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CHAPTER I. *PRESUPPOSITIONS*

These pages have been written in response to a generous invitation from the Cambridge University Press. I have been asked to try to give English readers some idea of the present state of religion in America. The invitation is gracious; the assignment difficult. America lacks the homogeneity of England, and generalizations about so mixed a people and so complex a society are always open to exceptions. Comprehensive precision will be impossible, and pedantry should require a battery of footnotes at the bottom of every page, if the text is to be faithful to the many diverse facts.

Moreover, no American can pretend to know his land intimately in its length and breadth. Residentially he is the citizen of a single state. The Declaration of Independence, referring to the thirteen rebel colonies of 1776, mentions not the nation, but 'these States'. The resultant doctrine of states' rights was for ninety years thereafter vigorously defended in theory. This right was held to involve ultimately that of secession from the Union. The issue, so long open to equivocal interpretation, was settled only with the conclusion of the Civil War. Since then it has been inconceivable that any single state or group of states should reassert what was once held to be the right to secede from the Union. For political purposes the nation is, in words taught to every school child in the land, 'one and indivisible'.

Nevertheless, old sentiments and affections linger on, though shorn of their one-time menace to the federal government. Pride of state and pride in one's own state are still familiar and powerful forces in American life. It is with us very much as it is with the members of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. A single college is the dwelling place for its fellows and students, who meet the university only in its 'federal' capacity. So it is with the American. For many of the purposes of his daily life he is primarily a citizen of Massachusetts or Missouri. Most of the laws which prescribe the pattern within which his life has been lived thus far are state rather than federal laws. Not only do the codes of these states, both civil and criminal, vary; their *mores*

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vary even more. The senator from Kentucky would not wish to be confused with the senator from Connecticut. Even the wayfaring man must have his wits about him on his transcontinental journey. The Sabbath laws and the sumptuary laws change from state to state, and the traveller's mild indulgences *en route* must be accommodated to the practice of the state through which he may happen to be passing.

Such parochialism is not to be wholly deplored. England knows it well, and treasures it. The Cornish fisherman and the Lancashire weaver are not indistinguishable, the one from the other. It would be an unhappy thing for England were they ever to become identical. Reflecting on the Revolution in France, and pleading against the vague abstractions of the social contract, Edmund Burke defended the provincial loyalties of the Anglo-Saxon: 'To be attached to the sub-division, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of publick affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind.'

Much of the best recent writing in America, as English readers well enough know, has been prompted by a penetrating and affectionate sectionalism. The old hymn 'America' professed a love for the country's 'rocks and rills, its woods and templed hills'. Such sentiments served well enough as long as America still lay to the east of the Appalachian Mountains. They lost their relevance as people went west. There are no templed hills in the plains, nor any rills in the dust bowls. Another medium has had to be found to express the folkways of Kansas and Texas. We have even welcomed the help of sensitive visitors like Mr Priestley in making Santa Fé and Taos vocal after their long, mute years. If the mechanical progress and the political drift of the times seem to be standardizing the country, much of our contemporary art is moving in the other direction toward a meticulous particularity. Willa Cather's *Death Comes to the Archbishop* is thus, in new and non-political terms, an affirmation of the state's rights of New Mexico.

As no American who knows and loves England would wish to see the rich variety of its local dialects overlaid and finally obliterated by the passionless neutrality of a BBC broadcaster's

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voice, so, we may hope, no Englishman would ask, for the sake of easy generalities about America, that the ways of New Orleans should be accommodated to those of Duluth, or the mind of a Wyoming cattle ranger merged with that of a Maine fisherman, to yield some single synthetic American mentality. Given a national crisis all Americans are now aware of their community of interest. But, as with 'the Solid South', so with other parts of the country, sectionalism is a stubborn fact both politically and culturally.

