

Intro. to Religion (Nts. for Chapters One through Three) Robert G. Buckenmeyer

The following autobiographical statements come from Avery Dulles, a self-styled atheist and former communist (a current Jesuit religious order priest and author of several books) whose thought changes as a result of sitting on the bank of the River Charles while thinking about the young trees' growth surrounding him in the Boston area; and from Elizabeth Vandon, a socialite self-styled atheist whose thought changed while "wandering over the hills" of Wales. These are, as it were, a contemporary *yin* and *yang* commentary on self-reflection bringing each to the conclusion that God exists.

These provide real-life, autobiographical examples of the three-fold Latin meaning of the English word religion, namely, *to re-read*, *to re-choose* and *to re-bind*. Note that these autobiographical sketches underscore the fact that whereas they both looked upon religion as a noun, an object of study and/or a mental concept, they felt the fact that religion is a threefold act(ual) relationship to a transcendent being whose presence each one witnessed, one through the sacredness of living blooms out of profane apparently *dead branches*; the other through the sacredness of the beauty of design out of *dirt and rocks*.

A Testimonial to Grace, Avery Dulles (Sheed and Ward, N.Y., N.Y., 1946), pp. 50-60.

In the darkness of my inner world, the highest human instincts were confronted with a vacuum. Into that vacuum stepped the grace of God. The barren desolation of my materialistic philosophy, its utter falseness and my humiliation at discovering it so, gave God His chance. The very extremeness of my error made conversion easier. Perhaps, if I had had more specious beliefs and affections - some human idealism or some earthly loyalty - I might have been less willing to accept God's offering of Himself.

This offering occurred suddenly and quite unexpectedly, on one gray February afternoon like many another. I was in Widerer Library poring over a chapter of the *De Civitate Dei* (Concerning the City of God, written by Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo about 370 A.D.) which had been assigned as reading in one of my courses in medieval history. On an impulse, I closed the book; I was irresistibly prompted to go out into the open air. It was a bleak rainy day, rather warm for the time of year. The slush of melting snow formed a deep mud along the banks of the River Charles which I followed down toward Boston. I enjoyed the cool rain in my face and the melancholy of the scene. As I wandered aimlessly, something impelled me to look contemplatively at a young tree. On its frail, supple branches were young buds attending eagerly the spring which was at hand. While my eye rested on them, the thought came to me suddenly, with all the strength and novelty of a revelation, that these little buds in their innocence and meekness followed a rule, a law of which I as yet knew nothing. How could it be, I asked, that this delicate tree sprang up and developed and that all the enormous complexity of its cellular operations combined together to make it grow erectly and bring forth leaves and blossoms? The answer, the trite answer of the schools, was new to me: that its actions were ordered to an end by the only power capable of adapting means to ends - intelligence - and that the very fact that this intelligence worked toward an end implied purposiveness - in other words, a will. It was useless, then, to dismiss these phenomena

by obscurantist talk about a mysterious force called “Nature”. The “Nature” which was responsible for these events was distinguished by the possession of intellect and will and intellect plus will makes personality.

Nor were the operations of this Person confined to flowers and foliage. The harmonious motions of the starry sky, the distribution of the elements and the obedience of matter to fixed laws were manifestations of the same will and plan. Looking, then, into myself, I beheld energies coursing through the human person, the greater part of them beyond the realm of consciousness, tending constantly to preserve, to nourish and to restore the weary body and soul. These forces were not of our own making, these operations not established by ourselves. Yet, they had from their inception a legitimacy which was conferred upon them by Another - the same as Him who moved the stars and made the lilacs bloom.

