Does It Matter Much What Man Believes?

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Unsound Assumptions.

The person interested in discovering the religious viewpoint prevalent in America today has but to advert to the utterances he hears on all sides — utterances repeated with such frequency as to become accepted as axioms. Every reader will recall such as the following: "It doesn't matter much what a man believes as long as he is sincere and does what is right."
"Religion is not a creed to be believed but a way to live."
"All religions are about equally good. They are all but different roads to the same destination."
"Don't worry about differences in creed. The important thing is to live right, to keep the golden rule."
"A man will be judged not by the doctrine he believes, but by the life he lives."

Whatever phrasing these slogans assume there is a kindred sentiment running through each of them, and all find a common agreement in their rejection of the importance of belief in the dogmas of religion. Indeed, the very word "dogma" has come to produce an unpleasant reaction in the popular mind, and to put a doctrine in ill-repute one has but to brand it with that label.

Before undertaking to hold up the above mentioned slogans to the light of reason and common sense, it will be profitable to trace the genesis of this sentiment now so rampant in America. A brief glance at the factors responsible for its origin and development will go a long way toward enabling a person to fathom the mystery by which a concept, unknown for practically sixteen centuries of the Christian era, has gradually come to gain the ascendency in the religious thought of the American people.

Truth Told Without Rancor.

In prosecuting this investigation into the origin, nature, and credentials of religious indifferentism, it may not be amiss to state at the very outset that it is my intention to treat the subject in a thoroughly frank, but impartial scientific manner. While at times I may feel compelled by the laws of logic to express a vigorous dissent from the principles of indifferentism, I do so with a complete absence of ill-will, and with nothing but sentiments of kindliness and good feeling toward all my fellow Americans, who may hold contrary views. Scholars of every shade of philosophic and religious thought recognize that a discussion, in which fundamental disagreements are expressed on religious views, may be conducted in an impersonal manner, without engendering the slightest vestige of rancor.

There is no logical reason for carrying differences in philosophical or religious views over into the altogether disparate domains of personal and social relationships. Hence, the reader, whether Catholic or non-Catholic, will remember that when at times I express a vigorous disagreement with some of the principles of indifferentism, I have in my heart only friendship and affection for the indifferentist. For, the aim of the discussion is to add not a jot or tittle to the sum total of the world's

rancor, but to lessen it by clarifying the present confusion in religious thought in America, by showing the clear dictates of logic when applied to prevalent viewpoints in religion. Origin Of Principle Of Private Interpretation.

When Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk, on October 31, 1517, nailed his ninety-five theses to the doors of the Church at Wittenberg, and proceeded to establish a religion of his own, he set loose in the religious world a principle which was destined to produce consequences far beyond the ken of himself or his fellow reformers. It was the principle of the supremacy of private judgment in the interpretation of the Scriptures and as a guide in the religious life. Not that Luther, Calvin, Zwinglius, or any of the other so-called reformers following immediately in his wake conceived for a single moment of this principle as one that would ultimately be invoked by the maker of every new creed as the basis and justification of his procedure. Luther believed that his own interpretation of the Scriptures was the only correct one — all the others were wrong. Calvin placed the same degree of overwhelming confidence in his own private judgment. So, likewise Zwinglius, Melanchton and the rest.

Far from being indifferentists in religion, these reformers were fanatics, each believing his own particular creed was correct, and willing to persecute unto death all who contumaciously held a contrary interpretation. Far from being the founders of religious tolerance, as a modern myth is fond of picturing them, the reformers set an example of intolerance and persecution which in cruelty and fanaticism has seldom, if ever, been equaled in the long annals of Christendom. Insisting with despotic finality that his judgment be accepted as supreme in all matters of religion, Martin Luther pronounced every one who differed from him in doctrine a heretic, condemning him in coarse and vulgar language. Thus he writes, “Whoever teaches otherwise than I teach, condemns God, and must remain a child of hell." ("Saemtliche Werke" (The Complete Works) Volume 28, page 346) And again: "I can hear and endure nothing which is against my teaching." ("Works," edited by Walch, Volume 8, page 1974)

The Intolerance Of The Reformers.