This fact conditions, and in a measure defeats, all attempts to generalize as to American religion. The country was in colonial times diverse in its origins, and immigration during the subsequent years of our national independence, so far from clarifying the situation, has only complicated it. Statements as to the predominant type of Church life and moral custom which might be true 'at the North' have less relevance in the South. The historic Congregationalism of New England, one of the major religious traditions in American life, means almost nothing below the Mason and Dixon line. Baptists are in the ascendancy there. The Episcopal Church flourishes in the cities, but, save in states like Virginia, it is not a convention in the country districts. The Society of Friends, a body influential and honoured among us as with you, is intensely local in its meetings, being concentrated in a few areas rather than spread thin over the whole land. The Mormons have made Utah their homeland: for five hundred parishes in that state they have only five in Massachusetts. Scandinavian Lutheranism which is a commonplace in Minnesota is all but unknown in Maryland, one solitary church of the Augustana Synod defending the faith in that state. These facts are not an accident, save as all history is accidental; they have their origins in the arrival and the subsequent movement of immigrant groups from the days of the *Mayflower* to the days of the 'ram-you-damn-you-liner' with its crowded steerage. No single consistent account of the total situation can be given; no one pass-key to its elusive meaning can be found.

Likewise, no single writer can hope to be fair to all concerned. As it is the nature of every religion to seek to universalize itself, so it is the habit of the individual believer to impute to others the

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forms of his own faith and practice. These pages cannot hope to be free of that tendency of the human mind. Furthermore, familiarity with some one scene native and most familiar to him makes it difficult for a man to deny his mental second nature and enter fully into the religious life of some distant part of the country. We are a mobile and migrant people, dwellers in flats and apartments. 'Moving Day' is a recognized national festival, but the day of long moves is over. Our moves are from one block in the city to another, or from this farm to the next but one. (Exception must be made to allow for the temporary dislocation of our population, due to the industrial needs of war-time.) Therefore, what can he know of Oklahoma who only Vermont knows? It is a bold venture for a writer sitting at a desk in a college town in Massachusetts to attempt to interpret the religion or the irreligion of a mining community in Montana. The genteel practices of his church, with their cultural presuppositions, unfit him for that task. Therefore, what is said hereafter in these pages may deceive and in some measure satisfy readers in another land who think of America as a uniformly consistent whole; it can neither deceive nor satisfy those whose intimate knowledge of other places and other ways within the land prompts an instinctive feeling of resentment because they feel themselves either ignored or misrepresented. With the best will in the world any attempt such as this is doomed to failure from the start. It will be provincial and partisan. How shall a New England Congregationalist feel the inwardness of the life of the Amish Mennonites in Pennsylvania, who for religious reasons fasten their garments with hooks and eyes rather than with buttons, or hope to convey the profound intimations of the *mysterium tremendum* suggested by the sight of a Dunker foot-washing in some cloistered community in Kansas?

Nevertheless, when these reservations have been made and duly entered, it remains true that the total fact of America has done something to every one of the religions which have migrated here. No one of them now is the exact counterpart of its parent body in Europe. Be it the climate or the Constitution, some subtle change has taken place. The text of creeds, confessions, and liturgies may still be the same, but the accent with

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which they are spoken is not that of the Old World. The characteristic nasal twang may now be heard.

Non-English languages of continental origin survive in our churches longer than they survive anywhere else, but they hardly outlast two generations. Grandparents may still use in church the native tongue of their fatherland; the grandchildren in a Sunday School are contemptuous of their non-assimilated elders and clamour for that English which makes and marks them citizens of their own country. With one or two exceptions, all of the major forms of organized religious life in America are of European origin. Yet they are not literal transcripts of that past. They represent subtle restatements of the elder faith and practice, occasioned and in some measure required by the process of their transplanting. The most universal church in the Western World is, by common confession, the Roman Catholic. Its universality rests upon its *quod ubique*, *quod semper*, *quod ab omnibus*. Yet this ancient canon, still theoretically in force, has not saved our Catholicism from American restatement. This great Church, numerically the strongest single religious body in the States, is in some ways the most vocally American of all our many denominations. The Irish priest with us, despite his age-old Missal and his unvarying Mass, is not the same man as the parish priest back home. He may remain consciously and devoutly Catholic, but he does not hesitate to speak boldly of 'American Catholicism', even though the words theoretically imply a contradiction in terms.

The slow process of assimilation and accommodation is still unfinished, indeed so unfinished that a British visitor not long ago was prompted to say that America is not a melting-pot at all, she is merely a varnishing pot, from which a thin veneer of seventeenth-century English Puritanism has been laid over the most diverse religious traditions. Nevertheless, the process goes on. It has already gone so far that when an ecumenical religious conference is convened, American delegates from our many local denominations find that, despite their differences, they are strangely nearer to one another than they are to the communions with which, by origin, they are severally identified in the Old World. The fact of their common Americanism is more strongly

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felt than are the ecclesiastical ties which bind them severally to their parent bodies in Europe. Whether this common quality has any religious meanings is an open question. It may be nothing more than a subtly pervasive secularity; it may be the portent of some new thing. Of the felt fact, however, felt by us most strongly when we forgather in some other land, there is no doubt.