If, then, the very energies of growth and healing in the human body were hedged with sacredness, was it not monstrous that we, incapable of creating a hair, should undertake to dispose of our whole being, heedless of its appointed end? One had but to attend closely to the movements of the soul, when free from passion and from the self-induced blindness of perversity, to sense the marvelous harmony of all its tendencies, working in unison for the fulfillment in us of the divine purpose. Most of all was this true, as Plato and Aristotle had observed, of the spiritual faculties. The mind, as they had remarked, is naturally adapted toward knowledge and tends, unless obstructed, toward the apprehension of Truth. The will, analogously, ever seeks the good and finds its fulfillment in ordering the lower parts of the soul according to the vision of the good which it beholds. To frustrate these tendencies, more native to us than ourselves, in a frenzied search for some arbitrary goal of our own choosing appeared in an unmistakable light to be blasphemous infraction of an eternal canon. Something sacred, I sensed, is violated and a priceless opportunity irrevocably lost, when the mind is steeped in drunkenness and the will deprived of its energy when lust for pleasure uses the mind as its instrument and debauches the effeminate will.

A glance at the great governing will and intellect which had given to all nature, the wide universe, its origin and end was a strong potion, awakening energies not easily harnessed or turned back. As I turned home that evening, the darkness closing round, I was conscious that I had discovered something which would introduce me to a new life, set off by a sharp hiatus from the past.

That night, for the first time in years, I prayed...

My first religious intimations, as the reader will observe, took on a Christian aspect. This Being Whom I perceived as the cause and consummation of the universe, the Alpha and Omega of all creation, was unmistakably the God of Christianity.

...The good which I held to be supreme and worthy of all man's devotion was not an abstract ideal. It was a personal will, throbbing through the whole universe as the force which had created it, the power which sustained it in existence and the goal toward which it tended. The moral good was merely an aspect of the Adorable Will of God. No abstract notion of the good could impress me as ultimate. The good was a value, and value implied appreciation, which is the function of personality. The good, conceived in personal terms, was capable of being made the object of loyalty and personal devotion. Dimly, I saw that personality as such was higher than any lifeless thing and that to serve

or worship anything, be it concrete or abstract, which lacked intellect and volition, was to debase oneself and to desecrate the dignity of one's own being.

In the possession of this tripart creed, made up of the existence of the moral law, its supremacy and its relation to the will of God, I found a degree and quality of happiness which I had never before thought possible. The values which it established precluded any radical pessimism. Within its framework one could discover ends in terms of which one's actions could be purposely coordinated. Far as I was from the Catholic faith, the road now was a straight one and philosophy had put me on that road.

I do not claim that I was or am or ever will be a philosopher in the sense of an expert on metaphysical questions. But, in another sense, anyone who stops to wonder what he should do or why do that which he does must be a philosopher. He must formulate some guiding principles in terms of which he can make practical decisions. He must seek out the premises implied in his own actions and see to it that they are mutually consistent and theoretically sound.

Many people pretend that philosophy is a dull study and one which has no relation to practical life. For me, it has never been so. It was terribly clear to me from the beginning that I could not do anything - whether to help a friend in trouble, to eat a meal, or even to take a breath - without running the risk of being asked by some Socrates, why? What is the principle by which you justify this action? Does it ultimately tend to bring about that which you deem to be worthwhile? These questions haunted me and I could have no peace until they had been answered. I would rather not act at all than act with the knowledge that I might better be doing nothing or doing the very opposite.

The man who refuses to face the philosophic problem is like a traveler in the night who will not take the time to decide where he is going because he is too much in a hurry to be on his way. He hastens first in one direction, then in the other, repeatedly striking his feet against cobble stones and stumbling in ruts, without approaching any nearer to his destination because he does not know whither he is bound. He becomes a slave to irrational impulses which incline him now this way and now that. Eventually, he resolves that he will follow the crowd, but he has no way of telling whether they are proceeding to the same destination or whether they know where it is located. They disagree among themselves and he listens to their confused, discordant counsels. Finally, he determines to follow the man who speaks in the loudest, more emphatic tones. When he has been led to one of those dead ends where error ends in impossibility, he finds out to his grief that the ignorant prophet whom he had chosen to follow was one of those hireling leaders who speak with conviction in order to gratify a personal passion for having others follow him...

The opinion that blind appetite could furnish a sufficient guide for action led to the general undermining of democracy...Man can not with impunity continue to ignore philosophy.

*Late Dawn*, Elizabeth Vandon (Sheed and Ward, N.Y., N.Y., 1958) pp. 128-29.

