

I AM AN IMPURE THINKER

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INTRODUCTION BY

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CHAPTER 13

METANOIA: TO THINK ANEW¹



MY DEAR FRIEND:

You have asked about my "conversion" from a Roman Catholic trend. In these days of Roman "romanticism" you have a right to this question. It is with some reluctance that I set out to describe to you the turning point of my life, after Germany's defeat in 1918. As you will understand at the end, it was precisely that which the Letter to the Hebrews calls "metanoia" from dead works. I cannot well use any English or German term for the event, and I certainly can call it a "conversion" only if you remember the meaning of metanoia.

In order to make the event clear, I must tell you something of the threads of my life which changed their direction by this experience. And I have to apologize if this should prove to you tedious. Although the effort will be to keep the antecedents down to a minimum, a certain confusing pluralism of the facts making up the situation remains a regrettable obstacle for an easy reading. "Metanoia" simplifies life; before, however, lives are the more complex, the richer they are.

The reason why the terms "conversion" and "repentance" do not fit, is a part of the story itself. But it may facilitate your task of understanding what I am driving at, if I say that we all have a double problem on hand, for our faith and for the health of our soul. One is the mental irresolution of deciding whether there is a God, or the Church of Christ, or a living Spirit. The other is the question whether the institutions through which we

¹ A letter to a friend, dated Feb. 18, 1946.

try to express this faith are apt to carry conviction and to absolve us from our duty to witness our faith in new ways.

Most church people consider the first question: does he believe? the paramount question. But my story exclusively centers on the second: are you not cheating yourself when you pretend to believe? For it so happened that I never had any of the apparently general doubts about God, Church, dogma. I cannot remember that I ever could understand why everybody did not believe the Nicene Creed, from about the time I began to think at all. I recall that in my school days I used a German song as an illustration of my faith in the fundamental significance of the incarnation. The song runs: *Es war als haette der Himmel die Erde sanft gekuesst* (It was as though heaven tenderly had kissed the earth). This, I felt, had happened at the beginning of our era. And it seemed very tempting to me even before I joined actively the Church at 18 to think of myself as a future minister of the gospel, and I was startled when my best friend was absolutely incredulous at my telling him so. I thought in my naiveté that this was the normal and natural activity of a man.

But when it comes to the externals of my life before 1918, this, my intellectual attitude, must be implemented by some facts. Externally, ever since I was in school, I had precociously studied history and linguistics, had taken my doctor's degree at the age of 20, was exceedingly proud of the fact that at 23 I had been asked to join the finest law faculty of any university in the world, and had the ambition of being as good a scholar as I could. The idol of scholarship held me firmly in its grip; let us call it charitably the god of the research of truth.

Then there was a second string to my bow. The state in Germany required our service in peace time in its army. Also, I taught its law and constitution and the history of both, since 1912. The government, then the god of law and power, held my allegiance. While I was in the army I discovered a lot about service, comradeship, vice, discipline: that is, good as well as bad things, in myself and others. And in the army the good and the bad is written large so that nobody can overlook either.

The third relation, the relation to the Church, was one of

orthodoxy. Chesterton's "Heretics" and "Orthodoxy" I nearly knew by heart. I took occasion to visit some fine Roman Catholic priests and monks. Cardinal Newman to me was a matter of course. And though I did not yet do much about it, in my thoughts I considered myself on the road to integral "Churchism." My love for the middle ages was an element in this as I began my scientific activity with a study on the medieval liturgy and as I was so much of a historian that the past was romanticized by me too readily. But romanticism was only one and not the most important element in my religious orthodoxy.

For when I had come to the University of Heidelberg at the age of 18, it was the lack of any confessing and living faith there which drove me wild. And the social struggles, especially the unrest in Czarist Russia, and the class warfare in industry, were constantly present to my mind. When some years later a Russian Marxian in Heidelberg announced the coming of the revolution, I advanced a plan of a "moral equivalent for a military army" by starting a work service from all classes of the people. This vision of 1911-12 I developed without any knowledge of William James' ideas. I was surprised to read his paper when I came to this country. The gradual implementation of this plan has taken much of my later life, from my first steps in the army itself to Camp William James in Vermont. But now it is mentioned only to explain that, as an answer to the German defeat in World War I, fortunately the three gods, the god of scholarship, the god of government and law, the god in church, at least had not killed my sensitivity to the real sore spot of our society.