These things being so, it is possible to make certain preliminary generalizations as to the religion of America, which will not do violence to the prodigality of the facts. These generalizations, which will be taken up and developed one by one as the record progresses, furnish our immediate point of departure.

I

The most important difference between the religious life of England and that of America is the continued existence in England of the Established Church, and the total absence in America of anything like an establishment. Let it be granted at once that in this respect the temper of English life is changing rapidly, and that what Henry James once called 'the fine old ecclesiastical arrogance' of all European establishments is now in England largely ancient history. Americans are well aware of the present relations between official Anglicanism and the non-Anglican bodies. The steps which England has taken in the field of inter-church action, and the lead which she has given—an action and a lead which the present crisis has perhaps compelled her to take in the interest of all that is meant by Christianity—are matters of common knowledge on this side of the Atlantic.

Nevertheless, it remains true that church and chapel are not culturally the same thing in England, and even were disestablishment to come to-morrow, the distinction would persist in memory and usage. The bishops entitled to sit in the House of Lords may not be in constant and faithful attendance at its sessions, yet the right remains. No American ecclesiastic has by virtue of his office any right whatsoever to a seat in the Senate of the United States. The parish church in an English village often carries on its walls a tablet bearing the names of all members of the parish, whatever their religious profession, who died in the first World War. That is the fit and recognized place for their

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corporate remembrance, even though individual memorials may also be accorded some of them in their own dissenting chapels. An American Unitarian visiting the little country churches in England twenty years ago said that he felt, in the presence of these memorials, as he had never felt before, the validity and the effectualness of an establishment, and thus the historic appeal of the Church of England to a whole people. There is no denominational church in any American community which may properly erect any such memorial for the young men of village or town. Each may memorialize only its own particular members. The slightest attempt on the part of any one parish church to seem to represent the community as a whole would be instantly repudiated as an unwarranted assumption of rights, wholly un-American. Any such total roster is therefore self-exiled from the churches and relegated to the town hall or to a plaque in some central square.

Hence the words Nonconformity and Dissent are meaningless in America. There is no politically privileged church to dissent from and no one body to which the sectarian may fail to conform. Granted that the last of the secular grievances of English Nonconformists are now gone, it is impossible to deny the background of the Establishment before which the action still takes place. The City Temple, before its sad destruction, was not the Abbey, and the difference, felt even by the uninitiated American visitor, was not a mere matter of architecture. The serene self-assurance, in the best sense of that word, of the Abbey is unlike the baffling compound of modesty and self-assertiveness in a Nonconformist chapel. There still is, unless a visitor's impressions are wholly in error, a cultural rather than a doctrinal or liturgical gulf between the offices in a parish church of the English Establishment, and the ceremonies, or deliberate lack of ceremony, in a Dissenting meeting house. Theology may be less able than once it was to describe, define and validate the doctrinal distinctions between church and chapel, but the words still have different connotations.

Be these matters as they may, and it is perhaps rash of the foreigner to comment on them, no Englishman can hope to understand religion in America, unless he rids his mind of the

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idea of an Established Church and of the consequent distinction between the church and the sect, and then tries to remake his thinking after another pattern. The truth is that America has little idea of 'the Church' in anything like its actual or its ideal catholicity; we know only churches. It is of these churches that Henry James was speaking in the passage from his *American Scene* which yielded the phrase just quoted.

> Looking for the moment no more established or seated than a stopped omnibus, they are reduced to the inveterate bourgeois level, and fatally despoiled of the fine old ecclesiastical arrogance. The field of American life is as bare of the Church as a billiard table of a centerpiece; a truth that the myriad little structures 'attended' on Sundays and on the 'off' evenings of their 'sociables' proclaims as with the audible sound of the roaring of a million mice. When an ancient treasure of precious vessels, overscored with glowing gems and wrought artistically into wondrous shapes, has, by a prodigious process, been converted into a vast community of small change, the simple circulating medium of dollars and 'nickels', we can only say that the consequent permeation will be of values of a new order. Of *what* order we must wait to see.[1]

By inference one may read out of these words Henry James's personal preference for the finer forms of the elder arrogance. His words sound, on our side of the Atlantic, a little ungenerous, too afraid of what Henry Adams once called 'the degradation of the democratic dogma'. For our present purpose his picturesque over-statement may be conceded. America is naked of 'the Church' in the historic sense of that word, as Europe has known it and used it. The place of the church is taken by 'denominations'.

