

On Losing The Catholic Faith . . .

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Acquiring the faith in 1946 was a process that lasted a year and a half and was predated by two circumstances that probably had an influence which outlasted the years of belief: one was that I happened to have an uncle who – despite never going near a church even at Christmas – was a quite remarkably good man, and the other was that apart from the conventional influences of my Anglican school I was brought up in a fundamentally pagan and easy-going home.

No doubt because of this nominally religious background, when the faith did impinge on my adolescence it was all the more virulent – there had been no saving inoculation. Certainly it was quite unlike anything I had previously come across. First and foremost it appeared to be a *real* religion in which at Christmas, in the scruffy church near the station, drunks sat on the floor with their backs propped against the font while the divine child was born again up at the ‘holy end’ amid fragrant swirls of *Dominus vobiscum*. It was a scene I came across later in E. M. Forster’s *Passage to India* and *Hill of Devi*. There was no comparison between such golden splendours and the flat remoteness of Anglican piety in which the congregation scarcely pretended to pray in a posture of mock-kneeling. And, of course, the faith was very much more than the mere glitter of midnight Mass – it was a path to a world in which God and his saints rubbed shoulders with history and literature. Somewhere in the background, no doubt, there was also a sense of relief at the possibility of unburdening the load of sexual guilt that had been accumulating since puberty; but, above all, there was the vivid impact of immense discovery – I had found a world in which the heroism of the recusants joined with the modern sanctity of the Cure d’Ars, while Boccaccio and Belloc, Mauriac and Maritain, became – if not quite familiar companions – at least meaningful names. And all this I owed to the church and not to my depressingly inadequate education.

Happily, it was still the pre-conciliar world in which on cold February evenings when I had left the boredom of my job at Blackwell’s the candles at Blackfriars threw unmodern shadows on the cowed figures as they tossed the plainsong casually from one side of the choir stalls to the other.

Formal instruction in the faith began a short distance from Blackfriars in the barn-like Jesuit Church of St Aloysius which I attended on Sundays and which in those days housed a remark-

able collection of relics that has long since vanished from view. The room in which my instruction began had all the ruthless absence of good taste (worldliness?) characteristic of such places. (Converts from Anglicanism have often seen such austerity as the hall-mark of spiritual professionalism, but I am afraid it is more commonly a blend of masculine insensitivity and boorish philistinism of a type closely associated with a narrowly religious education.) The Jesuit who instructed me was a shrunken priest whose false teeth had such a perceptible way of supplementing his remarks that they almost totally distracted my attention from what he was saying. As it happened this scarcely mattered since the greater part of my instruction took place later that year in the Priest's house at Egremont. Here in a Cumbrian mining community Fr Tate lived out a penitential life of exile from Downside. He was meticulous in keeping our weekly appointments and together we worked our way through the familiar simplicities of the catechism and even – but this was some private devotional interest – turned a few pages of St Augustine. (For many years it remained one of the few meaningful references in *The Waste Land*).

At last my reception, and I abjured all heresies and the religion of ancestors on a lovely mid-summer day in the almost empty tin shed of a church, and afterwards – thanks to Fr Tate's generosity – consumed a great dish of strawberries and cream. And even then, in the very beginning, my faith was more alien than I dared to recognise, and the process of rejection was already gathering strength. The next morning on returning to my pew after making my first communion I scandalised one of the faithful by not adopting a sufficiently devout posture. In itself it was a trivial episode, but lit up the disparity between my own instinctive sense of propriety and the accepted norms of pious Catholic behaviour.

Losing the faith after that was a steady process with periods of devout remission. Doubtless it was the more painless because my family were indifferent. It appeared to make little or no difference whether or not I attended Mass – a practice that I still maintain from time to time. At an early stage I stopped attempting to pray, and especially I avoided using the sort of prayers for faith which seem to pre-suppose the existence of faith.

'Lord, give me the gift of Faith so that I may see the truth of all you teach. I believe, Lord, because you cannot deceive me or lead me astray. Help me, Lord, at all times to trust you rather than myself, and to realise that your truth and your love are the sure road to happiness in this life and in the next.' Such prayers have always seemed to me a form of intellectual dishonesty and, when combined with the implied abdication of personal responsibility and some hint of benefits to come, an altogether reprehensible business. Faith on such terms could, I thought,

only be a matter for shame. (One sees, of course, why the Church gave pre-eminence to Pride as a capital sin!)

