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GIMME THAT OLD TIME RELIGION: JOHN CROWE RANSOM AND WILL D. CAMPBELL AS CRITICS OF AMERICAN RELIGION

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It is a truism to say that the South has been and remains one of the most conservative -- politically and religiously conservative -- regions in the nation. Whereas in the past when one spoke of religion in the South the Scopes trial may have come immediately to mind, today it is school textbook controversies or the contemporary version of circuit riding evangelists, the televangelists, mighty and fallen. Among these are religious broadcaster Pat Robertson of Virginia Beach, Jerry Falwell of Lynchburg, Virginia, Oral Roberts of Tulsa, Jim Bakker (not himself a Southerner) and the Fort Mill, South Carolina, based PTL Club, and Jimmy Swaggart of Baton Rouge. Though these names are familiar, it is too seldom recognized that within Southern religion there are trenchant critics who are as loyal to their Southern identity as they are unforgiving of American -- not just Southern -- religion.

I want to look briefly at two of these Southern critics of American religion, John Crowe Ransom and Will D. Campbell. Widely disparate in terms of vocations, socio-economic backgrounds, and theological commitments, these two men, separated by three decades, nevertheless think of themselves as Southerners and offer a Southern analysis of the ills of American religion. They engage in identical task, to use Biblical language, the task of naming the powers, the invisible forces of evil which manifest themselves in human institutions. And they are in at least partial agreement as to the identity of these powers which oppress the human spirit. A comparison of these two critics may, thus, provide us with some insight into the character of Southern religion and perhaps into the Southern character itself, if there be such a thing.

John Crowe Ransom was born in April of 1888 to John James Ransom and Ella Crowe Ransom. His father a preacher in the Methodist Church and his mother an educated woman from an established family, religion and education were from his earliest days prominent influences upon him. Ransom entered Vanderbilt in 1903 and graduated in 1909, his degree delayed by several years of teaching school during that time. Following his graduation, he was selected as a Rhodes Scholar and entered Christ Church, Oxford, where he studied classics and philosophy. Ransom was taken by England, and excelled in his studies there. He returned to his alma mater in 1913 to teach English. By the mid-twenties he was highly acclaimed for his poetry, having published three volumes. He was also mentor to the group of Nashville poets who published their work in *The Fugitive*. But it was in 1929 that Ransom turned his attention most decidedly to religion. *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy*, his first book of prose, is Ransom's critique of religion.

He made no bold claims for this work. In a letter to Allen Tate in 1929 he described it as "hot and hasty" but nevertheless a sincere and badly needed work (Young, 181). It is a multi-faceted book and we cannot do full justice to it here, but valuable insights may be gleaned from even a hurried look.

Ransom's concern was with what he viewed as the trend to denude God of those traits which had historically been

attributed to God. He found evidence of this trend in secular society with a creeping scientism which "forgets the limitations [of humans]" and which encourages instead hubris [116]. The result of this hubris is that human beings, not content with their role and status in the world, employ their scientific knowledge to alter the world. The result is a war upon nature that fails to recognize either the dignity of nature or the dignity of human beings.

"Progress" and "industrialism" were the two terms employed by Ransom to describe this scientism when applied to human practices. Progress refers to the attempt to mold nature to immediate human purposes and objectives without first having identified ultimate human purposes and objectives, and without having examined the consistency of these immediate objectives with the ultimate purposes of human life. Here is how Ransom put it in his essay, "Reconstructed But Unregenerate," in *I'll Take My Stand*:

> Progress never defines its ultimate objective, but thrusts its victims at once into an infinite series. Our vast industrial machine, with its laboratory centers of experimentation, and its far-flung organs of mass production, is like a Prussianized state which is organized strictly for war and can never consent to peace. Or . . . our progressivists are the latest version of those pioneers who conquered the wilderness, except that they are pioneering on principle, or from force of habit, and without any recollection of what pioneering was for. (8)

The eventual result of this confidence in the human ability to remold nature for human purposes was not the happiness and freedom humans assumed would be gained from this mastery, but rather "slavery" and unhappiness. "Under industrialism," Ransom wrote, "we scourge ourselves like true fanatics" (187).

That is the contemporary problem, Ransom thought, but a problem which could be felicitously resolved for human beings by returning to the old orthodoxy. "Religion," Ransom argued, "enlarges the God and limits man, telling the believer incessantly to remember his limits and be content with his existing condition" (116). Recognize nature's infinite variety, Ransom advises. And recognize the mysterious purposes of an inscrutable God in nature. Therein lies happiness. Therein lies salvation. Ransom does not suggest that man ought to recognize our human limitations and the purposes of an inscrutable God in nature because it would be an impiety not to do so. Rather, a failure to acknowledge these realities is ultimately a sin against the self.

