

EDITOR'S NOTE

WHAT IS THE OPPOSITE OF WEAKNESS?

He seeks not the greatness found in sacrificial action but the convenience one discovers in a comfortable, serene state of mind.

(Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Lonely Man of Faith*)

What is Rome to Jerusalem? What have rabbis in common with Roman Catholic priests? Rabbis are family men; priests are sworn to celibacy. Priests are garbed in supernatural power; they hold the keys to the kingdom, hearing confession and forgiving sins, performing the mysterious miracle of the Eucharist. Rabbis are, literally, teachers. As servants of the community and resources for halakhic rulings they engage in exactly the same activities of Torah study and human kindness that they promote among their flock. All the same, rabbis and priests share a sociological niche as professional symbols of religion; they are often perceived similarly by the laity and often see themselves as likewise set apart.

Two of the great English Roman Catholic writers in the first half of the 20th century created fictional priests reflecting their spiritual concerns. First Father Brown, G.K. Chesterton's answer to Sherlock Holmes. Brown, as his name suggests, is outwardly unimpressive. He solves his crimes through a mixture of keen reasoned observation and profound understanding of human beings. Always, he says, he can enter the mind of the criminal tempted to commit the crime, and this insight puts him on the right track. Save for the expertise in human corruption provided by his endless hours in the confessional box, Father Brown's success has nothing to do with his vocation, and everything to do with the good sense characteristic of his outlook.

In Chesterton's day, as in our own, modern-minded people tended to disdain traditional religion in favor of "spirituality," especially of the oriental variety. In "The Red Moon of Meru" Lady Mounteagle admits she had once been prejudiced against "brown people" until she discovered their "wonderful spiritual powers." To which Father Brown ripostes: "Frankly, I don't care for spiritual powers much myself. I've got much more sympathy with spiritual weaknesses."

Father Brown here contrasts spiritual powers, of the sort that attract Lady Mounteagle, with spiritual weaknesses. He bluntly rebuffs her attraction to the external impressiveness through which the typical spiritual guru cultivates his superiority over his audience. At the same time he insinuates

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a positive message: proper attainment of holiness characteristically requires the struggle with the manifold weaknesses of the spirit. Often fascination with the occult is an escape from that everyday struggle. In the story his interest in human weakness may have been rewarded by the prosaic repentance of a thief.

Graham Greene's famous priest is as different from Father Brown as the two authors are from each other. Chesterton is cheerful; Greene is morose; Chesterton's imagination is uproariously comic; Greene's is tormented. The Mexican priest in Greene's masterpiece *The Power and the Glory* remains nameless. Rather than solve crimes in the comfortable manner of an English amateur detective he is himself an outlaw, hunted by the revolutionary Socialist government in the 1930's bent on extirpating the faith he continues to propagate. During the long years of persecution, he has sought comfort in drink and, distracted, has fathered a daughter. He cannot forget that the police, bent on his capture, take hostages, and kill them, wherever they suspect he has been sheltered. The priest sees himself as failure and a disgrace, unworthy of the sacrifice he has occasioned. Yet his fitful attempts at escape come to nothing. Each time he is summoned to administer last rites, he turns back sourly, captive to his vocation.

The serene wisdom of Father Brown and the haunted shadow of the whisky priest both belong to a world infinitely distant from the shabby stories of abuse that have inflicted such harm on the Catholic Church and, to a lesser degree, caused immense pain and consternation in our own community. To explain why, let me cite George Weigl, a prominent Catholic public intellectual who had access to confidential documents in the aftermath of the pedophilia scandals 15 years ago. Discussing one of the most prolific offenders, who had been assigned numerous courses of therapy and then recycled to a new and unsuspecting parish, Weigl comments:

It was also striking that the 1995 "spiritual assessment" of John Geoghan by St. Luke's Institute did not probe the man's beliefs, even at the elementary level: Did Geoghan believe in God? Did he believe that God can make his will known to us? Did he accept the creeds of the Church and the Church's teaching on sexual ethics? Did he believe in sin? In punishment for sin?... What is even more striking, however, is the seeming assumption by the priest-interviewer... that these questions of belief have absolutely nothing to do with the "spiritual assessment" of a clerical sexual predator. Here was the triumph of the therapeutic at its most disturbing.¹

¹ George Weigl, *The Courage to be Catholic: Crisis, Reform and the Future of the Church* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 103ff.

