

A PERSONAL MEMOIR

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

I have had a long, troubled relationship with the Church. (I learned to call the Roman Catholic Church 'the Church' as a student of medieval history and it has been 'the Church' ever since.) The Church knows nothing of this dalliance. I flirted with Catholicism or railed against it from afar, rather like an admirer who sees so many flaws in the unapproachable beloved that she doesn't wish to bring the relationship to fruition but can't quite give up on her ideal notion of what the troublesome creature *should* be.

Let me begin at the beginning. I was born a non-Catholic and I became, at an early age, an anti-Catholic. This was not so much the result of strictures from my family as my absorption of the parochial attitudes which predominated in my rural, small town environment. Such exotic faiths as Catholicism and Judaism (although one was never quite sure whether Judaism counted as a religion or not given the disbelief of Jews in the Incarnation) were suspect. There were, in fact, no practicing Catholics in my town—unless they somehow celebrated mass at home. Indeed, there was only one church: a stern white affair with a barren interior featuring rows and row of extremely hard wooden benches. This local church was called "non-denominational" by the townspeople but the minister was a Presbyterian. Although my family was Lutheran, the nearest Lutheran Church was ten miles away so until I reached the age at which young Lutherans go to Catechism school I was, I suppose, a little Presbyterian.

My memories of my Presbyterian days involve pleasant Sunday School teachers and printed Sunday School lessons with pictures of Jesus in postcard colored glory: open-faced, rosy-cheeked, white, Anglo-Saxon features, long, wavy light- to dark-brown hair. He was always surrounded by benignly smiling followers, benignly smiling children, or both. Usually He was standing in verdant pastures or strolling down pathways bordered by delicately colored flowers tending towards pale reds and pinks. The only time I encountered living Catholics occurred when a Catholic family, with two girls my own age, moved to town. The new girls were tough rowdies who had freckles and Tried to Get People into Trouble by drawing others in on their mischievous pranks. This

did not bolster Catholicism in my eyes. I was a rather earnest young person and I assumed it reflected badly on the Church if children who belonged to it were ill-mannered and coarse.

At the appointed time I was transported the necessary distance in order to attend Lutheran Catechism school. We spent most of our time memorizing the questions and answers from Luther's Small Catechism. I entered upon my devoted, intense Lutheran period. I learned of all the shocking horrors and abuses against which Luther had mounted his protest. I committed to memory all the fine points which distinguished Transubstantiation from Consubstantiation. I found it completely unfathomable that presumably intelligent individuals could truly *believe* anything so patently ridiculous as the transformation of the wine and bread into the *actual* body and blood of Christ. Catholicism smacked of an encrusted, archaic, unenlightened tradition which hadn't kept pace with the March of History; of superstitions occasionally dressed up as a picky and arid philosophy which got itself bogged down in consideration of incomprehensible and irrelevant trivialities; of snooty bishops, cardinals, and popes laden with sumptuous garments who wandered through meaningless rituals featuring smoke, candles and mumbled Latin; of monks and nuns who hid away from the world and did nothing "useful" for society; of hypocritical injunctions concerning venial and mortal sins which Catholic youths blithely ignored because they knew "they could pay the priest and he would forgive them." I was convinced of my own intellectual and moral superiority as a bright, young, up-to-date Protestant as I compared myself with those of my age group still captured by what was a defunct institution soon to topple of its own volition. (Mostly, however, I didn't think about Catholicism or the Church.)

I was not untroubled by religious doubts as I entered high school. I began to question Martin Luther's faith, that unceasing, fearful confrontation with a wrathful and just God on His own terms. I tried to relax in the assurance that faith and not good works mattered where one's eternal soul was concerned. But as I lay awake at night and thought of Luther's *angst*, his tortuous journey to the belief that he truly believed, I decided that I understood his fear and anguish and I could draw no comfort from his faith. What if one believed one had faith but really did not? Could such self-deception damn one's

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

soul? Or was God merciful enough to forgive us our self-deceits? I asked my minister how I could be certain I had faith. Luther's Small Catechism, as carefully as I had read and memorized it, hadn't provided a satisfactory answer. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved," he answered. "Yes, I do," I replied, "but what if I don't, deep down where even I don't know about it but God will because He knows all?" Then I was told that the person who had faith would automatically, as it were, perform good works. This meant in practice that I had faith (although I had learned, of course, that one was saved by faith alone). I remained dissatisfied.

