

## **Rational Belief or Poetical Satisfaction**

The highly positive reception accorded John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*, indeed the attention given by the secular media to most of his writings, attests to the need that many have for spiritual nourishment as the intellectual and cultural influence of religion wanes in a country once thought to be Christian. The decline has been long in the making and mirrors the European experience of the past century.

The Spanish-born, Harvard University professor George Santayana, writing in 1937 for an American audience, observed:

The present age is a critical one and interesting to live in. The civilization characteristic of Christendom has not disappeared, yet another civilization has begun to take its place. We still understand the value of religious faith [...] On the other hand the shell of Christendom is broken. The unconquerable mind of the East, the pagan past, the industrial socialistic future confront it with equal authority. Our whole life and mind is saturated with the slow upward filtration of a new spirit—that of an emancipated, atheistic, international democracy<sup>1</sup>.

In the early decades of this century that type of judgment may have required the perceptiveness of a Santayana. Today it is universally acknowledged.

Does it make a difference to society whether men believe in God and worship Him? Does society have a stake in the presence or absence of religion? Although morality and religion are not to be identified, it is evident that religion carries with it a code of values. We may ask, for the sake of virtue in the citizenry, is it incumbent on the state to encourage religious instruction and practice? Plato, Cicero, and Seneca were so convinced of the importance of religion to the state that they thought it necessary for the state both to promote and to regulate religious observance.

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<sup>1</sup> George SANTAYANA, «Winds of Doctrine», in *The Works of George Santayana* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937).

In a 1992 collection, *Essays on Religion and Education*, the noted English philosopher R. M. Hare reprints an earlier article, «The Simple Believer». He begins that article with the judgment that the philosophy of religion «is a subject which fastidious philosophers do not like to touch»<sup>21</sup>. Still he is armed for a brief encounter. He is willing to confront what he takes to be an enfeebled Christianity defended only by its simple masses.

Reflecting almost two centuries of British empiricism, Hare assumes that the educated person cannot believe in the supernatural, a belief that he equates with superstition. He does not argue for his position but regards it as so well established that he at least does not need to provide the evidence. He then asks,

Can religion do without the supernatural? Suppose someone produced an interpretation of Christianity that could be accepted by the best humanists: would this necessarily be a bad thing?<sup>3</sup>.

Reluctant to witness the disappearance of Christianity and its trappings, Hare writes,

I believe that matters are so ordered in the world that there is a point in trying to live by the precepts to which Christians subscribe<sup>4</sup>.

Perhaps unknown to Hare, from the seventeenth century on, secular appraisals of the worth of religion abound. Authors such as Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) and Samuel Pufendorf (1632-1694) discuss religion in terms of its ability to satisfy human needs and interests rather than to lead one to union with the divine. For Grotius and Pufendorf, religion may be a necessary social institution even if deprived of its metaphysical underpinnings. In *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* (*The Right of War and Peace*, first published in 1625), Grotius argues that religious belief helps sustain peaceful manners and obedience to the law<sup>5</sup>. Like Plato, he suggests that those who deny the existence of God should be punished for disturbing the peace. He offers a purely secular defense of religion, one that does not require assent to any theological propositions. Grotius was convinced that most humans will abide by the laws of nature more diligently if they believe that God has instituted them<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> R. M. HARE, *Essays on Religion and Education* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Grotius and Pufendorf on the social value of religion, see Daniel GORDON, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought 1670-1789* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 77.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. D. GORDON, *Citizens*, 77.

Samuel Pufendorf's position on the relation between the natural moral order and religion was similar, but he placed more emphasis on the need to affirm God's existence in order to add binding force on the conscience. The rules of sociability, he wrote, have «manifest utility» and do not require theological justification, yet a rule has the greatest binding force on humans when they believe not only that it is a good rule but also that an authority has promulgated it and will punish them for transgressing it. In order to give the norms of sociability the greatest force,

[...] it is necessary to presuppose that God exists, and by His providence rules all things; also that He has enjoined upon the human race that they observe those dictates of the reason, as laws promulgated by Himself by means of our natural light<sup>7</sup>.

