

My Religion

By Miguel de Unamuno

A friend who writes to me from Chile tells me there are some people in his country who, referring to my writings, have asked him: "So in the final analysis, what sort of religion does this fellow Unamuno have?" I have been asked a similar question here on several occasions. And I am going to try, not to answer it, something which I don't intend to do, but see if I can state the meaning of this question a little more clearly.

Individuals as well as countries who suffer from a spirit of laziness—and spiritual laziness is possible in many productive activities of an economic or similar nature—lean in the direction of dogmatism, whether they realize it or not, whether they wish it or not, and whether they propose to do so or not. An attitude of spiritual laziness avoids any position which is critical or skeptical.

I use the word skeptical in an etymological or philosophical sense, because to be skeptical does not mean that one doubts, but that one investigates or searches without the need to find definite conclusion or affirmation. There are those who examine a problem and feel they must find an explanation or a solution, whether it is accurate or not.

When you're dealing with a purely philosophical question it is premature to ask someone for a definite solution without first stating the question as clearly as possible. When a long calculation is incorrect, erasing what one has done and starting over is the only way to make progress. When a house is about to collapse or becomes uninhabitable it must be torn down; you can't try to build another one on top of it. It is possible to build a new house with the material from the old one, but only after it is torn down. In the meantime, the owners can look for shelter in a shack if they don't have another house, or they can sleep on the bare ground.

We must not lose sight of the fact that, during the course of our life, it is very seldom that we can expect definite solutions. Men have lived, and still live, on the basis of dubious hypotheses and explanations, and sometimes even without them all together. In order to punish a criminal, society does not try to decide whether he did or did not have free will, and before you sneeze you don't think about the harm that can be caused by the small obstacle in your throat that caused the sneeze.

People who claim that if they didn't believe in an eternal punishment in hell they would become evil are, with all due respect, mistaken. If someone were to stop believing in punishment after death, they wouldn't become worse, but would only look for some other justification for their conduct. The person who is good while believing in some sort of transcendental order, is not good because he believes in it; he believes because he is good. This is a proposition which I am sure will seem obscure to those questioners who suffer from spiritual laziness.

So then, they will say to me: "What is your religion?" And I will respond: my religion is to look for truth in life and life in truth, even knowing that I may never find them while I am alive. My religion is to struggle constantly and tirelessly with mystery; my religion is to wrestle with God from the break of day until the close of night, like they say that Jacob struggled with Him. I can never accept the concept of the Unknown—or the Unknowable, as some pedantic writers say—and I will also not accept any affirmation

that says: “from here you can go no farther.” I reject the eternal *ignorabimus*. And at any rate, I want to reach for the inaccessible.

“Be perfect like your Father in heaven is perfect,” the Christ told us, and such an ideal of perfection is, without doubt, unattainable. But he gave us the unattainable as a goal for our efforts. And that happens, according to theologians, by grace. I also want to fight my fight without worrying whether I will achieve a victory. Aren’t there armies and even entire populations who accept an inevitable defeat? Don’t we praise those who give up their lives rather than surrender? Well, that is my religion.

Those who ask me this question want me to give them a dogma, a solution that will allow them to continue in their spiritual laziness. And not even that will suffice; they want to compartmentalize me by putting me in one of these boxes in which they place people by saying: he’s a Lutheran, he’s a Calvinist, he’s a Catholic, he’s an atheist, he’s a rationalist, he’s a mystic, or any other definition whose exact meaning they don’t really understand, but which excuses them from the need to think further. I refuse to let myself be compartmentalized, because I, Miguel de Unamuno, like any other person who aspires to full consciousness, am a unique being. “There are no illnesses, only ill people” some doctors say, and I say that there are no opinions, only opinionated people.

As far as religion is concerned, there is almost nothing that I have been able to resolve rationally, and I can therefore not communicate it logically, since only what is rational is logical and transmissible. It is true that with my feelings, with my heart and my emotions, I have a strong inclination toward Christianity, without trusting in the special dogmas of this or that particular Christian denomination. For me, a Christian is anyone who invokes the name of Christ with respect and love, and I despise the orthodox, whether they are Catholics or Protestants—the latter are usually just as intransigent as the former—who deny the Christianity of those who do not interpret the Gospel like they do. I know Christian Protestants who deny that Unitarians are Christians.

I confess with all sincerity that the supposed rational proofs—the ontological, the cosmological, the ethical, etc.—of God’s existence don’t mean anything to me, since all the reasons that they give for God’s existence seem to me to be based on suppositions that are begging the question. In this I agree with Kant. And I regret, when I say this, not to be able to discuss shoemaking in terms that a shoemaker can understand.

No one has been able to convince me rationally of the existence of God, nor of His non-existence. The rationalizations of the atheist seem to me to be even more superficial and useless than those of their opponents. And if I do believe in God or, at least, think I believe in Him, it is above all because I want God to exist and, then, because it is revealed to me in my heart, in the Gospels and through Christ and through History. It is a matter of the heart. Which means that I am not convinced of it like I am of the fact that two plus two makes four.

If it did not affect my peace of mind and my consolation for having been born, perhaps I wouldn’t worry about the problem; but since it affects my entire inner life and is the basis for everything I do, I cannot bring myself to say: “I don’t know, nor can I ever know.” I don’t know, that’s true, and perhaps I will never know. But I want to know, and for me that is enough.

