

Are You Sincere?

A Lawyer, A Professor, A Priest And A Merchant Engage In Plain Talk On Religion.

By a Catholic Playwright.

Australian Catholic Truth Society No.0982 (1945)

Professor:

“It is curious how widely men differ in their religious beliefs; but this is not perhaps to be regretted, for, after all, it is a matter of no importance what a man believes if only he be sincere.”

Lawyer:

“So says the poet, too, and I agree with him:

“For forms of faith let graceless zealots fight.

He can't be wrong whose heart is in the right.”

Priest:

“Allow me to say that, while I agree with you in prizing sincerity very highly, at the same time it seems to me you put a pretty low estimate on truth.”

Professor:

“How so? We do not undervalue the excellence of truth.”

Priest:

“It seems to me you do; for, if it be a matter of no importance what a man believes, then, whether a man is a pagan, Jew, Turk, (by which I mean Moslem,) or Christian, it is all the same, provided he is only sincere, On your theory all religions are equally good, for sincerity is the important thing, not truth, and therefore Christ's death, for the conversion of the Jews and the Gentiles to Christianity, was a mistake!”

Professor:

“Why! What would you have more than a pure and honest love of truth?”

Priest:

“Truth itself! Because truth is to the mind what light is to the eye. Deprive the eye of light, and soon it becomes weak, falls into decay, and is rendered useless — useless as the eyes of the fish found in the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky, where the light never penetrates. Deprive the mind of truth, and it becomes feeble, imbecile, dies, great as your sincerity may be. The mind was made for truth. Knowledge of truth is the life of the mind.”

Professor:

“But if a man is sincere he will seek earnestly for the truth.”

Priest:

“Grant it; so will a man who is hungry seek earnestly after food to eat. But hunger is not food, neither is sincerity truth. To say that it is of no consequence what a man believes, if he only be sincere, is as absurd as to say it is no matter whether a man has anything to eat provided only he has got a keen appetite!”

Merchant:

“You will, however, admit that a man may be in error and yet sincere?”

Priest:

“That is possible; but I do not admit that a man’s being in error, though sincere, is of no consequence. For if you give to the stomach bad or poisonous food, dyspepsia will soon overtake the man, it matters not how great his hunger. You give to the mind error and falsehood to feed on, and scepticism and doubt will soon appear, and despair or suicide will soon close up the account, it matters not how great a man’s sincerity may be.”

Professor:

“At any rate, if a man is really sincere he will find the truth; you won’t deny that sincerity is the way to truth?”

Priest:

“Certainly not; but the way to a thing and the thing itself are not the same, or to be esteemed the same. Do not confound sincerity with truth.”

Lawyer:

“That’s so. Gold is a mighty good thing to have, but a trip to the gold mines, and the digging for gold, is no joke.”

Priest:

“Just so. The gold we seek is truth; sincerity is not truth, but is the way to truth, and is to be esteemed only in view of truth.”

Merchant:

“I never saw things in that light before! I have heard so much about sincerity that I have taken it for granted it is all one needs to care about.”

Priest:

“That is the popular error. He, who is content with sincerity without truth, is as foolish as one, who has made the journey to the gold mines for gold, comes home without any, and fancies himself satisfied.”

Merchant:

“If sincerity is not truth, and never can stand in the place of truth, then the question what a man believes is, after all, rather a serious one, I fancy.”

Priest:

“Of course it is; it is a question which will have rather a serious settlement one day.”

Professor:

“Will you admit the promise, that he who hungers after righteousness shall be filled?”

Priest:

“Not only will I admit this promise, for it was made by Christ, but I most sincerely believe in its fulfilment. Pray, tell me, Professor, what is it to hunger after truth?”

Professor:

“Why it means to desire it earnestly, and to seek it with all sincerity.”

Priest:

“But a man who neglects to inform himself of the truth, or neglects, when informed, to follow his convictions, can he be said to hunger after righteousness?”

Professor:

“Of course not. But I believe most men seek after truth sincerely.”

Priest:

“I share that opinion with you. However, I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that there are not a few who profess to be sincere and are not.”

Professor:

“What sort of people do you mean?”

