

# The Catholic and Puritan Spirit in the TS

## The Value and Danger of Each

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Annie Besant in Sydney, 1922

I want to try to trace out the somewhat difficult subject of the place of the Puritan and the Catholic Spirit in our Society. I want to show that both types are necessary in every great movement; that both have their value and place, yet also their dangers. And if we realise that both are necessary, it may help each type to be tolerant as regards the other, and to see that each has its dangers.

Now, all the world over these two types are found; they are, in fact, two marked temperaments, intellectual and emotional, into which, roughly, you might throw almost all thoughtful and educated

people, and even the thoughtless and ignorant, for those also will show similar types, although naturally less attractively, because more extreme, than they may be among the class of people who at least are seeking to understand themselves, and to gain some measure of equilibrium. Looked at from the outside, the Catholic type is certainly the more attractive, and therefore I want to impress upon you the value of the Puritan type; because, being less attractive, its value is more likely to be overlooked. If the Puritan spirit were completely lost, mankind would lack that vigour and strength and tendency to free thought and free judgment which are so essential to human evolution. Unfortunately, it has often been united with a very cold and forbidding exterior; and if we take the two types as we find them in the reign of Charles I, certainly the Puritan is not very attractive from outside—hard, rather sour, forbidding, and austere. But it is not quite fair to judge the Puritan by that type in the reign of the Stuarts. It is not fair to pick out a type at the moment where these two difficulties face it—danger to itself, and the extreme evil of the type it is opposing. It is hardly fair to take that moment for a judgment of the value of the temperament in itself. But even if you take the Puritan of the time of Charles I and Cromwell, you can hardly help noticing, if you go beyond externals, the extreme moral value of that type amid those difficult and dangerous surroundings. Austere as it was, it was the austerity that was trying to guard itself against continual danger of pollution, and naturally it ran into extremes, as all reactions run, with the inevitable result that another reaction followed on the first, and you had the loose and profligate type of the Court of Charles II. It is the types I want to disentangle from these special manifestations, and, looking at them apart from all conditions that may emphasise one characteristic or another.

Now, in what does the Puritan type exactly consist? It seems to consist in an attitude of protest and criticism rather than of ready acceptance of the prevailing thought of the time. The Puritan mind is essentially critical, and critical in the modern sense of the term, which, instead of making the critic a judge, makes him an opponent and condemner. We must remember, however, that the true critical spirit is absolutely necessary for human progress, even though it often slips into condemnation and cynicism. The Puritan is always intellectual (I am speaking of the purer type), a man in whom mind is predominant. He is of the type that tends to separation rather than unity; he stands alone, sufficient for himself (I say that rather than “self-sufficient,” the second form connoting a rather unpleasant quality). We must realise the strength of this type. The strength may slip into austerity; but that very largely grows out of the religion to which the Puritan may happen to be attached. You do not find him in his more aggressive form unless he is protesting against something he regards as dangerous and mischievous. Naturally, under these considerations he is thrown into the attitude of combat, and hence all that is harshest and most hostile inevitably comes to the surface. But that is not a necessary part of the Puritan spirit. Looking at him as the intellectual man in whom emotion in this particular life is comparatively weak, or if not weak, repressed; seeing that in him the mental qualities are those which in this incarnation he specially endeavours to develop; understanding that the mind can only be developed where the qualities of analysing, comparing, and judging are active, you can readily see how, in the face of opposition, these qualities would turn into antagonism and protest. But I do not think that antagonism and protest are a necessary part of the Puritan spirit.

