

A NOTE ON RELIGION AS A PERSPECTIVE¹

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AN essential aspect of Ortega's philosophical outlook is his theory of perspectivism. According to this, every activity, every philosophy, for that matter, every individual point of view, constitutes a unique and irreplaceable perspective on reality. With this in mind, we may examine the following paragraph from one of his most fundamental works, *En torno a Galileo* (1933), in which he studies the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and from Christianity to rationalism:

It is possible that in making this matter clear to ourselves we may discover that the confusion of the scientific perspective with the vital perspective is not without its inconvenience; it is a false perspective *just as it was false to make of the religious, theological perspective the vital perspective*. We shall see, in fact, how life does not tolerate being supplanted by either revealed faith or pure reason. For that reason the crisis of the Renaissance was brought about, for that reason a new crisis, dark, enigmatic, has opened before us. (*Obras completas*, V, 66-67; italics mine.)

I think that, carefully considered, there may be no objection to make to this view. The fundamental desire of man is life—life is the only thing which, in the logic of which man is capable, is without an ulterior justification: life justifies itself. All values, truth, goodness, beauty, justify themselves by the objective requirement of their external correlative and by the subjective demand of the human nature which creates them in the sense of acknowledging them. Truth acquires its *raison d'être* by the obligation it is under, in order to be itself, to conform to the reality it describes and because the man who utters it is unable (in the simplest meaning of the words) to live without truth. In human dialectic, canons of goodness and beauty are more apt to meet with the subjective disconformity of man, so that to embark on an exposition of their justifying system would be a complex matter. But in the long run it amounts to the same thing as the justification of truth (which is also not lacking, to be sure, in considerations likely to complicate its exposition; but it always seems more natural to

¹ cf. Dr Sarmiento's article, *Ortega and Religion*, in *BLACKFRIARS*, August 1950.

approach the question of truth with a commonsense simplicity which decidedly does not suit the other two). Let the example of truth suffice for the present case. It presupposes an objective, external 'truth' (similarly with goodness and beauty). It is possible to speak in analogous terms of religion. There seems to be no objection to doing so. Traditional apologetics usually presents religion as necessary and useful, and we may add that it is inevitable. Necessary because religion is the relationship between man and God. There is a sense in which a 'negative' relationship like atheism also constitutes religion. Only agnosticism makes religious nonsense, although the 'agnostic's prayer' solves in the practical order the psychological tension of the man (this was indeed the case with the Spanish writer Unamuno) who feels the problem of God and at the same time experiences the impossibility of believing. It is interesting to note what Ortega has to say on this head:

The consequence is that the agnostic landscape has no background. Everything in it is foreground which makes it of course break the first rule of perspective. It is a landscape of a short-sighted man and a muddled panorama. Everything primary and decisive is eliminated from it. Attention is turned exclusively to the secondary and floating.

With worthy pretexts of reasonableness the discovery of the last 'fundamental' things is renounced, and our gaze is turned exclusively to 'this world'. Because 'this world' is what is left of the universe when we have rooted out from it everything fundamental; consequently, the world is without foundation, without solidity, without basis, an island floating aimlessly on a mysterious element. (*Obras completas*, II, 495.)

In any case, what matters here is that religion is justified on the one hand, by the existence of God and, on the other, is grounded on its usefulness for man, for his salvation. All that is true, and allows us to say that religion and life cannot coincide, that religion finds its justification in life and, therefore, the perspective of religion cannot be substituted for that of life; on the contrary, the religious perspective exists for the sake of life. The Saviour of the world has already said so in precise terms: 'I am come that they may have life and may have it more abundantly'. Religion imposes itself in virtue of the circumstance of man; one of his circumstances is that life seeks itself and in ever increasing degree, and this authenticity, this increase of intensity, the religious perspective

obtains for life more efficaciously than any other perspective whatever. But to say this is to recognise that they are not the same thing.

There is another aspect to this question which is accidental, but which nevertheless is vital for the understanding of the attitude to religion and to the history of religion implicit in Ortega's view. It is the fact that so often by religion is understood, to the exclusion of every other meaning, religious *activity*—in a word, religiosity. We have tried to show the place that religion must occupy viewed as an Orteguan perspective, that is as a fundamental, inescapable element in life. More precisely than 'place' in our lives the words 'motive' and 'purpose' suggest what Ortega means by perspective. The problem of religiosity is an important one in considering the obscurity which concerns this question of what we mean precisely by the words religion and life, and what we mean by the relation between the two things these words represent. It is not the same problem as that of asceticism and humanism, which is no less important, but must be dealt with subsequently to the solution of the present one. No higher authority than that of St John of the Cross could, one feels, be found to help us disentangle it. The following words throw light on the confusion of religious activity with religion and the obscurities to which it gives rise.

Of these many imperfections . . . I do not wish to treat further here, but only to say that sobriety and spiritual temperance show a very different kind of mortification, fear and subjection in everything to do with it; realising that the perfection and value of things is not in the great number and savour of external works, but in being able to deny oneself in them, and this men should try to do as much as in them lies . . . And many would like God to want what they want; . . . where they do not find their own will and pleasure they think that it is not the will of God, and, on the contrary, when they are satisfied they think God is satisfied, measuring God by themselves and not themselves by God, quite the contrary to what he himself taught in the gospel, saying that he who should lose his will for his sake, etc. . . . (*Night*, I, 6 and 7.)

It is worth investigating whether the religious believer can reconcile such a view with the conviction that religion is the supremely important thing in life, and whether there is not in this view an aspect of truth which it is important for the Christian to acknowledge and act on.