When the peasants, led astray by Luther's example of the private interpretation of Scripture to suit one's fancy, sought to carry out their own ideas of the meaning of the Bible, thus provoking the Peasant's War, Luther turned on them with savage ruthlessness, urging the nobles to kill these "children of the devil" and to track them down like mad dogs. ("toile Hunde"). His advice was followed literally. Thousands of these poor peasants were murdered with atrocious cruelty. In one of the letters of Erasmus (Epistle 803), the number of slain is placed at 100,000. Far from regretting such an orgy of wanton human slaughter, Luther prided himself upon it, saying: "I, Martin Luther, slew all the peasants in the rebellion, for I said that they should be slain; all their blood is upon my head. But I cast it on the Lord God, who commanded me to speak in this way." (Werke, Erlangen edition, Volume 59, page 284 "Table Talk"; see also Grisar, Martin Luther, Volume 3, page 213.)

Instead of becoming gentler and more tolerant with age, Luther grew more rancorous and vituperative. A short time before his death he wrote two frightfully abusive pamphlets. One was "Against the Papacy, founded by the devil at Rome," the other was against the Jews. The frontispiece in the first pamphlet was a shockingly vulgar picture of a piece with the contents. This production, the German historian, Dollinger, termed "a document whose origin can scarcely be explained otherwise than by supposing that Luther wrote the most of it when under the influence of intoxicating drink." (Dollinger, "Luther" page 48.)

Persecution Of Jews.

His attack against the Jews like-wise bristles with vile epithets, such as, "young devils damned to hell." He summoned his followers in Germany "to burn down Jewish schools and synagogues, and throw pitch and sulphur into the flames; to destroy their houses; to confiscate their ready money in gold and silver; to take from them their sacred Books, even the whole Bible; to forbid their holding any religious services under penalty of death; and if that did not help matters, to hunt them out of the country like mad dogs!" ("Luther's Works," Volume 20, pages 2230-2632.) It was in this spirit of bitter hostility and intolerance toward all who held a single theological viewpoint other than his own that Luther persisted until the final curtain fell. After a painstaking study of the reformer's life and writings, that impartial student of history, John L. Stoddard, formulates the following conclusion concerning Luther's attitude toward freedom of conscience: "It is commonly said that Luther inaugurated the right of free investigation. Nothing is less true. He talked of it, as a reason for abandoning the traditions of the Church, but he did his utmost to bring about complete subjection to an unassailable Bible as he interpreted it! He instituted thus a Pope of printed paper, instead of a Pope of flesh and blood. Moreover, since he constituted himself the authoritative interpreter of the Bible, he practically claimed for himself infallibility. One of Luther's contemporaries, Sebastian Frank, wrote despondently: “Even under the Papacy one had more freedom than now.'" (Stoddard, J. L., "Rebuilding a Lost Faith," pages 97, 98.)

This tyrannical attitude in matters of conscience was not confined to Luther. It prevailed among the reformers following in his footsteps. It was implicit in the system. For, in order to secure any coherence in his ranks, it was necessary for each reformer to set up his private judgment as supreme and absolute, and to insist upon all his followers molding their judgment in conformity with the pattern which he designed for them. Otherwise, there would have been no unity within the organization, but instead there would have been as many creeds as there were individuals exercising their private judgments. Examples.

Take Calvin, for example, as he may be said to typify in this regard the attitude of the whole swarm of so-called reformers following in Luther's tracks. In his letter to Aubeterre, Calvin claimed infallible authority, regarding himself as the mouthpiece of God, saying: "God has conferred upon me the authority to declare what is good and what is bad." ("Lettres francaises," Volume 1, pages 389-390.) In consonance with this premise, he demanded death by fire or sword for all who differed from him. His long imprisonment of his theological opponent, Servetus, and his subsequent burning of him to death over a slow fire, casts a lurid light upon the kind of religious freedom which the reformers brought into the world.

Nor was the case otherwise with the early settlers of America. Braving the perils of the sea to find in the New World the religious liberty denied them in the Old, the Puritans straightway proceeded to display violent antagonism and intolerance toward all who sought to worship God in a manner different from them. The voyage across the Atlantic brought a change of skies but not of mind. Like the individual reformers, the Puritans regarded religious liberty as a boon for themselves, but as an evil for all who disagreed with them. Hence, the heretic in America found himself receiving from the hands of the early colonists the same hostile treatment that was his portion in the Old World. The early history of the colonists in America wrote but another chapter in the age-old story of the persecution of the dissidents by the dominant religious group.