Pufendorf is convinced that in the moral order religion adds nothing that is not discernable through reason; it only serves to make these principles more binding:

The ultimate confirmation of duties toward other men comes from religion and fear of the Deity, so that man would not be sociable (*sociabilis*) either, if not imbued with religion<sup>82</sup>.

The Jesuit Claude Buffier, writing in 1726, insists that personal moral virtue is advantageous for «the happiness of *société*», and every vice militates against it<sup>9</sup>. Buffier was convinced that religion, particularly Christianity, is the foundation of «civil society». Although religion «is not absolutely necessary to establish the laws of purely moral virtue and of human *société*», religion, he argued, is necessary to help fix these laws in the minds of individuals<sup>10</sup>. Gordon delineates Buffier's position as follows,

There are», Buffier contended, «certain times when our passions are so strong that we lose sight of what reason advises us to do. We are then inclined to pursue our own interest without thinking about others. Without the sobering threat of divine punishment, we are apt to undermine the social order.

The rational effort to preserve civil society, Buffier argued, leads one to appreciate the necessity of having a religion:

<sup>7</sup> Samuel PUFENDORF, *De Officio Hominis et civis*, trans. Frank Gardner Moore (New York: Oxford University Press, 1927), 2.19, as quoted by GORDON, *Citizens*, p. 78.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel PUFENDORF, *De Officio*, 2.21; GORDON, *Citizens*, p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> Claude BUFFIER, *Traité de la société civile* (Paris: Chez Marc Bordelet, 1726), 6, as quoted by GORDON, *Citizens*, p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 118; GORDON, *Citizens*, p. 80.

It is reason itself that leads necessarily to religion in order to make it [religion] the solid rule of our conduct<sup>11</sup>.

Denis Diderot, in his *Essai sur le mérite et la vertu*, is not so sure. Diderot is convinced that virtue can exist without religion and that religion can exist without virtue. Diderot points to the evil effects that religious passions have engendered by evoking the French religious wars of the previous two centuries.

Recall», he advises, «the history of our civil troubles and you will see one half of the nation bathing itself, out of piety, in the blood of the other half and violating, in order to sustain the cause of God, the first sentiments of humanity<sup>12</sup>.

English speaking writers frequently take their lead from the nineteenth-century John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). In the essay *Theism*, Mills concludes:

It follows that the rational attitude of a thinking mind toward the supernatural, whether in natural or revealed religion, is that of skepticism as distinguished from belief on the one hand, and from atheism on the other<sup>13</sup>.

Mill was convinced that with respect to the existence of God, there is no proof one way or another. Making a distinction between proof and evidence, he admits that there is some evidence amounting only to one of the lower degrees of probability... The indication given by such evidence as there is points to the creation, not indeed of the universe, but of the present order of it by an intelligent mind whose power over materials was not absolute, whose love for his creatures was not his sole actuating inducement, but who nevertheless desired their good. The notion of a providential government by an omnipotent Being for the good of his creatures must be entirely dismissed<sup>14</sup>.

The implications for religion are clear. Religion has a value but not the one we have heretofore assigned to it.

Religion and poetry address themselves, at least in one of their aspects, to the same part of the human constitution; they both supply some want, that of ideal conceptions grander and more beautiful than we see realized in the prose of human life. The religious mind eagerly seizes any rumors of the transcendent. Belief in a god or gods and in a life after death provides the consolation that good will be rewarded and evil punished<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 2, 113; GORDON, *Citizens*, p. 80.

<sup>12</sup> GORDON, *Citizens*, p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> John Stuart MILL, *Theism* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Library of Liberal Arts, 1957), p. 77.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> John Stuart MILL, *Utility* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., The Library of Liberal Arts, 1957), p. 69.