And in 1917 the vision of the revolutions of the Christian world was preying on my mind at the front as I have told in the preface of *Out of Revolution*. In this book the scholar and the historian, the Christian and the man of law and order, all could participate, and the prospect of this book gave me strength, before Germany collapsed. But when this earthquake happened, even the book was engulfed in the vortex. Before I speak of 1918 in detail, I want you to understand that I forbade myself, among other things, to write this very book, although at that time it would have made me famous. It was not before

1931 that the time for a book of scholarship returned for me. In 1918 these glories were renounced.

From 1918 onward I denied myself the satisfaction of following one of the three open trends of the past, in church, science, or state. Why? Well, in 1918 my whole world organized in church, state, universities, the "Western World" that is, collapsed. In the summer of 1918 it dawned on me that the end of German statehood had come. The World War itself (not the so-called World Revolution deliberately staged by the Bolsheviks) was to me the great collapse which Marx and Henry Adams, Nietzsche and Giuseppe Ferrari had foreseen. Germany to me was as amorphous and stateless after 1918 as you must now recognize it to be. Although I prophesied a "pseudo-emperor" for a short later episode, he would not alter the fact that Germany from 1918 on was thrown upon the whole world and could only come to rest as an organized economy within a whole organization of the planet.

Since this was to me self-evident—and I have lived by this self-evidence and never again believed in a sovereign Germany—it was evident that the spiritual powers by which God's Spirit was represented in the German nation as in any other of the West, that is to say the Church, the Government, the institutions of higher learning, all three had piteously failed. They had not been anointed with one drop of the oil of prophecy which God requires from our governors, from our teachers, and from our churches, if they shall act under the grace of God. Not one of them had had any inkling of the doom or any vision for any future beyond mere national sovereignty.

However, God had spoken by events which to be sure went far beyond any one man's arbitrary making, and in these mighty judgements, the three representatives of His Word on earth, the law of nations, the sacramental church, the universities, all three had been obtuse. They had lost their *scent*. And Luke 12:54 ff. was read with pertinent application to our days. *For we do not live by sight but by scent, of which faith is the sublimation.*

To a man of faith in the verdict of God, the three greatest German institutions proved apoplectic. On the surface, they

might still function as they did. But to enter the Roman Church now, or to pursue an academic career, or to enter or stay in government service, would have made it impossible to bear witness to God's verdict. Any role in one of these three doomed institutions would have gagged me and therefore at best be meaningless. I would throw my weight behind these institutions simply by going on within them, drawing my salary from them, etc.

And now the strange thing happened which I could not foresee and which makes it seem worthwhile to me that you should receive this letter. These very institutions, all three, in a miraculous rivalry, came to me with tempting offers in the month of November 1918. This dramatized the crisis and made it explicit. The new revolutionary government, the finest flower of the religious press, the university, all three promised me suddenly a meteoric career if I would serve them.

This is what happened. A radical socialist member of the German Reichstag had been placed in my battalion² and I had impressed him sufficiently to receive now a wire from him in Berlin, that he would make me undersecretary of the ministry of the Interior to work out the new constitution of the republic. This wire I received at a military hospital, and on November 8th, on the eve of the emperor's abdication on the 9th, I carried this telegram with me on the train to Kassel where I was to take over new orders for joining the front on the 12th. But I carried another offer with me too. In the anguish of my heart, essays had taken shape and had gone to the leading religious magazine of Germany, the "Hochland," which sometimes accepted Protestant contributions. They not only found no lack of orthodoxy in them, but were relieved to publish "Siegfried's Tod", (the death of Siegfried) on November 1, 1918. It was the only timely utterance of some depth, at the downfall of the Reich, and it created a sensation. The editor asked me to hurry to Munich and to help in the sudden catastrophe to fill the magazine with the right kind of nourishment. I had only to hold on to this course and would have

² Rudolph Breitscheid. Army Headquarters had devised this scheme so that he be under control.

landed as a well established Roman Catholic religious editor. And then, of course, there was the university with my mighty plan of a history of the Christian revolutions, and with literally thousands of students going to swamp it, to which the faculty expected me to return.

At the railroad junction of Wabern, my wife and I took leave of a minister of the Reformed Church in Barmen who had been at the same hospital. He was a nice man, and I think a Christian, but he had, despite my attempts to tell him, only begun to fathom our crisis. He had enough time before parting to discuss the three opportunities. I first spoke of the chance of writing the new constitution. "Accept," he said. "How useful you can be!" Then I talked glowingly of my prospects in the religious field. Being a minister, he thought that was even better. And then I dangled before his and my eyes all the economic advantages in Leipzig where a university professor in 1914 made about 20,000 dollars (in purchasing power). And the good man again nodded and said that since I was married I should give my academic chances serious consideration.