The Swing Of The Pendulum.

How is it then that there has come to dominate the thinking of the great masses of people in America a philosophy of religion which is the very opposite of the one prevailing for eighteen centuries in Europe and for many years in the history of America? Why is it that apparently the majority of American people will give ready assent to the declaration of the popular lecturer that, "it doesn't matter what a man believes; all religions are equally good; creeds don't count, it's the life that one lives that matters," when their ancestors for centuries believed that orthodoxy of creed was of paramount importance? Why is it that denominational lines are so blurred, with even professing members worshipping in a church of one denomination on one Sunday and in one of a different creed on the next? America has recently had the amazing spectacle of a prominent Baptist minister, the Reverend Doctor Harry E. Fosdick, serving as the regular preacher in a Presbyterian Church in the nation's metropolis. The spectacle no longer amazes. On the contrary, the only amazement caused the general public was the action of a conference of Presbyterian ministers in rudely presuming to question the orthodoxy of the Baptist preacher's views in the light of the Presbyterian creed. The general consensus of editorial comment in the nation's press was that the action of the Presbyterian ministers in protesting that there was such a thing as a difference between a Baptist minister's teaching and the Presbyterian creed was in the eyes of the general public simply a case of "much ado about nothing."

Whence has come this complete swing of the pendulum from an absolute insistence at the cost of life itself upon the paramount importance of doctrinal orthodoxy to a complete disregard, which at times almost approaches contempt, for religious dogmas and denominational creeds?

The Supremacy Of Private Judgment.

To understand how the viewpoint of religious indifferentism, with its flabby thinking, with its obvious contradictions, with its sentimental effervescence, with its negation of the first principle of logic and the dictates of common sense, with its implicit denial of the validity of objective criteria of truth and error, could yet become the dominant philosophy of religion among the people of America, it is necessary to recall the principle which Martin Luther ushered into the religious world.

It is the principle of the supremacy of private judgment in the interpretation of Scripture and as a guide in the religious life. True, Luther did not formulate it as a principle to be used by others, but reserved its application to his own judgment. But his example proved more powerful than his words. It became infectious. Little did he foresee apparently that he was unleashing a hydra that was destined to divide his own sect into twenty-one different divisions, and that has brought — and is still bringing — more disintegration and division into Christianity than all the heresiarchs before or since his time. Like the fabled serpent, Hydra, that had nine heads and grew two more for every one cut off, this principle gives birth to two new sects whenever two members of a denomination disagree, by constituting the private judgment of each dissident supreme and beyond appeal. The two hundred and more different religious sects making up Protestantism today (in 1946) are but the mature fruition of Luther's principle of the supremacy of private judgment in religion. {How many sects of Protestantism are there today? One recent scholar informed us the answer was more than 2, 500!}

Let us analyze the implications of this principle. Clearly contained therein is the implication of the invalidity of objective criteria for the determination of truth. The criteria have become purely subjective. For, according to the principle which Luther exemplified in the formation of his creed, that is to be accepted which appeals to the individual, and rejected if it does not. Thus when Luther

found that Saint James in his epistle set forth the teaching that "faith without good works is dead" he promptly called it an "epistle of straw" and threw it overboard. Why? Because it does not make the same forceful appeal to him as his own doctrine of salvation by "faith alone."

For a similar reason be arbitrarily inserted the word "alone" after the word "faith" in the passage of Saint Paul (Romans 3:28) to make it square with his pet doctrine. When reproached for this, Luther offered simply his own will and pleasure as complete justification for his procedure. That it may be evident to all that the writer is not imputing to Luther a reason other than the one which Luther himself assigned we will quote his own words: "You tell me what a great fuss the Papists are making because the word “alone” is not in the text of Paul. If your Papist makes such an unnecessary row about the word “alone”, say right out to him: “Doctor Martin Luther will have it so,” and say ‘Papists and asses are one and the same thing’.” “I will have it so, and I order it to be so, and my will is reason enough.” (Quoted by J. L. Stoddard, "Rebuilding a Lost Faith", pages 101-102.) (Stoddard in turn is quoting from An Open Letter on Translating by Martin Luther, written in 1530. Translated from “Ein sendbrief Luthers. Von Dolmetzschen und Fürbit der heiligenn" in Martin Luthers Werke, (Weimar: 1909), Volume 30, Part 2, pages 632-646.)