The value of religion to the individual, both in the past and present, as a source of personal satisfaction and elevated feelings is not to be disputed. But in spite of these good effects, is religious belief intellectually sustainable? Mill decides in the negative. Belief is required neither for morality nor for a poetic or unified view of reality. The positive effects attributed to Christianity and other religions grounded in a supernatural order can be achieved through the religion of humanity.

Mill's assessment of the role of religion is reflected in the philosophy of John Dewey (1859-1952), certainly the most influential American philosopher in the history of the United States. By virtue of the appointments he held over a long lifetime, Dewey's influence was not limited to professional philosophical circles but extended to the entire system of state-sponsored education in the United States. His educational philosophy became the philosophy of the public school.

In both politics and education, Dewey allowed no role for religion or religious institutions, whatever roles they may have played in the past. Religion is an unreliable source of knowledge, Dewey believed, and, in spite of contentions to the contrary, even of motivation. Many of the values held dear by the religious are worthy of consideration and should not be abandoned, but a proper rationale ought to be sought for those deemed commendable. Through his critique of religion, Dewey sought not merely to eliminate the church from political influence but to eliminate it as an effective agent even in private life. He deemed religion to be socially dangerous insofar as it gives practical credence to a divine law and attempts to mold personal or social conduct in conformity with norms which look beyond temporal society<sup>16</sup>.

By contrast, a romantic or poetic view of the value of religion is found in Dewey's contemporary, George Santayana (1863-1952). No less a materialist than Dewey, Santayana maintained an appreciation (albeit a purely secular one) of the role of religion in society. He could say, where Dewey could not,

Religion when seen to be poetry ceases to be descriptive and therefore odious... [and] becomes humanly more significant than it seemed before<sup>17</sup>.

In his *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, Santayana wrote,

Religion and poetry are identical in essence, and differ mainly in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it

<sup>16</sup> John DEWEY, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 87 ff.

<sup>17</sup> George SANTAYANA, «On the Unity of my Earlier and Later Philosophy», in *The Works of George Santayana* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), vol. VII, preface (pp. XIII-XIV).

intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry<sup>18</sup>.

Santayana's Catholic upbringing was clearly a factor in his appreciation of the role of religion in society. Born in Madrid, he spent the first nine years of his life in Spain. By his own account, as an adolescent he oscillated between solipsism and the Roman Catholic faith.

It is not difficult to identify the source of Santayana's cultural appreciation of religion. Throughout his life he could recall with fondness his early experiences of religious pageantry, of the many feasts, such as Corpus Christi, celebrated in his boyhood Avila.

Santayana's reflections on religion were always the reflections of a materialist and therefore of a nonbeliever. He was appreciative of Catholicism in the same way that he was appreciative of other coherent systems of belief that produce effects in the practical order. In *Persons and Places* he tells us,

I had never practiced my religion, or thought of it as a means of getting to heaven or avoiding hell, things that never caused me the least flutter. All that happened was that I became accustomed to a different *Weltanschauung*, to another system having the same rational function as religion: that of keeping me attentive to the lessons of life<sup>19</sup>.

Elsewhere, he said, "I have found in different times and places, the liberal, the Catholic and the German air quite possible to breathe"<sup>20</sup>. A contemporary, George Herbert Palmer, is reputed to have said of Santayana that «He had Hume in his bones».

In Santayana's assessment, religion ought to be the highest synthesis of our nature, making room for the gifts of one's senses, of one's affections, of one's country and its history, and of the science, morality and taste of one's day. He admits that the circumstance of time and place account for much.

The Englishman finds that he was born a Christian, and therefore wishes to remain a Christian; but his Christianity must be his own, no less plastic and adaptable than his inner man; and it is an axiom with him that nothing can be obligatory for a Christian which is unpalatable to an Englishman<sup>21</sup>.

That observation is followed by another:

<sup>18</sup> George SANTAYANA, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), p. v.