I began undergraduate school as a major in history and I plunged myself into a painful rethinking of the grounds of both my political and religious beliefs. Loss of the religious and secular faiths in which one was raised is a long, complex process involving the world outside and the world within. My burgeoning rational skepticism carried me from initial doubt of Christian dogma to a rejection, a sloughing off one-by-one of the creation of the world as recounted in Genesis, the existence of the Holy Ghost, the virginity of the Virgin Mary, and, inescapably (but with fear and trepidation) the Incarnation, individual immortality—all of it gone. I kept a personal record, my belief barometer. As the barometer fell to nearly zero I wanted to rebuild. First I called myself an atheist. This lasted two weeks or so. The very word 'atheist' threw me into deep gloom. Then I became a deist after studying the Enlightenment and reading Voltaire. That didn't last long and I was shortly thereafter transmogrified into that most urbane and well-mannered of contemporary beasts, the liberal agnostic. The person who knows she doesn't know and what's more doesn't give a damn. Tweaks her nose at the frivolity and fundamental absurdity of religion. (A posture similar to that of Vonnegut's Bokonon who, as the world ices over, lies on his back "grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who." I did a lot of nose thumbing at You Know Who.) Agnosticism was undoubtedly the final answer: the proper position for the historian and political scientist-in-becoming.

But St. Augustine, damn him, kept nagging at me after I read the *Confessions* for a medieval history course. I also worked very hard to repress the fact that I had been moved to tears when my instructor read passages from various of the medieval saints in class. My classmates sat in stolid silence. Several indicated they thought such "irrationality" had (thank god?) been dispensed with by Modern Science. I viewed my own reaction as an atavism. Raised in a Christian family, I just hadn't sloughed off the recrudescence of the past quite efficiently enough. But I found myself drawn, nonetheless, to the concept of the *respublica Christiana*, to that compelling medieval drama, the contest between *regnum* and *sacerdotium*, to the notions of grace and selfless sacrifice for others or one's faith (all

so at odds with the predominant modern notion of the human being as a rational, cautious calculator of self-interest), and to the beauty, richness, opulence and grandeur of much of that medieval tradition which found its culmination in the soaring spires of Gothic cathedrals.

A few of us, meanwhile, organized in support of civil rights and social justice. The Eisenhower era was laid to rest and the student movement was just beginning. It wasn't yet Berkeley and Free Speech but it was getting there, slowly, as the society trembled with the inchoate rumblings of what we enthusiastically believed would be great change. Energized by Kennedy, touched by King and Pope John XXIII's simple caring and concern, we marched and leafleted and petitioned. Vietnam was a long way off. A few advisors. Nothing more. The last vestiges of the Cold War.

1963 Assassination. 1964 Gulf of Tonkin. Jeune hopes for the New Frontier and the Great Society faltered then festered into personal as well as political wounds. But the secular faith being the only faith left (the others having been destroyed by the acids of scientific rationalism) I clung to a flagging belief in Progress and liberal Reason. My faith lay in the secular repository and I wasn't going to draw all my savings out of the bank at once. A stouter heart than my own for that task. Time passed. Political dissent and despair. King lost. Another Kennedy dead.

I began to think about the Church again—or about a thread in its tradition which reemerged in those halcyon days of protest and risk. I remembered the words from an essay by Albert Camus I had read years before, an essay on what the unbeliever expects from Christians. This is what he said:

What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear, and that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, should rise in the heart of the simplest man. That they should get away from abstraction and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today.

I was no longer a Christian if by that one meant adherence to a particular creed. But I shared Camus' expectation. Surely if anyone should speak to condemn the slaughter of innocents, I thought, it ought to be Christians. I recalled the words of St. Augustine in Book IV of *The City of God*: "In the absence of justice, what is sovereignty but organized brigandage?" Augustine's gloomy bifurcation between the City of God and the City of Man, based as it was on the notion that man's conscience belongs to the City of God and thus supersedes any loyalty to a state viewed as little more than a "band of criminals" which "by recruiting more criminals, acquires enough power to occupy regions, to capture citizens, and to subdue whole populations . . .", was resurrected by the Catholic anti-war

left. Daniel Berrigan, his brother and his compatriots nagged away, pricking the American conscience, using drama, symbol and metaphor to condemn America's sordid moral priorities. Their actions gave voice to my own horrified realization of the failures of American society to face the truth about itself, its unwillingness or incapacity to confront its own cultural "crimes of birth," its refusal to correct the discrepancy between the dream and the reality of American society. It was, as one commentator on the Berrigans observed, "... not Christianity, but Americanism which has been tried and found wanting."

