

A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

(1928)

In the autumn of 1927, G. S. Viereck, a German-American journalist who had paid me a welcome visit, published an account of a conversation with me, in the course of which he mentioned my lack of religious faith and my indifference on the subject of survival after death. This 'interview, as it was called, was widely read and brought me, among others, the following letter from an American physician:

' . . . What struck me most was your answer to the question whether you believe in a survival of personality after death. You are reported as having said: "I give no thought to the matter."

'I am writing now to tell you of an experience that I had in the year I graduated at the University of X. One afternoon while I was passing through the dissecting-room my attention was attracted to a sweet-faced dear old woman who was being carried to a dissecting-table. This sweet-faced woman made such an impression on me that a thought flashed up in my mind: "There is no God: if there were a God he would not have allowed this dear old woman to be brought into the dissecting room."

'When I got home that afternoon the feeling I had had at the sight in the dissecting-room had determined me to discontinue going to church. The doctrines of Christianity had before this been the subject of doubts in my mind.

'While I was meditating on this matter a voice spoke to my soul that "I should consider the step I was about to take". My spirit replied to this inner voice by saying, "If I knew of a certainty that Christianity was truth and the Bible was the Word of God, then I would accept it."

'In the course of the next few days God made it clear to my soul that the Bible was His Word, that the teachings about Jesus Christ were true, and that Jesus was our only hope. After such a clear revelation I accepted the Bible as God's Word and Jesus Christ as my personal Saviour. Since then God has revealed Himself to me by many infallible proofs.

'I beg you as a brother physician to give thought to this most important matter, and I can assure you, if you look into this subject with an open mind, God will reveal the truth to your soul, the same as he did to me and to multitudes of others. . . .'

9 I sent a polite answer, saying that I was glad to hear that this experience had enabled him to retain his faith. As for myself, God had not done so much for me. He had never allowed me to hear an inner voice; and if, in view of my age, he did not make haste, it would not be my fault if I remained to the end of my life what I now was - 'an infidel Jew'.

In the course of a friendly reply, my colleague gave me an assurance that being a Jew was not an obstacle in the pathway to true faith and proved this by several instances. His letter culminated in the information that prayers were being earnestly addressed to God that he might grant me 'faith to believe'.

I am still awaiting the outcome of this intercession. In the meantime, my colleague's religious experience provides food for thought. It seems to me to demand some attempt at an interpretation based upon emotional motives; for his experience is puzzling in itself and is based on particularly bad logic. God, as we know, allows horrors to take place of a kind very different from the removal to a dissecting-room of the dead body of a pleasant-looking old woman. This has been true at all times, and it must have been so while my American colleague was pursuing his studies. Nor, as a medical student, can he have been so sheltered from the world as to have known nothing of such evils. Why was it, then, that his indignation against God broke out precisely when he received this particular impression in the dissecting-room?

For anyone who is accustomed to regard men's internal experiences and actions analytically the explanation is very obvious - so obvious that it actually crept into my recollections of the facts themselves. Once, when I was referring to my pious colleague's letter in the course of a discussion, I spoke of his having written that the dead woman's face had reminded him of his own mother. In fact these words were not in his letter, and a moment's reflection will show that they could not possibly have been. But that is the explanation irresistibly forced on us by his affectionately phrased description of the 'sweet-faced dear old woman'. Thus the weakness of judgement displayed by the young doctor is to be accounted for by the emotion roused in him by the memory of his mother. It is difficult to escape from the bad psycho-analytic habit of bringing forward as evidence details which also allow of more superficial explanations - and I am tempted to recall the fact that my colleague addressed me later as a 'brother physician'.

We may suppose, therefore, that this was the way in which things happened. The sight of a woman's dead body, naked or on the point of being stripped, reminded the young man of his mother. It roused in him a longing for his mother which sprang from his Oedipus complex, and this was immediately completed by a feeling of indignation against his father. His ideas of 'father' and 'God' had not yet become widely separated; so that his desire to destroy his father could become conscious as doubt in the existence of God and could seek to justify itself in the eyes of reason as indignation about the ill-treatment of a mother object. It is of course typical for a child to regard what his father does to his mother in sexual intercourse as ill-treatment. The new impulse, which was displaced into the sphere of religion, was only a repetition of the Oedipus situation and consequently soon met with a similar fate. It succumbed to a powerful opposing current. During the actual conflict the level of displacement was not maintained: there is no mention of arguments in justification of God, nor are we told what the infallible signs were by which God proved his existence to the doubter. The conflict seems to have been unfolded in the form of a hallucinatory psychosis: inner voices were heard which

uttered warnings against resistance to God. But the outcome of the struggle was displayed once again in the sphere of religion and it was of a kind predetermined by the fate of the Oedipus complex: complete submission to the will of God the Father. The young man became a believer and accepted everything he had been taught since his childhood about God and Jesus Christ. He had had a religious experience and had undergone a conversion.

All of this is so simple and straightforward that we cannot but ask ourselves whether by understanding this case we have thrown any light at all on the psychology of conversion in general. I may refer the reader to an admirable volume on the subject by Sante de Sanctis (1924), which incidentally takes all the findings of psycho-analysis into account. Study of this work confirms our expectation that by no means every case of conversion can be understood so easily as this one. In no respect, however, does our case contradict the views arrived at on the subject by modern research. The point which our present observation throws into relief is the manner in which the conversion was attached to a particular determining event, which caused the subject's scepticism to flare up for a last time before being finally extinguished.