<sup>19</sup> George SANTAYANA, *Persons and Places* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), p. 419.

<sup>20</sup> George SANTAYANA, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), p. 189.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Only a few years ago, if a traveler landing in England on a Sunday and entering an Anglican church, had been told that the country was Catholic and its church a branch of the Catholic Church, his astonishment would have been extreme. «Catholic» is opposed in the first place to national and in the second place to Protestant<sup>22</sup>.

What then is Protestantism? «I see in it», says Santayana, «three leading motifs: a tendency to revert to primitive Christianity; a call to moral and political reform; and an acceptance of the religious witness of the “inner man”». In a cynical mood, Santayana was to say, the «inner man» for the Catholic, as for the materialist, is apt to be regarded as a pathological phenomenon<sup>23</sup>.

Santayana's interest in Catholicism was far from superficial. He appreciated the integrity of its doctrine and recognized the folly of watering down key elements in an attempt to gain secular acceptance. His criticism of the «modernist movement» in the Catholic Church is as severe as any produced by a Catholic apologist.

The modernist wishes to reconcile the church and the world. Therein he forgets what Christianity came into the world to announce and why it is believed. Having no ears for the essential message of Christianity, the modernist also has no eye for its history. The church converted the world only partially and essentially; yet Christianity was outwardly established as the traditional religion of many nations. And why? Because, although the prophecies it relied on were strained and its miracles dubious, it furnished a needed sanctuary from the shames, sorrows, injustices, violence, and gathering darkness of earth<sup>24</sup>.

The church, continues Santayana, is not only a sanctuary but a holy precinct where one might pursue sacred learning, philosophy, and theology in the midst of an ordered community life, perhaps within a superior artistic milieu. Speaking of the Catholic Church and particularly of the papacy and its material ambience, he writes,

Much has been added but nothing has been lost. In his palace full of pagan marbles the pope remains faithful to the teaching of Christ, promoting the basic truths of the *New Testament*. It is within the halls of the papacy that the gospel is still believed, not among the modernists<sup>25</sup>.

Santayana adds,

It is open for anyone to say that a nobler religion is possible without the trapping of the papacy. The ancient Greeks, Hindus, or Mohammedans might well acquit themselves before an impartial tribunal of human nature and reason. But they are not Christians, nor do they wish to be. Neither

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> «Winds of Doctrine», p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

are the modernists, «men of the Renaissance», pagan and pantheistic in their profound sentiment, to whom the hard and narrow realism of official Christianity is offensive just because it presupposes that Christianity is true<sup>26</sup>.

#### Continuing his criticism of the modernists,

They think the weakness of the church lies in not following the inspirations of the age. But when this age is past, might not that weakness be a source of strength again?<sup>27</sup>

In a frank supernaturalism, in a tight clericalism, not in a pleasant secularization, lies the sole hope of the church [...] As to modernism, it is suicide<sup>28</sup>.

What civic task does religion perform that obliges Santayana to defend its integrity against those who would dilute its message? The answer lies in Santayana's conviction that poetic knowledge possesses cognitive value both for the speculative insight it provides and for the guidance it offers in the practical order. Religion when confused with a record of facts or natural laws is deflected from its proper course, but when seen as poetry it becomes a guide to life.

It should be acknowledged that by temperament and metaphysical outlook, Santayana is not representative of the main drift of the American philosophy of his period. At first opportunity he fled New England for Europe, eventually ending his years in the Eternal City. He loved the labyrinth of the old streets of Rome, the Pantheon, Michaelangelo's *Moses*, and the Forum from the top of the Capitoline. He loved to meditate while seated in the Basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano, the Pope's own church, amidst the baroque Titans lining its columns. Intellectually he remained a pupil of the Enlightenment philosophy he learned as a student at Harvard. Although he remained steadfast in his materialism, he was culturally at home only among the artifacts of spirit whose transcendent source he denied. I am certain that he understood and appreciated a statue found in the Borghese Gallery in Rome, a statue carved by the seventeenth-century sculptor, Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1590-1680). In that splendid marble treatise, Bernini captured the ancient reverence for the transcendent as he depicts Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius fleeing Troy — Aeneas in the prime of life rescuing his aged parent who holds aloft the household shrines and his son who carries a lamp with the hearth fire. Santayana would have it no other way in spite of his disbelief.

Although Santayana spent his last years in Rome, his philosophy of religion has little in common with classical Latin writers or with their

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.



medieval commentators. Cicero, Seneca, and Macrobius all approached religion, not as a cultural artifact, but as a moral virtue. Piety, they commonly held, is a species of justice, the habit of paying one's debt to the gods. The religious act is primarily an act of homage, whatever its specific manifestation in prayer or sacrifice. In the words of Cicero, there is «no nation or tribe so uncultured that it does not acknowledge some sort of deity», and consequently, none without worship. The word «religion» itself implies as much. As Aquinas reminds us, Cicero found the origin of the word in the verb *re legit* (to ponder over, to read again), Augustine in the verb *re eligere* (to re-elect), and Lactantius in the verb *re ligare* (to bind back)<sup>29</sup>.

From the classical point of view, religion begins in an acknowledgment of several facets of reality —namely, that there is a god or gods, that reality consists in more than spatio-temporal-physical and mental events, that history is guided and controlled by a nonhuman force, and that individual existence does not terminate with the cessation of bodily processes. For the enlightened Roman, assent to those propositions is generated by philosophical considerations; for the masses, assent is produced either by intuition or by a more or less gratuitous act of faith.

The twentieth-century religious mind tends to the conviction, shared by Santayana, that modern philosophy has undermined what was formerly regarded as evidence for the existence of God, and that, consequently, religious faith is a completely gratuitous act. In the eighteenth century, Kant could boast that he had limited reason in order to make way for faith. In the nineteenth century, Kirkegaard was eager to leap into the dark. But to the mind schooled in the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Aquinas, faith cannot be a leap into the dark. Assent must be rational, meaning that what is proposed for belief must be not only internally consistent but must cohere with what is known through experience and demonstration.

Against such a backdrop the art of paying homage to the divine, its attendant ritual, feasts, architecture, painting, literature, and other fine arts may be appreciated as human artifacts. But they are robbed of their intrinsic intelligibility when the wisdom, philosophical and theological, that generated them is thought to be mere poetry.

Santayana's materialism leads him to deny the existence of God, yet he remains a cultured nonbeliever. He cannot bring himself to deny the human worth of the religiously inspired literature and other artifacts that he holds to be among the treasures of the world. No iconoclast is he. Yet even from his own vantage point one may doubt that those arts, deprived of the rationale that produced them, will continue to thrive, although art does not have to be created from a religious

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<sup>29</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 81, a. 1.

perspective to be in some sense sacral. That which is driven by an ideological perspective at variance with the spiritual component of human nature is likely to fail. A cursory acquaintance with the proletarian art of the twentieth century suggests that it exist on a much lower plane than the religiously inspired art of the high middle ages or of the Italian Renaissance or of the baroque. Experience teaches that materialisms of any variety have an almost built-in debilitating effect on the arts.

One is tempted to ask, What would Santayana say if he were writing today? Would he still adhere to the nineteenth-century rationalism he embraced as a youth? With the methods and assumptions of modern science virtually destroying turn-of-the-century positivistic philosophy, would Santayana adopt a much more comprehensive synthesis, a realism at once open to experience, science, philosophy, and revelation? Of course there is no way of knowing. Perhaps Santayana's greatest contribution as an interpreter of religion is his appreciation of its integrity when it is well crafted and his acknowledgment of the positive role it plays in the lives of many.