There is no doubt about how either Father Brown or the whisky priest would have answered questions about their beliefs. What makes Greene's priest a religious character rather than a fictionalized case history is the fact that he understands exactly what it means to be a human being created in the image of God with an immortal soul to save or forfeit and what it means to have consecrated one's life to the priestly vocation. In a word, their lives are lived in the full awareness that God's demands on us are absolute and non-negotiable.

Weigl goes on to imply a link between the laxity of the church hierarchy and its failure to insist resolutely on the primacy of church teaching over a mechanical therapeutic mercifulness. The accuracy of his allegations is an internal Catholic matter that need not detain us. Historians of Protestantism, noting the sexual shenanigans involving notable charismatic evangelical figures in cycles of scandal and recovery, might likewise point a finger at their mild-mannered undemanding conception of God. One could go back to the root of liberal Protestantism in 19th century Brooklyn, with the famed minister Henry Ward Beecher, celebrated for emancipating American religion from the strict authoritarian God of his father, and even more notorious for carrying on with other men's wives.²

One might downplay the importance of religious commitment regarding these questions by arguing that human nature is the same in every place and time and that deviant psychology does not differentiate among religious affiliations. Halakha and common sense regulate the opportunities for sexual transgression precisely because our desires so often defy our mastery. The current scandals are rooted as much, if not more, in fantasies of power than in carnal lust. The abusiveness rife where dominant individuals or cliques within an institution become a law unto themselves, and victims are unable to fight back or even protest, is nothing new, nor is it a phenomenon particularly tied to organized religion. Yet, despite these points, it seems incredible to hold that the presence or absence of bedrock religious faith is irrelevant to behavior and even more so that it is irrelevant to the way the religious community reacts to grievously deviant behavior. Nor is it plausible that those inclined to such behavior are not affected by the general moral and doctrinal atmosphere.

² See Richard Wightman Fox, *Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) and Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2006).

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It goes without saying that there are Jewish counterparts to Weigl's questions and that God makes categorical and non-negotiable demands of Orthodox clergy and laity alike. When abusive behavior was hushed up by those in charge the common explanation was that the guilty individual is "doing wonderful work," meaning that he is personally magnetic and attracts those under his influence to identification with what is popularly called the "Orthodox life style," or that we have a manpower shortage. To ask about belief and depth of commitment to God's absolute demands after the fact, when the offending individual's actions have already spoken, is indeed practically irrelevant. How individuals have reached that point should not be ignored, especially if we care about fostering health rather than merely quarantining spiritual disease. We enter religious life and adopt it as a profession for a variety of motives. We may have wished to identify with the Jewish people and foster Jewish identity or to help Jews and humanity. We may have desired a way of life that allows us to learn and teach. We may have been influenced by family traditions and expectations. Or we fell into a way of life without thinking about it much. In the end, as time and suffering and joy do their work, our lives invariably outstrip or fall short of our initial motivations, to the extent we understand them. Yet regardless of our initial motives, we know that it requires discipline and sacrifice and struggle, although we can hardly anticipate the exact form temptation will take and what will be required of us to withstand it.

What is the opposite of weakness? Father Brown implies that the opposite of the charismatic deployment of "spiritual powers" is attention to spiritual weaknesses. The title of Greene's novel contrasts power, as exercised by the police lieutenant, with the ambiguous glory of the flawed but faithful priest. The opposite of power may be weakness. But the opposite of weakness is not power. The opposite of weakness is strength and strength means steadfastness; it means keeping faith.

The difference between our struggles today and the world of Greene's priest is that our culture no longer takes as a given the absolute non-negotiable character of the divine command. As in previous times, many successfully lead sheltered lives, relatively free of temptation. Others, however, are put to the test. Rabbis and religious teachers are especially vulnerable in contemporary society, if only because we are more keenly aware of the gap between nominal adherence to Orthodox standards, where it still exists, and the conviction of divine command and divine mission. As R. Soloveitchik recognized in the middle of the last century, our

audience “seeks not the greatness found in sacrificial action but the convenience one discovers in a comfortable, serene state of mind.” The blank stare of indifference, the smile of condescension, even the stupidity of an intended compliment that betrays utter miscomprehension, make us wonder what we are doing and to what purpose. In such circumstances one is liable to feel belittled and estranged, summoned to heroism or driven to despair.

Where commitment is steadfast the individual can withstand failure and indifference and keep true to his mission. Where it is not, religious functionaries are exposed to the same temptations that plague other modern men and women. Moreover, because their profession sets them apart from the rest of society, they may imagine compensating for disappointment and futility, bitterly, almost vengefully, by relying on an aptitude for power and domination over others, or by overvaluing such gifts in colleagues. Or they may want to numb the pain of isolation by reaching out for the transient pleasures of the flesh and the illusion of contact, with the vague fancy that God is distant and indifferent.