Priest:

“Well, for example, there’s our friend A. His neighbour, a Unitarian, makes him a visit. He rejects the divinity of Christ, and calls the religion of millions of Christians, for nineteen centuries and more, ‘a remnant of idolatry’, and A. has not a word of contradiction to offer.

“On his way to his place of business he meets an old friend, a Trinitarian, and is ready to agree with him that his belief in the divinity of Christ is the corner-stone of Christianity, and it is unworthy of an honest man to call himself a Christian and deny it.

“Another time he gets into conversation with a Quaker friend, who tells him that religion is entirely an affair between God and the soul, Christianity is exclusively spiritual, and that a priesthood, sacraments, ceremonies, are Jewish ordinances and mummeries, and he is inclined to think that quite an enlightened view of religion.

“Now he meets a high-church Episcopalian (or Anglican as they call them in Britain), who assures him that Christianity without a church, a priesthood, sacraments, and a ceremonial, is at best only a dream, and he begins to think of taking a pew in an Episcopal church.

“At an evening party he finds himself in company with infidels; they declare that all religion is an invention of priest-craft to keep men in darkness and to tyrannise over them, and by his silence he seems to assent to what they say.

“One morning, on his way to his bank, his friend, a Presbyterian or Methodist, gets him by the button-hole of his coat, and drags him off to a prayer-meeting. This man, on the theory that all religions are equally good if only one is sincere in his belief, cares not a toss of a penny for truth.

“Here is B., who is a faithful husband, a kind father, a warm friend, and an upright man in his dealings with his fellow-men. He is a man of good intentions, generous impulses, and a worthy citizen. ‘His heart’, as you would say, ‘is in the right place’. He wrongs no one. I retract; he does wrong, a grievous wrong, to himself, to his own soul. For what does he know of the great truths of divine revelation, and their claims upon his intelligence for recognition and belief? What does he know of the positive duties which he owes to his Creator and God? Scarcely anything.

“You can hardly say that this man is sincere. So far as he goes he is sincere, but his sincerity only goes half-way; it includes only his relations with this world. Let me ask what will it profit a man if he lives ever so well in the round of duties connected with this world, if he does not open his eyes to the next? Men do not perish when they die, like the beasts of the field.

“I said he wronged no one but himself — this was a mistake; he wrongs his wife, his children, his friends, his neighbours; he wrongs everybody, for to be a man and to be satisfied with a vague sentiment of religion, and not to have true personal relations with God; to inherit and enjoy the benefits of Christian civilisation and not share its duties and labour for its perpetuation and perfection; briefly, to be a man and not a Christian is a wrong to one’s own soul, to all society, the race, and to God!

“There is C., who has given some serious thoughts to religion. He has some doubts concerning some of its doctrines. He promised himself on his sick-bed, or at the death of a child, or a friend, or a parent, or a wife, that he would give to the subject the time and attention which its importance demands, and clear up his doubts. He has made some efforts to keep it. Books were bought, but there they lie on the table, or in his book-case, with their leaves uncut; he remains in ignorance and doubt, and probably will die so. He persuades himself he is sincere all the time, but never puts his sincerity to any use.

“There, too, is D., who is a great reader of the Bible; he knows its contents almost all by heart, and should you doubt the sincerity of his belief it would be taken as a gross insult to his Christian character.

“On the one side he reads of the humanity of Christ, and he accepts it; and, on the other, he reads of the divinity of Christ, and this he rejects. He finds in it that there is a heaven for the just, and he rejoices; and at the same time he reads that there is a hell for the unjust, and this he explains clean away. He learns by its pages that faith is necessary to salvation, and this becomes an article of his creed; while, in the same book, he is told that good works are equally necessary, and he calls them ‘filthy rags’. He reads that Christ pardoned sinners their sins, and feels consoled by it; and he reads also that Christ gave the power to pardon sins to His apostles, and he exclaims: ‘Oh, we do not interpret that text as you do!’ Does not all this mean that our friend D. sincerely believes what pleases him best, and not the truths God has revealed in Holy Writ?”

Merchant:

“Now that you bring it to my mind, it seems to me I have heard a good many persons talk just as you have described.”

Priest:

“Of course you have. Now, let me call your attention to the fact that all men who talk and think in this way make God a horrid monster. Is it not monstrous to give us minds that hunger for the truths, and then to be utterly careless whether we hold to truth or falsehood, whether our minds are benighted and besotted, or clear and sparkling with gems of thought?”