Then it became clear to me that by accepting any one of these offers I would become a parasite of German defeat. The country was heading towards disrepute, defeat, poverty, and I would get on top of this corpse. I would shine either as undersecretary or a religious editor or as a university teacher. And I would have to wave a flag which had proved to be uninspired, unprophetic, and would make other people believe that I believed in its message when I did not.

I simply went back to the garrison and forgot about my prospects and did my daily chores around the barracks helping to demobilize in great haste the thousands of men. I then went back to my faculty and read an address before the dean and faculty taking by and large Justice Robert Jackson's point of view that a world community could only be constituted by the world's nations taking action against Germany as a state. The paper which was printed then, and today reads as though written for the Nuremberg trials, finished my career in that faculty. Later in 1919 I had occasion to speak before the

Catholic bishop of Wuerzburg and the prevailing Catholic students of that city. I began with St. Paul's word "*scio cui credidi*," "I know in whom I have believed." It was the Apostle's day in the calendar. But the orthodoxy of my method could not conceal the fact that never would this old priest give me his blessing. And I kept awake all night after that speech, overcome with great pain. And to this day, and I am sure to the end of life, the church to which I hope to belong always will include the Roman, in my heart.

So, instead of church, government, or university, I went into industry. I took a position at the Daimler-Benz automobile factory in Stuttgart. My boss could not make out for a long time what a strange guy he had hired to assist him on labor problems. I parted with my academic library; for worthless paper money, by the way. The buyer sold it to Switzerland for 10,000 gold francs. This then was the turning point of my life. I learned what "Hebrews" meant by metanoia from dead works. If the vehicles of the Spirit are sullied, it's no use disobeying the verdict of history over them. I did probably not advance much in personal virtue by this about face towards the future, away from any visible institution. I did not become a saint. All I received was life. From then on, I had not to say anything which did not originate in my heart. In the process I rediscovered the meaning of original sin. Under original sin the offices which we hold in society force us to think one way and act in another. This chain I had broken. The term "repentance" is absolute nonsense for this decision. The Salvation Army type of repentance confesses one's private and usually perfectly unimportant sins. These private sins occur when we have nothing big to live for.

I emphatically decline to admit that I repented on that November 8, 1918, and in the following period, for my private sins. Perhaps I should, but I did not repent, and I had nothing to repent. I was called into a new, dangerous form of existence *which did not yet exist*. One cannot stress strongly enough the difference between this situation and the sinning against the ten commandments. I was in danger of falling into the sin against the Holy Ghost by doing the dead works of scholarship,

state, church. The urgency of the catastrophe challenged me to do repentance not for my sins but for the sin against the Holy Spirit committed and perpetrated by these institutions. The crime or sin against the Holy Spirit always is committed as a social and collective action. And we repent for it by dissociating ourselves from the profession or institution which is God-forsaken.

This dissociation, however, is more easily formulated than achieved. Because no social space or field exists outside the powers that be, and the existing institutions are all there is at the moment of one's metanoia, of one's giving up their dead works. On November 8, 1918, nothing existed except the church, politics, science by which to express one's faith. It takes a lifetime and longer to extricate oneself from the established institutions and to find new ways of establishing some less corrupt forms of expression for the living faith.

Metanoia is not an act of the will. It is the unwillingness to continue. This unwillingness is not an act but an experience. The words make no sense, the atmosphere is stifled. One chokes. One has no choice but to leave. But one does not know what is going to happen, one has no blue-print for action. The "decision" literally means what it means in Latin, the being-cut-off from one's own routines in a paid and honored position. And the trust that this subzero situation is bound to create new ways of life is our faith.

It seems necessary to remind people that this is the way of salvation experienced by any new-born souls and that God seems to care little for the problem of smoking or drinking or similar secondary matters. Because the sins against the Holy Ghost are the only ones which cannot be forgiven. The others are important for the immature. This one alone counts in the course of God's history of salvation for grown up people.

I have never written down the story of my "metanoia" before as all my later life grew out of this and has kept me pretty busy. But since you have asked me point blank, I seemed to owe you an answer. And now I have looked back upon that moment at the railroad junction of Wabern and reflected that it draws attention to the original sense of the decision a

Christian was asked to make in the old days: to distinguish the spirits of death and life, and to turn away from dead works although they might be sanctified by the highest authority. Because God is a God of the living and His judgements may be expected any day.

Very sincerely your friend,
Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy