seen what he says he saw. On

the spiritual planes of existence, where all is to us ideal and abstract, he must have seen individual and social life in the concrete.

It makes little difference to me, however, whether Swedenborg saw these spiritual phenomena concretely or not. Of the authenticity of his message to mankind, his philosophy, simply as philosophy, is its own sufficient voucher. For example, in his concept of God as both "esse" and "existere," the "being" and "becoming" theories of the old philosophies are vitalized with rational spiritual life. By the same concept the truths of idealism are harmonized in one great system with all that is true in materialism. Swedenborg's "esse" as infinite and eternally unchanging essence, and "existere" as its infinite and eternally changing expression, constitute the dominant principle of all the phenomena we know. According to him this is the dominant principle of phenomena on every plane—physical, mental, moral, spiritual. It is God himself.

But as this principle is God, simply as principle, we get no idea of God's form. For the human mind, on a plane where idea is abstract and matter alone is concrete, to think of the form of a principle is to think of emptiness and nothingness. Since, then, we cannot picture the form of God as He is in principle, the Messiah appears in the form of superlative man. In this form we can conceive of God, because this is the highest form we are in this life capable of contemplating and loving.

As Son to Father, the Messiah is the second person in the Trinity. But the Trinity of Swedenborg is not the medieval riddle of three individuals who are yet but one individual. Swedenborg's Trinity in its ideal expression is a universal principle—the principle of the unity of purpose, cause, and effect; or, what is essentially the same thing, of substance, form and use. Without this

Trinity in unity God could not be God, nor could any man be a man. Even a chair could not be a chair; for is not a chair necessarily substance, form and utility—wood, shape and seating capacity—and are not these things three distinct elements of one object? On their highest plane, these three unified elements appear to Swedenborg's vision as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—three in one and one in three: God the Father as infinite purpose or love, desiring creation; God the Son as infinite cause or wisdom, conceiving creation; and God the Spirit as infinite effect or use, which is creation.

Let us illustrate on a lower plane with a man, a useful inventor—Edison, for example, as the inventor of electric lighting. We have in the first place, Edison's purpose or love desiring to produce electric lighting; in the second place, his knowledge or wisdom conceiving a method of electric lighting; and in the third place, his actual utilization of this knowledge or wisdom for the satisfaction of his purpose or love, in producing electric lighting and thereby serving mankind. Here are three elements, and all of them were necessary, and necessary in union as one. Without this trinity in unity, Edison, as inventor of electric lighting, not only could not exist, but would be unthinkable.

And when we speak of God the Spirit as infinite effect or use, which is creation, we mean creation in the sense not merely of original making but of continuous making. Very often the idea of a First Cause seems to imply an original cause, when its real meaning is a continuous cause. To illustrate—we might speak of the movement of a cannon ball and the movement of a watch as caused by a force. But the cannon ball's movement is caused by an original, the movement of the watch by a continuous force.

Constituting the one original source and con-

tinuous impulse of all phenomena, the three attributes of God—purpose or love, cause or wisdom, and effect or use—are symbolized materially by the heat, and light, and consequent vitality of the sun. The sun is said to be in our solar system correspondent to the triune God in his universe. To understand what is meant by correspondent, some idea of the Swedenborgian doctrine of correspondence is necessary. Correspondence differs, let me explain, from analogy. Analogues are only accidental resemblances, having no relation to cause and effect; whereas Swedenborg's correspondences are effects on one plane, of causes on another. The idea may be crudely illustrated by one's image in a mirror. This is not an analogue; its characteristics are those of the Swedenborgian correspondence. A perfect example of correspondence is facial expression; it is a manifestation of the mental on the plane of the physical. Another example is the heat of the sun, which is the material appearance of God's love, as is its light of his wisdom. Upon coming to full spiritual consciousness, we should feel, according to Swedenborg, the love principle as the physical body feels heat, and see wisdom as the physical eye sees light. In like manner, all other realities of what we now call the ideal would be concretely phenomenal.

Interpreting the Bible by this system of correspondences, Swedenborg considers it as embodying an inner sense, which constitutes the true Biblical revelation. This inner sense is not as in a cryptogram; it is to the literary and the historical sense as soul to body or cause to effect. The first chapter of Genesis thus becomes essentially the story of the birth of a human soul; the Israelitish pilgrimage, of its regeneration; while the tragic drama of Palestine is a representation of the progress of truth on earth—its birth in a lowly place, the vicious pursuit of it in infancy, its con-

founding of the learned in youth, its temporary obscurity, its subsequent disturbance of dominant or crystalized disorder, its crucifixion, its resurrection, its triumph. And isn't this process familiar, in the development not alone of individual character but also of human society—or what Swedenborg would call the "greater man"? From Moses to Lincoln every leader in the new crusade has realized it. Have we not all realized it? Do we not all realize, moreover, that truth triumphant always crystalizes in false forms, to be in turn broken up and reformed with repetitions essentially of the same drama successively on higher and higher planes of apprehension and application?

According to Swedenborg's philosophy, the different planes of divine expression are insulated, the phenomena of each progressing in continuous degrees on their own plane and being held to it by the principle of what Swedenborg calls discrete degrees. A crude illustration of discrete degrees would be a stream of water in a pipe; while the water can flow continuously within the pipe, it cannot spread beyond its confines. This principle of discrete degrees, one of the great distinguishing doctrines of Swedenborg, is no more than the perfection of analysis. It simply recognizes and distinguishes essential differences.

A very important principle, therefore, is the principle of discrete degrees; one which is by the present generation woefully ignored. The universities ignore it when they treat sociology as an inductive science merely, the churches when they consider it deductively alone; Christian Scientists ignore it when they obscure the difference between the spiritual and the physical, materialists when they are blind and deaf to the spiritual; Socialists ignore it when they obscure the difference between social solidarity and in-

dividual autonomy, anarchists when they deny social solidarity; your practical man ignores it when he sneers at the ideal, your idealist when he abjures the practical.

All differences of kind, from lowest to highest, are within the Swedenborgian concept of discrete degrees. But life is divided by Swedenborg into four major degrees or planes, each discreted from the others. These are the corporeal, the plane on which the physical senses reign; the natural, the plane of intellectual activity; the moral, the plane of righteous conduct; the spiritual, the plane of motive. To give to your fellow man a "fair deal," for example, whatever the motive, even though it be only to keep out of jail or to get into good society, is moral; but it is not spiritual unless inspired by motives of respect for the rights of your fellows as equal to your own.

Through the boundaries of discrete degrees nothing can pass in its own form. Its form must alter to harmonize with the nature of the plane to which it passes. For illustration, love on the spiritual plane becomes heat on the corporeal, and wisdom on the former is light on the latter. Consequently the scientist, though he might explore to infinity the continuous degrees of the corporeal plane, can never penetrate its insulation into the natural, the moral, or the spiritual—not as a scientist, not by so-called scientific methods. On the corporeal plane we live in a world of effects. It depends not only for its original impulse, but also for its continuance, upon other worlds—discreted worlds of causes. The latter can be studied from the former only ideally, by philosophical as distinguished from scientific methods, and through the medium of correspondences. Chemical analysis is not the open sesame; anatomical psychology is vanity and vexation.

But don't imagine that Swedenborg's philos-

ophy is merely an intellectual system. From center to periphery it is vibrant with the doctrine of usefulness for its own sake. This doctrine is simply a rational interpretation of the two great commandments—love for God and love for the neighbor. Man's love for the neighbor expresses itself and finds satisfaction in usefulness to man; his love for God, in usefulness to man under the inspiration of his imperfect perceptions of the eternal principles of absolute right. Conversely, God's love finds expression and satisfaction in usefulness to man, and in harmony also with the eternal principles of absolute right.

Understood in that way, the idea of love by God for man and by man for God appealed to my awakening sense of the spiritual. So I turned hopefully to Swedenborg for light, for more light, for further light. As I began to apprehend his philosophy, it responded to my unchecked demand for the rational. Through it I came to appreciate the dilemma of those to whom everything is in flux, and also the dilemma of those to whom everything is fixed. Eternally changing phenomena seem to me now but natural expressions of eternally unchanging principle. I behold a universe of matter and mind and morals and spirit in constant flux phenomenally, yet in principle the same yesterday, today, and forever. It is a universe, moreover, which is pervaded and governed by an exquisite harmony of the wisdom that is infinite rationality and the love that is infinite justice.

By Swedenborg's philosophy, therefore—not in every respect as interpreted by its organized cult, but in a general way—my later religious views have been moulded. Though it may not have restored religion to me nor me to religion, I am conscious of some of the signs of both. Many of these I shall not mention, partly for

lack of time and partly because they could not be interesting to you. I may say, however, that I feel once more that I am a miserable sinner; though it is when I wrong a brother or drift away from the principles of absolute right, as I perceive them, and never because I miss a prayer meeting or amuse myself on a Sunday. Once more I try to pray, but in my work rather than on my knees. And I fear—for this is a confession—that I am still somewhat of a pharisee; I cannot wholly rid myself of the notion that it is a deadly sin in others to disagree with me. But pharisee or not, I am able with all sincerity to say, along with men whose experience has been like my own, that a faith that was dead has revived. But this faith is not the old terror-fostered credulity; it is implicit confidence simply in the practicability of what is right. If there are times when I falter, and, indeed, there are many such times, I can exclaim with rational fervor regarding this faith, as aforetime I prayed with credulous piety regarding its graven image, "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief."

Those who desire to become better acquainted with the philosophy of "Discrete Degrees" will find Charles H. Mann's late work, "Life Within Life," readable and instructive; 115 pages; 50 cents postpaid. Swedenborg's work, "Divine Love and Wisdom," is suggested as giving further help in understanding his religious philosophy; 40 cents postpaid. Address Western New Church Union, 64 East Van Buren St., Chicago.

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