“Such a God would be like a parent who, being himself endowed with learning and advanced in culture, would let his children grow up in barbarous ignorance, not caring whether they spoke gibberish or spoke anything; or, like a father who would deliberately leave his tender little ones to wallow among swine and wander in wild wastes, unfed, unkempt, like the wild beasts.”

“No comparison, indeed, is strong enough to show the folly of such a notion of God. He Who is truth itself, like the sunlight, longs to illumine every eye, to shine in every mind, to impart to every soul His own mental image; to brighten and burnish that mirror, to keep it undimmed and untarnished, to see Himself reflected there, and to sport with it in the intellectual delights of wisdom. Indifference to religious truth is the foulest, basest weakness of a fallen and corrupt nature.”

Lawyer:

“I confess I never quite saw it in that way before, but your clear explanation makes me realise that indifference is criminal.”

Priest:

“Yes, and you realise that more clearly still in its consequences.

“There is our friend E.; he stoutly maintains that the Catholic Church is the old woman in scarlet, that the Pope is anti-Christ, that Catholics pay their priests for the pardon of their sins, give divine worship to the Blessed Virgin, the saints, and their relics; that an indulgence is a permission to commit sin, and the Pope has declared the Blessed Virgin equal to God!”

Merchant:

“That’s true, sir, every word of it; you have photographed my neighbour to a T.”

Priest:

“Now, your neighbour, will he listen to the refutation of the calumnies he has always been so ready to believe? Has he ever read a Catholic book to be rightly informed? Is he willing to do so?”

Merchant:

“Catch him reading a Catholic book! The other day he heard that a friend of his had joined the Catholic Church, and he tried to convince him of the errors of Popery, as he called it. I was present. He thought he would have an easy time of it; but, in the course of the discussion, he got the worse of it. But that did not hinder him from repeating afterward the same old story again.”

“In spite of the fact that his boy wrote to him from the Philippines to say how large and handsome the churches are, how devout the people, how modest the women, in spite of the good work he sees Catholics doing everywhere, in their schools and hospitals and asylums, he persists in thinking that figs and cherries grow on the thistle and the cactus plant.”

Lawyer:

“Father, it seems to me you can strengthen your argument in this way. A man is sincere when he carries a counterfeit note to the bank, but that does not give value to the note. The farmer who purchases a piece of shoddy goods is sincere in his desire to please his wife, Sarah, but his sincerity does not change shoddy goods to silk. The sick man who buys a quack remedy is sincere, but that does not impart curative properties to the molasses and water he has paid 50 cents for. You have made me realise that there is question of getting a coin of true value, cloth of sound quality and medicine that will cure of itself. Is not this what you Catholics contend for?”

Priest:

“Precisely so. Let me add another illustration or two.

“Ten men are shooting at a covey of birds. Only one has his gun loaded with bird shot.

Ten men propose to put a bridge across a canyon, only one has iron and wood, the rest have straw and wire.

Ten men promise to guide you across an unknown continent. Only one has a complete map.

“These examples teach the state of the case. It is at first like a puzzle picture: Find the man whose gun is properly loaded, who has the iron girders, who holds the map in his hand. All pretend to be huntsmen, bridge builders, guides. Only one really is.

“There must be ways and means of telling the truth from the false, and every honest and sincere man must study out the puzzle for himself. If he does not take pains to do so his sincerity is all sham.”

“Where, then, is there that pure love of truth in these sincere believers? Give me a man truly sincere, and you will find him not indifferent to the claims of truth, or shutting out the light of truth, or hugging error to escape the force of truth; but one open to conviction, earnest in search after truth, not content until he finds it, and, when found, embracing it, cost what it may, with his whole heart. Away with that sham and cant, which under the cloak of sincerity puts truth and error on the same footing, and makes the possession of truth a matter of no consequence!”

Professor:

“Do I understand you, sir, to say that the Catholic Church invites inquiry?”

Priest:

“That is precisely my meaning; and all that the Catholic Church fears is ignorance and the want of fidelity to truth when once known; in a word, the lack of sincerity where she is concerned.”