It should be noted that Santayana and Dewey did not have the American stage completely to themselves. I would be remiss if I did not at least mention William James, Charles Saunders Pierce, and Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead may be taken as representative. In a series of lectures titled «Religion in the Making», delivered at Harvard University in 1926 while he and Santayana were both on that faculty, Whitehead could proclaim that «the order of the world is no accident»<sup>30</sup>, but rather implies the existence of God.

Religion, Whitehead insisted, requires a metaphysical foundation. Science may

[...] leave its metaphysics implicit and retire behind our belief in the pragmatic value of its general descriptions. If religion does that, it admits that its dogmas are merely pleasing ideas for the purpose of stimulating its emotions. Science [...] can rest upon a naive faith; religion is the longing for justification<sup>31</sup>.

Whitehead suggests that the ages of faith were identical with those ages when metaphysics was ascendant. The skeptical and historicist turn of the early nineteenth century, he was convinced, not only affected religion but robbed the natural sciences themselves of their rational support. Whitehead's realistic metaphysics, it may be noted, provided a rational preamble to Christian belief for several generations of students of theology in many North American divinity schools.

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<sup>30</sup> Alfred North WHITEHEAD, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan Co.), p. 115.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

Catholic parties to the discussion now framed as the «church-state debate» included the Jesuit theologians Gustave Weigel and John Courtney Murray. Murray addressed some of these issues in a notable collection of essays, *We Hold These Truths*. There he speaks of the «new barbarism» that threatens the life of reason embodied in law and custom. The perennial work of the barbarian, he writes, is

[...] to undermine rational standards of judgment, to corrupt inherited wisdom by which the people have always lived, and to do this not by spreading new beliefs but by creating a climate of doubt and bewilderment in which clarity about the larger aims of life is dimmed and the self-confidence of the people destroyed<sup>32</sup>.

Murray in his day was not optimistic that the West could in the near future recover its patrimony. The key, he recognized, is the learning that gives one access to Athens and Rome and medieval Paris and Padova. A respect for the time-transcending wisdom of the ancients can only follow acquaintance. The legacy of classical learning remains. Just as classical learning was recovered in the middle ages, in our own time it remains to be tapped for its intellectual and spiritual sustenance. The Greeks, Murray was convinced, can teach us much about human nature, about the nature of science, and about the acquisition of virtue. The Romans can instruct us on the subject of law and on the nature of religion and its importance to civic life. Their medieval commentators, in weaving both into a synthesis, including the third element—namely, revealed religion—provide us with a heritage that can be appropriated, built upon, and utilized.

If we are to draw any conclusion, we may note that from Grotius to Hare there are to be found serious thinkers who appreciate the visible effects of religion. Judged from a classical point of view, the virtue of religion is but one virtue among many. As a virtue it is contingent upon the recognition of God's existence, but whether God truly exists or not, religion is an empirically discernable artifact. De facto, the institutions that collective worship brings into being create more than temples. They carry within them intellectual and moral insights, which in turn call into being some of the highest art forms and literature known to mankind. Unavoidably, religion inspires a way of behaving, a social ordering, and a culture. In the East, Confucianism and Buddhism play the same role that religion performs in the West, which is perhaps the reason many people confuse them with religion. But in the West, apart from the Arab world, no vehicle other than Christianity has been capable of providing the steady instruction, the uplifting tutelage of the many, admired by Santayana. The philosophy of

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<sup>32</sup> John Courtney MURRAY, *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960), p. 13.

the Enlightenment, by contrast, has played itself out on a Hollywood stage, as the purveyor of a culture from which the readers of John Paul II are recoiling.

In a remarkable way materialistic and the agnostic interpretations tell us much about the role of religion in society, about its ennobling, synthesizing, culturally stimulating and socially motivating aspects. Although naturalistic interpretations deny the reality upon which homage is based, they find that as a cultural artifact, religion when intelligently constructed has much to recommend it. Unfortunately that abstract appreciation does not often lead to support in the practical order.

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