In peaceful times your Puritan would be distinguished rather as the analytical or intellectual man, most valuable to any community into which he may be thrown at the time. For you cannot develop the mind without developing these analysing qualities; synthesis comes later, the one belonging to the lower, the other to the higher Manas. Both need to be developed. While the lower Manas is developing, you must have these qualities of analysis, comparison, and judgment, without which it is not possible to lay a strong foundation for any belief. You must recognise the utter necessity for the challenging, questioning, even doubting and sceptical spirit. Only by means of this can error be detected, and the traditions that come down from the past be gradually purified of the accretions that have come to them during the ignorant periods through which they may have passed. To be sceptical is no fault, but rather a virtue. If there is to be progress at all, there must be challenging of that which has come down from the past, so that, testing, analysing, criticising, you may be able to separate the truth from the error. How would religion become ever more and more spiritual if men are only to inherit, and never to examine and understand? And since no religion or other form of thought can ever come down through centuries without picking up a large amount of error, if we had not this critical and challenging spirit all religions would grow into superstitions, and that which is most valuable for the race would gradually be covered under a mass of ignorant error. Hence at certain times in the history of the race a great outburst of the Puritan spirit is necessary.

That alone will bring about fundamental changes, religious, moral, and social; that alone has the courage to go forward whilst in a minority, and test with the test of

reason every belief and every tradition. We must not, then, blind ourselves to the immense value of this spirit in the intellectual development of man. For always, inasmuch as religious and social order has come by some great Teacher enormously beyond his own generation in religious, moral, and social development, inevitably his teachings, handed down generation after generation, will in many respects tend to be covered with superstition.

Let us pause for a moment and see what the word “superstition” means. I do not think I can give a better definition than my old one: “superstition is the taking of the non-essential as the essential.” I think that you will find that that covers all the cases which you would call superstitions—a truth originally; but in every truth there are necessary and accessory parts. As the understanding of the truth is clouded, the accessories take on too large a value in the minds of the people, until at last the accessory is everything and the essential nothing.

I told once an Indian story which marks out clearly what is superstition. There was once a very holy man in the habit of offering a sacrifice by pouring butter into the fire—one of the ordinary Hindu ceremonies. Morning after morning he duly performed this rite. He was much admired by his neighbours, and the regularity of the discharge of his religious duties led them to consider him a model worthy of imitation. This good man happened to have a cat. As he was kindly-hearted and affectionate, the cat loved him, and used to come up and interrupt his religious service; so he put a collar round the cat and tied it to the bedpost to prevent interruptions. Time went on, a few generations passed, and then all the people who copied this admirable saint not only offered the sacrifice, but also considered it a part of the rite to have a cat tied to the bedpost. Still more time went on, until at last all that remained of the original ceremony was the cat tied to the bedpost and nothing else. Now there is superstition; the harmless accessory had become necessary, until it occupied the whole of the worshippers’ minds. This is often the case in religions which have lasted long, and have had many ignorant adherents. They cannot distinguish between the inner meaning and the outer form; and gradually the outer form becomes everything, and the inner meaning disappears. Then comes the time when, superstition having taken the place of truth, there rises up the critical intellect of man, attacks the whole, and challenges the authority. *Only sometimes the critic is not evolved enough to recognise the truth at the same time that he wars against the error.* More often he takes the whole as superstition and tries to destroy it completely. There you have the history of many reformations. Take the great Reformation of the sixteenth century. If you look back to that you will see that an enormous amount of valuable truth was thrown aside in trying to get rid of the surface error with which the truth had been covered. And so in tracing down the growth of the Puritan spirit from the time of Luther, through Calvinistic Switzerland, up to Scotland with John Knox, and then looking at it as it spread over England, and became so powerful under James I and Charles I, you will recognise that in the whole of that there is a gradual throwing away of everything that the mind could not grasp and understand, and consequently a great loss of the spiritual side of things. The result of that historically has been that the truth that was thrown away in the getting rid of the error came back again a little later. And so with certain

fundamental tendencies in man, against which the Puritan of that time set himself utterly—the use of images in public worship, the use of music, the use of garments different from the everyday garments, and so on—all these points that he threw aside as part of the Papal abomination came back again, slowly, steadily, gradually spreading through the whole of the Anglican Church. So that you have this remarkable object-lesson, which it would be well for all Puritan-spirited people to remember. You may visit a cathedral today. Outside the cathedral you will see the statues which were broken by Cromwell's soldiery; and inside the cathedral, on or around the high altar and chancel, you will see the modern statues placed there in order to help the devotional spirit in the congregation.