Instead of subscribing to the viewpoint of the modern indifferentist that it does not matter much what a man believes, as long as he does what is right, Luther held almost the direct opposite, namely, that it does not matter much what a man does as long as he believes aright.

In throwing overboard all objective criteria for the determination of religious truth, Luther enthroned the subjective reaction of the individual with all its whims and caprices as the dominant principle in the establishment of a doctrinal creed. But when subjectivism is made the cardinal principle in any system of belief, there is left no rational means by which error can be demonstrated, or the vagaries of a capricious nature effectively checked. For, each individual finds in his own subjective reaction a sufficient reason for his religious faith. It has become supreme and infallible, and beyond it, there is no court of appeal. For, it is in the same domain as taste and fancy, concerning which philosophers have long maintained it is futile to dispute.

It is not probable that Luther had any clear perception of the intrinsically divisive implication of the principle he introduced into the religious world. Principles, however, have a peculiar habit — especially when permitted to function for a sufficient length of time — of gradually bringing to the surface in explicit form, implications which were lurking under cover, unperceived and unsuspected. As Cardinal [Blessed John] Newman with profound penetration has pointed out: "Principles will develop themselves beyond the arbitrary points of which you are so fond, and by which hitherto they have been limited, like prisoners on parole." (Newman, Cardinal, "Prospects of the Anglican Church.)

The Fruits Of Private Judgment.

It is this principle of subjectivism, namely, the supremacy of private judgment, which has been working as a leaven in the bosom of Christianity for four centuries, and which is responsible for the present widespread disintegration and anarchy that has torn Protestantism into hundreds of different warring creeds, making Soviet Russia with its Bolshevik revolutions seem in comparison like a model of orderly government. It is this principle which has spread ruin and chaos throughout Christendom, making the divisions in Christianity a laughing-stock in the eyes of the pagan world, and causing them to exclaim to the missionaries sent to convert them: "When you Christians can

first agree among yourselves as to the true religion, then come and impart the truth to us — but not before."

It is this principle of subjectivism that is responsible for the sloughing off of clearly defined dogma, the blurring of denominational lines, and the making of religion a matter of the feelings and emotions.

Throwing aside the chart and compass of reason and the north star of a divinely established teaching authority, this principle plunged the bark of religion upon a dark and stormy sea, tossed about by the tempests of subjective feelings and the passions that stir ceaselessly within the human breast. It is this principle, which is the prolific mother of modern religious indifferentism, in which vague half-truths and obvious contradictions dressed up in pleasant sentimental garb are eagerly pressed to the bosom without so much as being questioned for their credentials.

When Rebecca wished to secure for her younger son, Jacob, the blessing and the birthright which Isaac intended for the elder son, Esau, she clothed Jacob with goat's skin that it might appear to the blind father's touch like the coarse skin of Esau. Isaac, hearing the soft voice of Jacob and feeling the rough skin of Esau, voiced his perplexity, saying: "The voice is indeed the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." (Genesis 27:22.) So the person who holds up to the light of reason and of objective reality the common utterances of the indifferentist that "all religions are equally good and true" will be compelled like Isaac to recognize the dual character of the subject confronting him, and say: "The statement as an intellectual assertion is perfectly false, but the sentiment is kindly and agreeable. It has the voice of Jacob, but the covering of the beloved Esau."

Not Logical, But Popular.