Well, the war is officially 'over.' Protest has subsided. People focus on their dwindling resources as inflation mounts, jobs are lost, and corporate profits rise. I don't think much about the Church anymore. But I know what I expect of it in a time of pervasive despair: there are hungry to be fed, trembling to be clothed, homeless to be housed, frightened to be comforted. There are systems of oppression and exploitation to fight and to condemn. To this end, the Church must as never before confront and come to terms with socialist theory for of all the possibilities for restructuring society, for narrowing if not eliminating the unconscionable gap between the many poor and the few rich, for providing minimal dignity in the form of clothing, shelter, health care and education, socialism offers the clearest alternative to the exploitative present. Oh yes, the consumer cornucopia in which goodies were dispensed in disproportionate amounts to successful little American boys and girls was never supposed to end. But end it must. And end it should.

Perhaps the loss of faith is really a loss of innocence. As painful as that may be, it isn't necessarily bad. A democratic socialism, erected on a foundation of respect for persons, on a belief in the dignity of each and every human being in the eyes of God and man, owes much to Christianity. For St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, man was a political and social animal. Secular rule and dominion were ordained by God to achieve earthly peace and justice. A restructured society, one not dedicated to the protection of the pursuit of private profit, might well move to fulfill both the Thomist vision of secular dignity and justice as well as the Marxist concept of the non-alienated society in which people truly become themselves as they share in labor for the common good.

What, finally, do I think of the Church? Well, it is something which is always there: one secure point of reference in a fragmented and apparently random world. I'm happy that it's there, but then I'm happy that Long's Peak in my home state of Colorado is always in the same place when I journey westward each summer. I know that there is ferment and change within the Church. But too often to those of us outside it the ferment seems, at best, focused on rather arcane or trivial

matters. When the Church makes common cause with those who struggle for earthly justice and equality I may not overcome my many years of railing and flirting with it from afar (in other words, there shall be no marriage) but I will gladly join hands in a struggle to ennoble the earthly realm by eliminating from it those systems of privilege and exploitation which do violence to the bodies and spirits of human beings all of whom are equally children of God.

LIBERATION? NONE—SEXISM? MOSTLY



THE STAGE

It is customary to expect from Broadway theater the sophisticated and from Off-Broadway the avant garde. With these expectations I thought it might be interesting to see how sex and its liberation were faring this summer season, an unusually active one for New York theater. On the basis of various reviews I chose, on Broadway *Chicago*, and Off-Broadway, *Let My People Come*, which explicitly claims to be "A Sexual Musical."

One is compelled to conclude sadly, poor sex, poor liberation, poor sexual liberation.

Perhaps one should not really have expected much from *Chicago* except, in Graham Greene's terms, entertainment. And good entertainment it is, chiefly because of Gwen Verdon and Chita Rivera dancing Bob Fosse's choreography. But like the people of the play, the sex was dreary and the liberation not at all. A sort of *Cabaret* transposed to Capone's Chicago, it lacks the former's bone-chilling despair. But it is more than sufficiently depressing as it is, since every sexual encounter's denouement is both deception and violence. Its combination of sex, violence and exploitation might more readily be expected in Broadway's X-rated porn shops than its sophisticated theaters, even when they are attempting satire.

Even more disappointing and equally unliberated was *Let My People Come*, probably because this "sexual musical" both claims to be and has been described as a "theatrical emancipation" and a "milestone for freedom of expression." It may have been—ten years ago. But in the age of Al Goldstein and his journal, *Let My People Come* is about as emancipated as the old men's smokers and stag shows.

In the long run, in fact, its sexual liberation and emancipation are no more convincing than the non-tumescant celibate sexuality of romantic Irish clerics like Andrew Greeley, Eugene Kennedy and Vince Dwyer. Its "look but don't touch" policy (almost as stringent on stage as between cast and audience) can hardly