Generally speaking, the process of ceasing to be a Catholic was a matter of some chance circumstance bringing it home to me that my real loyalties lay elsewhere and were in fact no more Christian than they were Catholic. Sometimes some book or experience was more obviously significant in illuminating what I did not believe. One such early reading was Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy* – how inadequate I should find it today – and, more usefully, Simone Weil's *Waiting on God* and all the other translations of her work which have appeared over the years. Quite often, of course, the process was carried further by my instinctive response to the immediate situation. There was the day in the early sixties when the question arose whether we would have our children baptised. I remember walking up a lane on a summer afternoon with a highly respected young priest and hearing him remark that if we failed to have our children baptised we were running the serious risk of depriving them of heaven – in other terms they might not 'save their souls' because of our failure. I can still sense my ridiculous astonishment that this amiable young man should really believe in a deity whose judgments might be influenced by such a matter. It was one of those moments when the whole sorry scheme of things made sense in some way that had nothing to do with sacraments and Churches.

On a different and earlier occasion, I had called on our elderly parish priest to see whether my still partly Christian beliefs could be brought into harmony with the Church's teachings about the limitation of families. The priest, whose attitudes had been formed well before the Church discovered the paramount importance of the individual conscience, said that we were all sinners and that we should inevitably continue to sin and that the sacrament of penance was the method instituted by God to reconcile ourselves with Him. The priest explained that he knew perfectly well that he would become guilty of the sin of anger and that this failure would recur again and again. It appeared to me extraordinary that he should not apparently notice any difference between my circumstances and his own – between my intentional behaviour and his involuntary anger. It was only one of many episodes which led me to conclude that what really mattered to the Church was nothing more important than the fact of membership. It is an attitude exemplified by the persecutions of the past, by the parody of 'mercy' extended to Shylock and by the attitude of mind which prefers the 'bad' Catholic to the 'good' pagan. Indeed, so powerful has been the conditioning of the Church on this question of membership – metaphorically of the Body of Christ – that Catholic intellectuals frequently appear to have distorted the plain meaning

of words in a desperate attempt to square the circle and retain the faith of their childhood. Almost the only thing I remember clearly from my first brief instruction at St Aloysius is the warning I was given not to expect Catholics to be better than other people. At the time I gave the advice no thought but as the years went by and we moved through periods of racialism and colonial war and grasping affluence I came to feel that if the regular devout reception of God in the sacrament of communion really made no difference – or if Catholics were (like their fellow Christians in other denominations) more ready than average to condone racialism or the American War against Vietnam, then the whole business of the sacraments was a dangerous and morally blinding fraud. It did not seem good enough to pass the difficulty off with the rather complacent remark that after all, Christ came to save sinners, not the righteous. It was an attitude of accommodation – of taking damn good care to be no better than one's fellow citizens and making a virtue of the fact – which only failed to be sufficient when the position of the Church was somehow threatened. (Whatever is good for the Church is good for mankind. And now that in Eastern Europe the Church is threatened by the philosophy and power of the totalitarian state we find that the rights of the family and the individual conscience are supremely important.)

Another aspect of Catholicism with which I became increasingly disenchanted was the way in which it appeared to thrive on misery and despair. To a certain extent even the benevolent humanitarian work of such a popular figure as Mother Teresa seemed tainted by this subtle form of corruption. It was not, of course, that suffering and misery should not be relieved – but rather my feeling that the Church actually preferred wretchedness and poverty as a convenient milieu for its work of salvation. Shaw tackled the theme in *Major Barbara* when Undershaft criticised his daughter for 'converting' starving men,¹ but more often – at least in our secular society – it has been the appeal of religion 'as something to turn to'; what Mr De'Ath in a recent *Spectator* article on the subject of his conversion called, 'a bulwark against the degradation of despair'. Charlotte Mew in her splendid and largely forgotten poem, *Madeleine in Church*, wrote:

I do not envy Him his victories.

His arms are full of broken things.

And she went on to say – in what has increasingly seemed to me the right response:

But I shall not be in them.

Thus, over a period of about thirty years I have gradually found myself abandoning belief in the Church, Christianity, and God and the assertion of disbelief has become the most accurate expression of where life has brought me. In fact the question

whether or not God exists no longer matters to me – what matters is the memory I have of my uncle rejecting an offer of black market petrol coupons and setting off to work at an unearthly hour of a winter morning without the convenience of his car. In a practical sense there was nothing to be gained by his rectitude.

To conclude with two trivial anecdotes. Not long ago our hard-working and, no doubt, intelligent parish priest told me that if he did not believe in God and the happiness of an after-life, he would at once abandon his parish duties and indulge himself in as many of the sensual pleasures as he could manage. When I protested that this seemed improbable and that even if he lost his faith he would still have the satisfaction of doing a useful job in assisting other people at critical moments of their lives, he reiterated that he would not remain an hour more in his clerical collar but would instantly seek out wine, women and song. Perhaps he was pulling my leg. Somehow I could not see him on the primrose path, but to have said so would have been unkind. Shortly before this conversation he had preached a sermon on God and had remarked that some people doubted His existence. A man sitting in the pew behind me laughed aloud and it struck me that his laughter was not only rather affected, but revealed a kind of naive arrogance – and then I remembered that story about the publican and the pharisee in the temple and idly wondered which of us was which.

1 In almost every other respect a ridiculous play.