

A CASE HISTORY OF FAMILY RELIGION

THE history of family religious life, as a microcosm of the national religious life, seems to me to offer a virgin field for research and documentation. I offer these pages as a study of one family, my own.

At the outset I wish to admit a prejudice in favour of continuity, homogeneity and unity in family religious life. It is only through these safeguards—the fruit, by the bye, of singleness of Faith—that we enjoy the blessings of mutual understanding, concord in social relationships and the benefit of a traditional ethical and spiritual culture. Under the group system of religion the nation is committed to a system that makes for misunderstanding and estrangement between group and group, faction in family life, and prejudice and suspicion between individuals. True it is, as says à Kempis: ‘He who seeks to enjoy things alone, forfeits the advantages that are in common.’

My starting point is my father. He was brought up an Anglican in the full simplicity of the Protestant Evangelical Faith—no choir, no vestments, no frills. Tate and Brady, the black gown, and the pure milk of the Gospel. The emotional appeal and the emotional acceptance—this was religion as he understood it and it carried him through adolescence into adult life.

My mother’s case may appear astonishing in days when the position of the Wesleyans has hardened into one of entire alienation from the Church of England. But in her young days there was a certain ill-defined connection between the two communions and she appears to have had a foot in each. Her mother was a staunch Anglican, but her father was a Wesleyan, and—exercising a true Victorian authority as master of his own household—he carried all his children with him to the chapel. In seeming contradiction of this, the whole family partook of the Sacrament at the parish church; and, also, my mother, though a Wesleyan, taught a Sunday School class at that church. But the contradiction was only apparent, for there was no diver-

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gence of belief. Whether Wesleyan or Anglican, whether in church or chapel, their Faith was one and the same, the Protestant Evangelical. And so, when my Mother was married to my Father and joined him in worship at an Anglican church, no denials were asked of her and no fresh affirmations. She was equally at home in either communion.

For some years nothing happened to disturb their content, and then a subtle change came over the Church of England. Chameleon-like, it began to change its colour. Under the influence of the Tractarian Movement, the vicar began to magnify his office, to shed the 'minister' for the 'priest,' and to refer to the 'Lord's table' as the altar. But it was his appearance in a surplice that gave the greatest offence. That savoured of 'rank Romanism.' My father registered his indignation by 'verting to Wesleyanism and by such act placed himself in schism from the Church of his birth. In the case of my mother it meant merely a final dissociation from it forced on her by the centrifugal tendencies of Wesleyanism.

To continue: that surplice was responsible for a great deal, for it meant that all we children were brought up as Wesleyans. We worshipped at a little village chapel served by 'locals,' *i.e.* amateur preachers, and grew up to discover that Wealth, Culture, Rank and Learning were all ranged on the side of the National Church. Which seemed to us odd—if Truth really abode with us. But we were told Anglicans were godless folk. They combined a formal adherence to religion with a life of worldliness. But we had our doubts, and they remained with us.

It was my eldest brother who was the first rebel. Up at Cambridge, he studied the whole matter closely, decided that 'nullus episcopus, nulla ecclesia' was the only sound doctrine, and abandoned the chapel for the church. And, one by one, we all asserted our independence and followed his example. My father may have secretly approved, for he was still attached to the Church of his youth; at any rate, he raised no objection. But, in retrospect, it was a harsh

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and melancholy secession, for it left my mother in lonely isolation. She may have been distressed, but she said little or nothing. Alone she went her uncomplaining way each Sunday to her chapel and worshipped her God after the manner of her fathers. And in that faith she died. Though a Wesleyan, she held high sacramental views and Sacrament Day was a great and holy day for her. The Rector of the parish came and prayed by her death-bed. He was a Protestant Evangelical and prayed such prayers as she prayed herself.

And now where do we stand, we children who survived and grew to mature years?

My eldest brother continued in his Anglicanism and steadily progressed towards the Catholic school of thought. Had he lived longer he might have become a Catholic.