The philosophy of religious indifferentism which prevails in America today cannot be explained as the resultant of any sustained effort in logical reasoning. Its roots must be traced back to the principle of subjectivism which Luther introduced into the world in making the private judgment of the individual autonomous and supreme in matters of faith. For, if the principle of subjectivism be admitted then the subjective reaction of the individual, with its large core of feeling and emotion, becomes the sole criterion of religious truth and error. If all the creeds produce about the same subjective reaction, the same emotional response, the individual concludes, and, on the basis of his fundamental assumption, concludes quite logically, that all religions are about equally good and true. That is why the philosophy of modern religious indifferentism is but the logical sequel of the principle of subjectivism — the twentieth century harvest of the sixteenth century seed. {And it is worse for the twenty-first century!}

That this principle of subjectivism is still as dominant in the Protestantism of today as it was in Luther's time is clearly evident from a perusal of Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible, the standard work among modern Protestant scholars. Writing on the inspiration and authority of the Bible as a guide for the individual, A. Steward says therein: 'More pressing, perhaps, than even the distrust of criticism which prevails in many quarters, is the search for authority. If the Bible is not to be like an Act of Parliament, operative, "to the last and farthest extremity of the letter," how is it to retain that quality which the Westminster Confession ascribes to it of being the final court of appeal in all controversies of religion? How is the divine and authoritative element to be separated from the human and fallible? How, in fact, is revelation, in the sense of communicated knowledge, possible by means of the Scriptures?... Denney quotes with approval the words of Robertson Smith, in which he gives a modern rendering of the testimony of the Holy Spirit: "If I am asked why I receive

Scripture as the word of God, and as the only perfect rule of faith and life, I answer with all the fathers of the Protestant Church: Because the Bible is the only record of the redeeming love of God, because in the Bible alone I find God drawing near to man in Christ Jesus, and declaring to us in Him His will for our salvation. And this record I know to be true by the witness of His spirit in my heart, whereby I am assured that none other than God Himself is able to speak such words to my soul." Denney, however, clearly perceives what we have pointed out above, that this is "a doctrine of the Divine message to man," not "a doctrine of the text on Scripture." His view is that coming to Scripture "without any presuppositions whatever," without any antecedent conviction that it is inspired," we become convinced that it is inspired because "it asserts its authority over us as we read," it has "power to lodge in our minds Christianity and its doctrines as being not only generally but divinely true," its power to do this being "precisely what we mean by inspiration".' (Dictionary of the Bible, edited by James Hastings, Volume 1, page 298. Scribners, New York)

But neither Steward, nor Denney, nor Smith throw a single ray of light upon the baffling problem of explaining why so many divergent and contradictory interpretations result from the perusal of comparatively simple passages if each individual reader is really inspired as to the truth contained therein by the Holy Spirit. How can the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of Truth, inspire individuals to draw from the Holy Scripture contradictory meanings? In seeking to make each individual inerrant in his reading of the Bible, they make the Holy Spirit the father of lies and falsehood. If each individual feels "assured that none other than God Himself is able to speak such words to my soul," then, there remains no external authority to check the vagaries of the capricious spirit, for each individual has constituted his own subjective reaction as the final court of appeal. Is it any wonder then that Protestantism continues to this day to be the fertile mother of sects and divisions that it was in Luther's day? For, in its very bosom it still harbors the principle of subjectivism, the principle of division, with no external or objective agency to restrain it from breaking out on its ceaseless rampage.

America — A Stronghold Of Religious Indifferentism.

It is interesting to note that the phenomenon just described is peculiarly characteristic of America. In probably no other country in the world is the view that it does not matter what religious creed a man professes, so widespread as in America. In traveling through the various countries of Europe, one finds the people surprised on hearing of the not uncommon practice in America of persons attending the services of a particular denomination on one Sunday, and the services of a different church on the next. True, religious indifferentism has filtered through in a small degree into a number of countries, due to a considerable extent to the spread of American travel and to the infiltration of American literature. America remains, however, its true home, and the paradise where it thrives most luxuriously.

The question may be raised, however, as to why America should be the special breeding ground of religious indifferentism. The explanation is to be found in the consideration of the following circumstances: First, the population of this country has become a virtual cross section of the population of the Old World, and a mosaic of its different religions. It has had, therefore, for many years a far greater diversity of religious faiths than any other country in the world. The diversity resulting from the adherents of the various religions in the Old World bringing their creedal viewpoints with them to the New World has been further increased by continued divisions within denominations, and by the birth of many new sects indigenous to American soil. It is an unusual year, indeed, that does not witness the arrival of one or more sects.