I will spend my entire life struggling with this mystery, even if there is no hope of ever resolving it, because this struggle is my nutrient and my consolation. Yes, my

consolation, because I have grown accustomed to taking hope from desperation itself. And I don't need any lamebrains or dimwits to tell me that this is a paradox.

I cannot conceive of any educated person who does not have this preoccupation, and I expect very little from the opinions—and opinions are not the same as certainty—of those who are not interested in the problem of religion in its metaphysical aspect, and who only study it for its social or political aspect. I expect very little for the spiritual enrichment of humanity from those men or those people who, because of mental laziness, because of superficiality, because of their faith in science, or for whatever reason, distance themselves from the fundamental preoccupations of the heart. I don't expect anything from those who say: "You shouldn't think about that"; I expect even less from those who believe in a heaven and a hell like we believed in when we were children; and I expect nothing at all from those who declare with the certainty of a fool: "Those ideas are only fables or myths; when you die you are buried, and that's it." I only expect something from those who don't know, but are not resigned to it; from those who struggle without ceasing to find the truth, and base their entire life on the struggle itself, rather than on achieving a victory.

Most of my work has been an effort to stir up others, to disturb the very fabric of their heart, to distress them if I can. This is something that I have already explained in my *Life of Don Quijote and Sancho*, which is the most complete confession of how I feel. Let people search like I search, let them struggle like I struggle, and perhaps all of us together will be able to glean a bit of truth from God and, at least, this struggle will make us better people, people with more spirit.

In order to accomplish this work—a religious work—in these Spanish-speaking countries which are corroded with laziness and superficiality of spirit, asleep in the routines of Catholic dogmatism, or free-thinking or scientific dogmatism, I have sometimes had to appear immodest or improper, at other times hard and aggressive, and not a few times complicated and paradoxical. In our mediocre literature I have hardly ever heard anyone cry out from the bottom of his heart and get upset or disturbed. This kind of outcry is unheard of, since most writers are afraid they will look ridiculous. The same thing has happened and still happens to those who put up with a public insult for fear of appearing ridiculous when their hat falls on the ground, or when they are arrested by a policeman. Not me; when I have felt the need to shout, I have shouted; I have never been held back by decorum. And this is one of the things for which I will never be forgiven by my fellow writers, so polite, so correct, and so disciplined, even when they preach rebellion and disorderliness. These literary anarchists are worried more than anything about style and syntax. And when they are discordant they are careful to do it discordantly, without any sign of orderliness or harmony.

When I have felt pain, I have cried out, and I have done it in public. The Psalms which I have included in my book of *Poesías* are nothing more than the cries of my heart, with which I have tried to make the heart-strings of others vibrate. If they don't have heart-strings, or if they are so rigid that they won't vibrate, my cry will not resonate in them; they will say that this is not poetry and they will try to examine it acoustically. You can also make an acoustic examination of the cry of a man whose son has suddenly died, and those who have no heart and no children will accept that.

The Psalms of my *Poesías* along with various other compositions that are there are my religion, the religion from my heart, which is not expressed logically or rationally.

And I express it, for better or for worse, with the voice and the ear which God gave me, because I cannot rationalize it. And for the one who sees rationalization and logic, and method and exegesis, rather than life, in my poems because there are no fauns, dryads, sylphs, nymphs, “absinthe,” pale green eyes, and other cheap modernistic tricks, there is no need to worry about him, because I will never be able to touch his heart, not with the bow of a violin nor with a hammer.

What I try to avoid like the plague is being classified, and I want to die hearing those spiritual loafers who sometimes stop to listen to me ask: “Who does this guy think he is?” The liberal or progressive fool thinks I am a reactionary and perhaps a mystic, without knowing of course exactly what that means, and the conservative and reactionary fool thinks I am some sort of spiritual anarchist. Both of them think I am a braggart who is trying to pass himself off as someone special and whose head is a pot full of crickets. But nobody ought to worry about what fools think of them, no matter whether they are progressives or conservatives, liberals or reactionaries.

And since men are stubborn and usually don’t understand even after someone has preached to them for four hours, the persistent questioners, if they read this, will turn right around and ask me: “So then, what solutions are you offering?” And I, to conclude, will tell them that if they want solutions, they’d better go to a different store, because in mine no such item is being sold. My endeavor has been, is and always will be, that those who read me think and meditate on the fundamental issues, and it has never been to give concrete answers. I have always tried to stir things up and, more than anything, to suggest rather than to instruct. If I sell bread, it is not bread, but yeast or ferment.

There are friends, good friends, who advise me to discontinue these efforts and devote myself to what they call something objective, something, they say, that would be definitive and long-lasting. What they mean is something dogmatic. But I declare myself incapable of doing that, and I reserve the right, the sacred right, even to contradict myself if necessary. I do not know if what I have done, or what I may do in the future will remain for a year, or for centuries after I am gone, but I know that if you strike a blow in the boundless sea the waves will expand without ceasing, although they become weaker and weaker. To stir things up is something. If because of this agitation someone comes along who does something lasting, then what I have done will endure.

It’s an act of supreme mercy to wake up the one who is sleeping, or to move the one who is immobile, and it is an act of supreme religious piety to search for truth in all things and to uncover frauds, foolishness and incompetence wherever you find them.

So now my good friend in Chile knows how he should answer those who ask him about my religion. However, if it is one of those foolish people who think that I have a prejudice against people, or against a country because I have told the truth to one of their members, the best thing to do is not to answer him.

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Mi religión y otros ensayos, 1910.

Translated by Armand F. Baker, posted at www.armandfbaker.com