Lord Bryce in his *American Commonwealth*, a generous and accurate book on which we still depend for an understanding of ourselves, cites the separation of church and state as being the distinguishing feature of American religious life. Not merely does he enter the fact; he evidently approves of its effects:

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[1] *The American Scene*, by Henry James, p. 327. Harper & Brothers, New York, 1907.

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> Of all the differences between the Old World and the New this is perhaps the most salient. Half the wars of Europe, half the internal troubles that have vexed European States, from the Monophysite controversies in the Roman Empire of the fifth century down to the Kulturkampf in the German Empire of the nineteenth, have arisen from theological differences or from the rival claims of church and state. This whole vast chapter of debate and strife has remained virtually unopened in the United States. There is no Established Church. All religious bodies are absolutely equal before the law, and unrecognized by the law, except as voluntary associations of private citizens.... So far from suffering from the want of State support, religion seems in the United States to stand all the firmer because, standing alone, she is seen to stand by her own strength.[1]

II

The next thing to be said of American religious life as a whole is that, in contrast to that of the Old World, it is rankly individualistic. According to the polity of Congregationalism (i.e. Independency), which was the pattern for church life in the New England colonies, any group of like-minded and professed believers have the right to organize themselves into a church, which is in matters of both faith and practice a law unto itself. The Bishop of Gloucester, a candid though not unfriendly critic of America, has often said in the spoken word and in print that, from the standpoint of church life in England, all churches in America, whatever their polity, are congregational. Once again there is an element of deliberate overstatement in this judgment, but there is also an element of truth. We shall have occasion later to comment on the actual number of Americans organized into churches on this polity, as of their effect upon churches theoretically organized upon a wider and more comprehensive basis.

Meanwhile, it is true that when the average American thinks of his church, he thinks not of the communion to which that church belongs, much less of any Holy Church Universal, but of the four walls of the building where he worships on Sunday and of the group of familiar friends and neighbours whom he

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[1] *The American Commonwealth*, by James Bryce, vol. II, pp. 763–78. The Macmillan Company, New York, 1913.

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meets there. The idea of the church has for him an intensely 'local habitation'. Even his denomination, which must constantly be preached to him as a larger truth, means less to him than the particular parish which for him represents that truth. It is only by a deliberate act of the imagination, bringing some kind of order and common concern out of the chaos of denominationalism, that he is able to envisage, even remotely, what is meant by the Church Universal. In America the seamless robe seems to have been shredded into so many rags and tatters that it is beyond recovery. A Christian must make shift with the particular fragment which has fallen to his lot. The great ecumenical conferences of recent years have made constant use of the majestic term *Una Sancta*. Even though the American delegate to such gatherings may be able to muster enough far-off Latin to understand the reference, the words sound remote. They are an abstraction, a vague hypothesis. There is nothing in his American experience to correspond to them. His heart does not kindle at the thought, and he is sceptical as to the possibility either of recovering an ancient reality now lost or of creating some fresh reality never as yet achieved.

This intense individualism of American life must not be identified as an excess of personal piety. We are probably neither more pious nor less pious than church members elsewhere in the modern world. Nor is there among us anything of the solitariness of the mystic, with his 'flight of the alone to the Alone'. The American is sociable and gregarious. He does not like solitariness or the solitudes. Therefore the strong strain of individualism in his religion is not, in the first instance, religiously conditioned. It is merely a transcript of what has been until most recent times an accepted phase of American life as a whole, to be understood and interpreted not in the authentic terms of the hermit tempers, but in the terms of the self-reliance of single individuals who have been pioneering for three centuries on a frontier. Rufus Jones, the beloved and honoured American Quaker, likes to tell of the farmer who was showing a visitor his well-tilled acres. The visitor said, 'It is wonderful what God and man can do together when running a farm.' 'Yes', said his host, 'but you should have seen this farm when God was running it alone.'