The spectacle of over two hundred different sects proclaiming different creeds, each insisting upon certain important features which all the others are lacking, and which it alone has, so overwhelms the ordinary man in the street as to leave him in a daze of bewilderment and confusion. How is he to find time to investigate each of these myriad creeds to ascertain which is the true one? The prospect of accomplishing such a Herculean task simply staggers him. Furthermore, he sees the leaders of all these denominations hopelessly disagreeing among themselves. What is the reaction of the ordinary layman to this Babel of confusion and contradiction? It is as natural as it is inevitable. It is the feeling that it does not matter much after all what a man believes as long as he does what is right. It is the easiest way of escape from a difficult and disagreeable task. It is the pleasant path of least resistance — the route chosen by the vast millions of pleasure loving Americans. It is in consonance, too, with the principle of subjectivism in religion.

The Easiest Way.

The second factor in the espousal of indifferentism by the American people as their dominant religious philosophy may be found in the fact that the principal emphasis of this philosophy is upon the action rather than upon the thinking that lies behind the act. It stresses the importance of getting results. In so doing, it harmonizes with the national temperament of the American people as a nation of "doers" rather than thinkers. The motor type is regarded with the highest esteem. Functionalism is the prevailing philosophy in business — the philosophy of "getting things done." By this standard, a man's success is largely measured. Americans are particularly fond of the scriptural text: "By their fruits you shall know them.” We have made it our national shibboleth. In thus emphasizing the importance of action and conduct, the indifferentist is right. For the viewpoint of the religious indifferentist is not completely fallacious. Nothing that is totally erroneous could ever have won the number of adherents which indifferentism has won. It is a half truth, and it is because of the germ of truth that is in it that it has won its following. While correct in its emphasis upon the importance of conduct, it is myopic and wrong in its neglect and denial of the importance of an objectively sound and truthful creed as a basis of religious faith. It overlooks the fact that all conduct has its roots in thought. If the thinking is erroneous, the resultant action will not be entirely correct, but will reflect the shortcoming in the thought. It overlooks also the fact that God wishes to be worshipped not only in deed but in thought. He wishes the homage of our minds as well as of our bodies. The indifferentist does not apparently advert sufficiently to that scriptural counsel which expresses so profound a psychological truth: "As a man thinks in his heart so is he." (Proverbs 23:7.)

They Lack Religious Instruction.

The third factor may be traced to the fact that in America all denominational creeds enjoy the same political rights. They are all equal in the eyes of the civil law. There is undoubtedly a tendency to carry over this concept of the equality of all creeds from the sphere of jurisprudence to the field of reason and conscience. The tendency toward this carrying over in thought is further increased by the complete exclusion of religious instruction in the public schools, so that the majority of the people of America have but vague general ideas as to definite religious doctrines. Consequently, they fall rather easy victims to such specious shibboleths of the indifferentist as: "It doesn't matter much what a man believes as long as he does what is right." "All religions are about equally good."

These pass ingratiatingly before their eyes with all the solemn splendor of unquestioned platitudes.

From what has been said thus far, it will be seen that the key to the solution of the perplexing problem of discovering how millions of people in America could espouse the philosophy of religious indifferentism with all its contradictions and inconsistencies, is to be found in the principle of subjectivism introduced into the religious world by Luther. By making the private judgment of each individual supreme, this principle became the prolific mother of innumerable religious sects. Confronted with the Herculean task of determining which one of these hundreds of warring creeds was really the true Church of Christ, vast numbers of the American people have simply raised aloft the white flag — surrendering to the apparent hopelessness of such a task and seeking an easy escape by declaring that all creeds are about equally good and that it doesn't matter much anyway what a man believes as long as he does what is right. Don’t raise the white flag of surrender! It DOES matter what one believes! The truth CAN be found!

Let us abandon indifferentism and let us acknowledge that truth matters! Let us not be satisfied until that truth has come to rest deep within our souls! Might I suggest a clear-headed investigation of the claims of the Catholic Church, the one church founded by Our Lord to proclaim His truth ‘in season and out of season’, until the end of time! Thanks to Our Sunday Visitor Press.