For the occasional holidays which Realism insisted I must take in the interests of health, which in itself was essential to the work to which I was dedicated, I went whenever possible to the mountains; often to Wales where, having as my headquarters some isolated farmhouse or lonely inn, I spent long days wandering over the hills,

“meditating”. Sometimes for hours at a time, I would lie stretched on my back, my mind a complete blank, absorbing into my being the surrounding stillness and watching clouds of an incomparable whiteness, such as I have never seen anywhere but in Wales, chasing one another across the clean blue of the sky. And always, I was aware of that vague longing, shot through with an immeasurable sadness, for some kind of union with those qualities of unchangeableness and indestructibility which were associated in my mind exclusively with mountains. And it was towards the end of one such day that the idea of The Design first came to me.

If you have had the good fortune to be trained from early youth in the proper use of your intellect, the idea may seem so commonplace that you may wonder what in heaven’s name I found in it to get so excited about. But, I can assure you that to me, with my haphazard education and the years of woolly thinking consequent upon it behind me, it came as a revelation of the first magnitude. And it came in rather a strange way.

I was returning one evening from an excursion into the mountains, following a rough track through country that was lonely and desolate in the extreme. It was autumn, and the day which had been a golden, glowing one when I started out was quickly drawing to a close.

All around me, silhouetted against the rapidly darkening sky, I could see mountains and great crags, looming like huge icebergs above a sea of white mist which, surrounding me on all sides, seemed menacing and uncanny in its silence and stillness...The whole scene was eerie - frightening; it occurred to me that if suddenly I were to find myself wandering alone on the moon, this silent desolation would be something in keeping with what I would find there. And yet, instead of hurrying on my way, as I suppose would have been natural in the circumstances, I found myself walking slowly and very softly, until finally I came to a halt altogether.

I felt bowed down beneath a great weight of awe and reverence for the beauty I could see and the most mystery I could feel all around me. It was like a Presence, very near to me; and in some way, connected with it, quite suddenly, there came to me the idea of The Design.

For the first time in my life, it occurred to me that the beauty and design I could see all around me in the world must have “come from somewhere” - it could not “just have happened”. It must have come, I thought, from some Thing - something that contained within itself all the beauty and all the design that ever had been, was and ever would be. Therefore, it could never have had a beginning and it would never come to an end. It was The Design; Universal, Unlimited Design, so to speak.

I cannot describe the excitement, not to mention the wild hope, that the advent of this idea gave rise to.

For days, weeks, months afterwards, I could think of nothing else. It seemed to me (for a while, at any rate) as though a whole new universe had opened up to me - an Invisible Universe!- because, of course, as soon as the idea did come, I lost no time in trying to work out in my mind what sort of Thing this could be and where it could be.

Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane* provides an explanation of Vandon’s and Dulles’ insight:

The more religious man is, the more paradigmatic models does he possess to guide his attitudes and actions. In other words, the more religious he is, the more does he enter into the *real* and the less is he in danger of becoming lost in actions that, being non-paradigmatic, “subjective” are, finally, aberrant. This is the aspect of myth that demands particular emphasis here. The myth reveals absolute sacrality because it relates the creative activity of the gods, unveils the sacredness of their work. In other words, the myth describes the various and sometimes dramatic irruptions of the sacred into the world...Every myth shows how a reality came into existence, whether it be the total reality, the cosmos, or only a fragment - an island, a species of plant, a human institution. To tell how things came into existence is to explain them and at the same time indirectly to answer another question: *Why* did they come into existence? The *why* is always implied in the *how* - for the simple reason that to tell how a thing was born is to reveal an irruption of the sacred into the world and the sacred is the ultimate cause of all real existence.

Moreover, since every creation is a divine work and hence an irruption of the sacred, it, at the same time, represents an irruption of creative energy into the world. Every creation springs from an abundance. The gods create out of an excess of power, an overflow of energy. Creation is accomplished by a surplus of ontological substance. This is why the myth, which narrates this sacred ontophany, this victorious manifestation of a plenitude of being, becomes the paradigmatic model for all human activities. For it alone reveals the real, the superabundant, the effectual.