For as long as we can remember the social environment has been inhospitable to “men of faith” without breaking their integrity and self-discipline. In the past these men, particularly those in the rabbinate, may not have enjoyed great success in recruiting congregants: often they lacked the language and education; always the social odds were against them. For the most part they enjoyed such encouragement as their families could provide and their colleagues were reachable by post. Like Father Brown, these men did not thrive through the deployment of “spiritual powers.” Unlike Father Brown, they constructed lonely citadels of strength and steadfastness not in fiction but in real life, contending not against fictional evil but with all too painful indifference.

I have spoken of faithfulness in terms of unshakable adherence to doctrines and convictions. Let me make it clear that this is not a matter of being able to produce the correct answers to the kind of questions Weigl asks, as if knowing the “approved” positions and repeating them upon demand conferred immunity to faithlessness in practice. No segment of our community is free of guilt, neither the liberals who openly make light of rigorous obligations of belief and behavior, nor those who uphold the most punctilious standards in theory, even while quietly regarding gross violations in their circles as “negotiable” offenses. It is the seriousness of belief and principles that is at risk, rather than merely their precise content.

To forestall misunderstanding, let me also iterate that my intention is not to offer a theory about the causes of rabbinic irresponsibility and abuse. My remarks here are about our spiritual condition rather than

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about causes. To borrow an old philosophical example: fire results when a match is lit, but there will be no fire unless there is oxygen to support the flame: the match is the cause; the oxygen is a condition. Abusive attitudes and behavior and subsequent cover-ups vary with the individual. My concern here is with the religious-moral state of our community and what we ought to do to sustain our steadfastness and integrity.

When I consider what I and my generation needs in order to be strong and steadfast in our commitment to the *Ribbono shel Olam* I am ever inspired by the written record of vigorous study left behind by some of the lonely American *Rabbanim* mentioned above. Last Elul, for example, I studied the newly printed *Moadei Tsevi* by R. Tsvi Hirsh Grodzinski, a rabbi with the best Lithuanian training who served the Jews of Omaha, Nebraska from 1891 to 1948 (57 years!). One section of his book is a practical responsum on the halakhic validity of *hazarat ha-shatz* of Rosh ha-Shana *musaf* when the cantor does not trouble himself to recite the passages assigned to the choir. Side by side with this no doubt dispiriting query is a trenchant analysis of the *sugya* dealing with the institution of *hazarat ha-shatz*. Although his day to day experience as an American rabbi was frustrating, R. Grodzinski's intelligence and calm persistent strength of character speak from his writings. To think of how such men lived is a prophylactic against faithlessness and self-indulgence and a reminder of what we are here for.

The highest level of friendship, as Rambam stated in his commentary to *Avot*, following Aristotle, is that of individuals who share a sublime goal, where one helps the other. If we want to restore the integrity of our religious community, it is important that we seek friends, and become friends, whose entire conduct is a mutual reminder of the existence of absolute and non-negotiable divine demands. If we create such a community, we will not be isolated when we pose to ourselves Weigl's questions about fundamental conviction and commitment.

The whiskey priest is not so fortunate. He yearns for the sacrament of confession and absolution, even at the hands of Padre José, a weak man who has been forced to marry, and is exhibited as an object of mockery and humiliation. Even such a coward is a priest, and even he might help his fellow priest confront his sins and achieve contrition. But Padre José is afraid to come, even when the police lieutenant promises he will not be punished. The whiskey priest spends his last night alone.

He caught sight of his own shadow on the cell wall: it had a look of surprise and grotesque unimportance. What a fool he had been to think that he was strong enough to stay when others fled. What an impossible

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fellow I am, he thought, and how useless. I have done nothing for anybody. I might just as well have never lived. His parents were dead—soon he wouldn't even be a memory—perhaps after all he wasn't really Hell-worthy. Tears poured down his face; he was not at the moment afraid of damnation—even the fear of pain was in the background. He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him at that moment that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage. He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint.

It would be good for us as individuals and good for the people we serve if we kept R. Grodzinski's example of dignity, integrity, and lonely persistence before our eyes as a guide and inspiration and source of strength. It would be good if Greene's novel about the whisky priest and his hard-earned deathbed insight helped us to keep the model of religious steadfastness in mind before we become enmeshed in temptation and despair.