I have purposely taken the Puritan spirit outside the Theosophical Society so that you may look at it apart from any special question of interest to our own Society. If you see the value of that in religion, you will welcome its presence in the Theosophical Society. You will realise that that spirit is wanted in order to balance and keep in check what might otherwise be the excess of the Catholic spirit. You will realise that our critical friends are doing us an immense service in their criticism, and that it only becomes mischievous when the critical spirit grows into antagonism and dislike, which need not at all accompany it, and should not accompany it in a well-balanced and thoughtful mind. We must have that spirit amongst us, otherwise the enthusiastic will run away too rapidly and fall into error. The chill that sometimes it causes is a very valuable element for mental growth. We do not want to have nothing but chill—that will prevent growth altogether; but if we were more tolerant with each other, then we might have the advantage of the chill, which would keep the intellectual atmosphere clear and sharp, without having the very life chilled out of us by criticism.

Let us now pause on what we mean by the Catholic spirit. By that I mean the spirit which is reverent of tradition, which is willing to submit to reasonable and recognised authority, which is willing to take a great plan and co-operate in it, and realise that the presence of the architect of the plan, if He be a person highly developed, say a Master, is enough to give it authority, and that there is no lack of freedom or dignity in accepting the plan of a greater, and working it out to the utmost of one's ability. It is the spirit which, largely emotional, when it rises into love of the higher, and becomes devotion, causes sympathetic vibrations on the buddhic plane, and so begins the awakening of the Spirit above the intellect. Again, with this Catholic spirit you always find the love of beauty. It is artistic. It seeks to clothe thought in forms of beauty. It loves ceremonial, takes a pleasure in harmonised expression of thought, and desires that everything round it should be emotionally satisfactory as well as intellectually sound. Moreover, its mind is eminently teachable, where the Puritan is not. Hence it is far easier to lead it along the path of what is called Occultism. The Catholic mind very readily recognises that those above itself in development may be able by guidance and teaching to help it to reach knowledge which, unaided, it would be unable to achieve. The Puritan would walk alone; the Catholic would utilise every assistance that can be given in evolution, including the assistance of human beings more highly developed, as well as of spiritual intelligences. And so you have round it an atmosphere which readily

responds to impulses from the spiritual worlds, and always with this spirit you find the tendency towards Occultism of various kinds. I do not think you ever find that tendency in connection with the Puritan spirit. You may find with the Puritan spirit sometimes a lofty form of mysticism, a recognition of a Spirit as the Life of universe, and an attempt to realise that Spirit within oneself. That you may reach largely by way of the intellect, and emotion is not necessarily concerned in it. Intellectually you may realize unity, and then pass into the mystical ideal of the One in the Many, to be recognised in each. And you do find occasionally in the great Puritans of the past a very noble, though somewhat stern and cold, form of mystical belief; whereas the moment you come to Catholic mysticism, you find yourself in an atmosphere charged with emotion. The Catholic Mystic is swept up in a great surge of emotion to the Object of his the love; the Puritan Mystic calmly, almost coldly, recognises the greatness of the Object of his worship, intellectually tries to realise, and by that to some extent unifies himself with it. You have an example of the Puritan Mystic in Cromwell. Read his letters, read the letters of the man, wrung out of his heart by strain of doubt and despair, and clinging, in spite of all temptations, to his belief in the reality of a Divine Power whose instrument he was. You will rise from that reading with a new idea of the strength of this man, and realize that with all that strength of God and his own strength as being only an instrument in the divine hands. But you never find in the Puritan Mystic the expression of love, of passionate affection, that are so common among the Catholic Mystics; and more than anything else is the difference marked when you come to deal with Occultism.