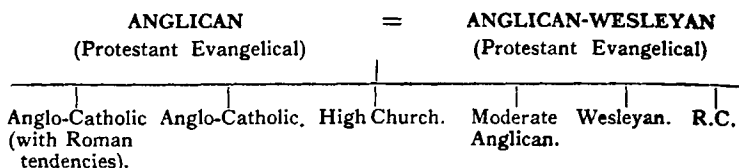
If you take the Church of England and strain it of its Evangelicalism, Anglo-Catholicism and Modernism, you have a large residuum left which it is difficult to label but which is generally known as Prayer Book Anglicanism. Its influence is the influence of inertia, the influence of a large and highly respectable body of people that looks askance at extremists and resolutely refuses to move from the old paths. It comprises the main volume of the Anglican current whereas the 'isms' are merely surface movements. It rejects new Prayer Books and populates the bench of Bishops, and its moderation, deemed spiritual tepidity by its enemies, is known of all men. It was to this sort of Anglicanism my sisters were subjected, and of the three I think I can truthfully and without offence state that with it one has remained content. The second I should call 'High Church,' *i.e.* she prefers a church which has definitely dissociated itself from the heavy residuum of Moderates, but is too timid to fly the banner of Anglo-Catholicism. Convenience might tempt them to worship at the same church, but not choice; for 'High Church' has that 'something extra' the other has not got. My third sister found Anglicanism, as she knew it, cold and cheerless, and reverted to Wesleyanism.

Of my second brother I need only mention that he is a clergyman and an advanced Anglo-Catholic to show how far he has travelled from the faith of his boyhood.

But possibly it may be said of me that I have travelled farther. After a period of troubled agnosticism, I found again the faith I had lost and took Orders in the Church of England only to discover that I had not at all realised what the Church of England was. I had imagined that there was a corpus of doctrine, clear and defined, which represented the teaching of the Church of England. I had thought it of the essence of a Church that it should have a mind and a will—the mind expressing itself in doctrinal formulæ and the will in disciplinary sanctions. But I discovered this was not so. I was asked *my* views. Views? I had no views. I am ashamed to say that I was so ill-instructed in the various schools of thought that fought for mastery in the Church of England that I thought views were merely the idiosyncracies of cranks and lunatics. But I was speedily disillusioned—‘views’ stalked abroad everywhere unashamed, ‘views’ were the determining factor as to the parish one obtained; in short, it would be difficult to find two adjacent parishes in the country which agree—not down to a decimal point, at any rate. There is certainly a body of doctrine common to all parishes, but it is in each case coloured by the personal prejudices and predilections of the parson. For a long time I obstinately refused to credit this. But in the end I was beaten. Individual churchmen had convictions, but the Church itself had none. So I studied the claims of the Papacy, found a hundred interconnected reasons for believing that Truth dwelt under its aegis and joined the Church of Rome.

An epitome of our family history thus gives us the following results which, for the sake of clarity, I give in the form of a genealogical table:

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Such is the case of one family, and it will be observed that it mirrors and emphasises the religious divisions of the nation at large. And I assert—primarily as regards the family which is my immediate study—that it is an errant and mischievous state of affairs. When we gather under one roof, as may happen, Sunday sees us go our separate ways to separate churches. The very religion that should unite us, divides and scatters. But—ironical thought—we meet at dinner. We may not meet at the altar of God where centre all our hopes, but we fraternise over the turkey and plum pudding!

And is this state of affairs final? Is there no remedy? Personally I see no remedy—and I make the statement not as propaganda but as a scientific conclusion based on data weighed and studied—but in the return of Christendom to the Catholic Church and the Papacy. Here is the 'One Faith in One Body.' Here, by reason of that 'One Faith' is unity, homogeneity, continuity. Here is the proper basis for agreement, concord and co-operation. Here is a definite moral, spiritual and social culture that makes the present one with the past. Here wisdom and prudence and courtesy stand set in piety. Here all that is permissible to human nature finds true scope and the voice of the crank and the kill-joy is not heard. Here is truth and freedom and common sense. Here the devout may be robust and the robust devout. Here is a Church that can train an individual, a family, a nation; that can build up a civilisation. Here indeed is a Church. Rather, here indeed is *the Church*.

But this, of course, is only a personal opinion. What I wish to call attention to is the perverse and unhappy fate that so often overtakes Family Religion in this country of so many creeds and churches.

H.K.G.