Despair and the Secular Saint

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Brevity, integrity, honesty are terms of high praise. For many moderns, they are the only absolutes, the virtues which make for a kind of secular sanctity.

Because the secular saint is brave there are many things of which he can boast. The proudest of his boasts is the renunciation of all hope, the rejection of all salvation. This is indeed a dark mystery, full of a twisted sacredness and black impenetrability. It is the very want of light, the holy gloom of life, that makes the philosophy of the secular saint, so he thinks, nearer the truth. For him truth is his own body. He thinks of the pleasures of the flesh as, for him, the ultimate escape. Don't take refuge in any acceptance.

He tends to consider his easy morals a truer kind of chastity, more fundamental, more sensitive, richer. He looks upon the virtue of the faithful spouse and the continent as a commonplace vulgarity. They are, he is sure, all honorable men, but basically captives of an illusion. The moral restraint, the security of an ordered life, the sense of direction, the clean-cut, bright-eyed optimism of the Christian is for the secular saint the joy of the ignorant. He looks with pity on the immense innocence with which the Christian lives out his life, this child who gives meaning to life and purpose to death.

What distinguishes the secular saint from the Christian, however, is not the level of elevated animality on which he lives. It is his proud defiance of accepted norms. It is his mysticism of despair. At this point his sanctity begins, and, having gone full circle, here it ends. The bestic vision of despair is man's final goal. Only the honest, the brave, the heroes of sensitivity are admitted to this dark vision, those who have the courage to live without the comfort of morality, those brave enough to face the terrors of life without meaning and death without hope.

But there are other secular saints whose despair is not the posturing of little boys. They are mature, truly sincere and honest. Their despair, they know, is real and they have the intelligence to accept and to cry out against it. Representative of this group is the Nobel Prize winner, Albert Camus. A character in one of his plays says, "To lose one's life is a little thing and I shall have the courage to do it if necessary; but to see the meaning of this life dissipated, to see our reason for existence disappear, that is what is unbearable. One cannot live without meaning." Camus does not yet know the meaning of life. His despair is, however, a seeking for meaning. He does not possess the right answer, but he has not forgotten the proper question: what is life without meaning? Death without hope?

The secular saint's despair, identification of ruthlessness with truthfulness, contempt for the respectable preoccupations of other men, are not without value. They throw light on the virtue of hope. Man left to himself, as the secular saint bears tragic witness, is quite apt to get involved in a defiant pessimism. He does not attain hope, the promise of future beatitude. That is what S. Thomas meant when he said that a purely human hope "falls short of the notion of virtue." Hope is a virtue only when it comes from God, like faith and charity. Hope is a divine virtue because only God can give it. Hope is not an easy answer to the question of life and death. St. Thomas says, "Hope implies a certain imperfection." The imperfection of the Christian's life in the world will cause him anguish. This he must face with honesty and bravery. The imperfection of the present life will also make him look forward to the Perfect Life, which God Himself. The virtue of hope gives him a divine certainty, as strong as God's strength, as unchangeable as God's word, that life has meaning, that death is purpose, that the joy the Lord will be his.