And there, in our own Society, is a point we ought to pause upon. The Catholic type amongst us will be one that will readily respond to the idea of the Masters, the Puritan less quickly. The Catholic mind in the Theosophist will not only recognize the ideal of the Masters, but will be fired with a desire to thread the Path that They have trodden. There will be a looking up of reverence, an outstretching of the hand of the hand for guidance; a realization that by that dependence more rapid progress may be made along any other line. That which is invisible will exercise a potent attraction; he will be always trying to know something of the invisible worlds and their inhabitants, he will always be reaching out towards these worlds and trying to expand his consciousness into communication with them. He will be willing to train himself with that in view, and you will have in him the possibility of the Occultist which you will not find in the Puritan type. For you cannot begin this part of occult knowledge along the purely intellectual basis. The intellectual exertion will check at once the evolution of the other vehicles. The moment you begin to think: "What am I doing? Is it imagination? Is it hallucination?" you check the growth of the subtler faculties of man. You are obliged to for a time to go on without questions, feeling, sensing, groping, and refusing to allow the mind to come in with its analyzing spirit, that chills everything down so much that these budding faculties, as it were, shrink back from the touch of the frost, refusing to unfold. "Well," you say, "there is a danger. The person may become over-credulous, may be utterly led astray." True. It is the necessary danger of all such research. Only step by step do you learn by experience to distinguish between the true and false, between the thought-forms created by yourself and the inhabitants of other worlds into which you are penetrating with half-opened eyes. But remember that distinguishing does not do away with the reality of the



thought-form. Your own thought-forms which surround you when you first pass on to the astral plane are real forms in astral matter. They deceive you, yes, because they are your own creations, and only give you back the things you are thinking about. They repeat to you your own thoughts, and there lies the element of danger. But you can only outgrow that by experience, exactly in the same way that the baby learns that it cannot catch hold of the glittering thing at the end of the room, but, to reach it, must cover a great deal of space. You do not think it heartbreaking because the baby makes mistakes. You are content that he shall learn. Why not be as philosophical about yourselves? You know that they will grow out of their ignorance by experience. So will you. Those who always want to be right are people who will never make Occultists. The Occultist must be ready to plunge forward, and possibly tumble into a bog, but be ready to go on afterwards, learning by experience to understand. Those who will not face this have not enough of the Catholic spirit to make Occultists, and had better leave it for another incarnation.

There is another danger, one especially seen here—the dependence upon another. I have often been asked: “How can you develop independence and judgment if you are always trying to do the will of another, whom you call your Master?” The answer is simple. You look to your Master for direction, and He may point you to some work to be done. You take the work because He told you to do it. So far you are the obedient servant; but your judgment, your reason, all your thought-power, all your initiative, are taxed to the utmost in the achievement of the task. A sensible Occultist never goes running to his Master and asking, “How shall I do this?” He knows that is not the Master’s work. The Master has done His part in saying “Do that.” How you do it tests you, and brings out your strength and weakness. And the Master is far too wise to prevent your bringing out your strength and discovering your weakness by doing for you what He has told you to do. Hence the Occultist develops all his faculties in the attempt to do his Master’s will. The two things work well together, and he does not become weak but strong in realising that the Master is greater than he, and knows far better the plan of the work, while he himself, in carrying out his own portion of it, finds full employment for every faculty of brain and heart.

It is scarcely possible for the typical Puritan to become an Occultist in the life in which this side is being so strongly developed. You cannot understand everything when you go into unknown worlds; and unless you are willing to be ignorant, there is no possibility of discovering new knowledge. Every pioneer of science—to quote, I think, Faraday—“runs about like a dog with his nose to the ground, trying to find out a trail.” That is exactly the way of the experimenter. You must search for yourself for the trace which will guide you to the desired knowledge; and if you will not do that, you must take the results of others, and be content with these results for this life.

But, now, how will these two types of spirit work when they come to, say, a clash of outlook between great leaders in the Society? You will have at once the working of the critical intelligence which sees faults more readily than virtues, and bad motives more readily than good. That is its weakness. But it also has its value in pointing out certain dangers into which the Society might otherwise slip. The Catholic spirit will be far more ready to take it for granted that one from whom they have learned much may have some other reason which they do not see, which would justify to the doer what he has done, and they do not feel that curious sense that they

must save their neighbour's souls, whether their neighbours desire it or not. They are content to say, "That is my road, that is his"—a wider and more generous spirit. Nevertheless, I think we should do well also to recognise that the presence in the Society of the critical and even judging spirit has at some times its value. But it is not a foundation on which anything can be built, and that is sometimes forgotten. You cannot build an enduring edifice on the grounds of protest against someone else. It cannot endure. It is curious to notice that the same people who condemn personality when the tendency of the personality is love and devotion, are the people who show personality most strongly when they antagonise and dislike. I admit to the full that principle should guide, not personality; but I cannot admit that a love for a personality is wrong, whilst a hatred of a personality is right and admirable. Both may put persons above principles if the two come into clash. And it is putting a personality above a principle when you desert the Theosophical Society, forgetting the great principles which make it immortal, and leave it, protesting against it, because one or two people hold views with which you do not agree. If Theosophy be anything at all, then it is everything in life, and is not to be given up for anyone, whether saint or criminal. Suppose a hundred murderers were members of the Society, is that any reason why you or I should go out of it? It seems to me that the fact that we disapprove of that so much is a reason for staying in the Society, in order to strengthen it in the hour of its peril and to carry it through.

We need in the whole of this to study our own nature first, and find out our weak points, and then to guard against that weakness in the time of storm and stress. And we need, more than that to realise that very often when people oppose us, they oppose us because of their virtues, and not because of their vices. That is, that the people who are utterly against me now are against me because of their virtues. They are wrong in the view they take—they misconstrue; that does not matter. But the fundamental reason why they oppose is because they believe that I am condoning what is wrong. That is a good feeling, and right. But it is not right when it goes into hatred and calumny, when people go about telling abominable stories of all kinds which are utterly false, using them as a weapon to injure. But, none the less, the beginning lay in a virtue—the desire to guard the Society from harm; and that ought to be recognised even when it has run into excess. If we can do that, then, in the midst of struggle, we shall be learning the true Theosophical spirit, which sees the good first, and only recognises the excess afterwards. And my suggestion is: "Train yourself, in your ordinary thinking, to see first the good of a person or thing, and only afterwards allow yourself to see the weakness or evil." Then you will get all the good of your critical spirit, and be guarded against much harm. But if you see the bad side first, you are likely not to see the good side at all. These things test our members, and show whether we are fit to go along this great path or not—show whether we are ready to be part of that great Sixth Race which is coming, or whether we are so wedded to our own opinions that outside those we can see nothing good.

The trouble is practically over, but we should remember its lessons—a wide tolerance, a sterner self-criticism, and a more charitable attitude towards our fellows. You cannot be too hard in criticising yourself, nor too tolerant and charitable towards your neighbour. Remember that in every one of us the Self is endeavouring to

express something of himself. In our own case we have the right to criticise every obstacle put in the way of His manifestation, to be hard in our judgment of ourselves, pitiless in our condemnation of our every fault and weakness. But we cannot govern the manifestation of the Self in another; hence our criticism is useless and impertinent—does not help, but hinders; for if the other person is wrong, as you think he is, then your harsh judgment makes an added barrier in his way when the Self in him is trying to guide him back to the right, whereas your charity, your tolerant respect, will help him to realise the noblest in him. Hence the lesson of this great shaking should be criticism of ourselves and charity to all around us. Recognition of our own type, clear self-judgment, so that we may walk aright and help others as much as may be; and, above all, so to purify our own characters that we may be channels for the life that flows in the Society, and may not soil it as it passes through ourselves. The Society can never die by attacks from without, nor by desertions from within; it can only die when its members are careless of their own thought, their own character, their own ideas; that, and that alone, can make the Society unworthy of the guidance of its Teachers. It was once said: “So long as three men remain in the Society worthy of our Lord’s blessing it cannot perish.” That was a word spoken by a Master in the days when the Society was weak and struggling, and when the few people that belonged to it feared it would never survive the storm that shook it in the time of the Coulomb attack. Think of that if any other storm should approach us—although we are not likely now to have another for the next twelve years; but when a storm comes, remember that inspiring idea, that as long as three remain in the Society it cannot perish; and add to that the vow registered by the Higher Self: “If others depart, I will be one of the three.”