But it is not only in science and in industrialism that men are guilty of the failure to recognize the God of orthodoxy. The same fault can be found in American religion, Ransom contended. In American religion ethics had replaced theology; religion was being reduced to morality. The reason for this was that the God of Israel, a stern and inscrutable God, had been replaced by a New Testament God, an "amicable and understandable God," whose primary concern was the happiness and well-being of the human race. The old God was "mysterious and not fully understood," "was worshipped with burnt offering and sacrifice," and was "the author of evil as well as good" (29). Ransom urged a return, as he put it, to the Old Testament God, an inscrutable God whose concern for human welfare was doubtful, a God who, if he offered salvation after death, would nevertheless effect human casualties in bringing about the salvation of some (154).

Why return to this God? Because without this God man forgets what evil is, much to his own detriment. Without this God he neglects and finally abandons religion and, forgetting his impotence before nature, takes the destiny of the universe into his own hands, thus creating a hellish existence for himself and for all of creation. As Ransom wrote in a letter:

> . . . little by little the God of the Jews has been whittled down by the Spirit of Science or the Spirit

> of Love or the Spirit of Rotary; and now religion is not religion at all, but a purely secular experience, like YMCA and Boy Scouts. (Young 180)

So Ransom called for a return to a God "fully equipped with thunderbolts," a "virile and concrete God" before whom human beings would tremble with fear. Ransom calls man back to that old time religion in which God is God and this world exists to serve God's purposes, not human purposes, a theocentric not anthropocentric universe.

While Ransom's God is fully equipped with thunderbolts, Will D. Campbell's God has no lack of olive branches. Indeed, it might be said that Campbell's God is the very one about whom Ransom warned, a New Testament God, loving in character.

Will D. Campbell, now of Mt. Juliet, Tennessee, was recently described as having "spent his 60 years elevating iconoclasm to a vocation" (Gibble 570). He is, in the words of a *Newsweek* article in 1972, a "bourbon-guzzling, tobacco-spitting, guitar-strumming man who rarely preaches a Sunday sermon and believes that the institutional church is perhaps the greatest barrier to the proclamation of the Gospel" (5/8/72: 84). And he is a Baptist to boot.

Campbell was born in Amite County, Mississippi, in 1924 to a poor but devout Baptist family. Early in his childhood he decided to become a preacher, and at the age of seventeen he was ordained by h is church to the gospel ministry. He attended Louisiana College in Pineville briefly before his less than stellar performance was interrupted by the war. Following his military service he returned to the South where he enrolled first at Wake Forest from which he received an A.B. degree, and then Tulane University from which he received an M.A. in English. After Tulane he enrolled at Yale Divinity School, graduating from there in 1952.

Campbell's first charge was in a small Louisiana parish. He left that pastorate to serve as the chaplain at Ole Miss where he became involved in the civil rights movement. In the mid-fifties at Ole Miss the chaplaincy and civil rights activism did not mix well. For this reason, in 1956 Campbell severed his relationship with the University and became a race-relations specialist for the National Council of Churches. In the early sixties, feeling his freedom stifled by the NCC, Campbell left to become the director of The Committee of Southern Churchmen and publisher of *Katallagete*. He now spends his time in public speaking and writing. His books include: *Brother to a Dragonfly*, *The Glad River*, *Cecilia's Secret*, and *Forty Acres and a Goat*. He is currently at work on a children's book and a book on the Baptists and the Bible. He is pastor to a "pulpitless, roofless, unpropertied and uncodified church," the Church of the Forty Acres and a Goat, in Mt. Juliet.

Campbell's understanding of the Christian faith has remained more or less the same since the early sixties. The cornerstone of his understanding of the Christian gospel is II Cor. 5:19, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." God, in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, has redeemed and reconciled all people to himself. And there is no reconciliation with God independent of reconciliation with other persons. Furthermore, there can be no genuine reconciliation of one person to another independent of reconciliation to God. Thus the failure of all "non-religious" attempts at solving social problems. The task of the church is to act as the community of the reconciled. And Campbell faults American religion for its failure to take God's reconciliation seriously and to live as those reconciled to God and to one another.

Like Ransom, Campbell recognizes the forces of evil in the world, forces which oppress and enslave the human spirit. And, if anything, Campbell has been more explicit about the identity of these forces of evil. While never denying the presence of evil within the heart of the individual, Campbell has emphasized the expression of evil in institutional form. The state, the military-industrial complex, the corporate economic structure, the academy -- the

public school system as well as the public and private universities, agribusiness, the church -- all have been agents of oppression. All have victimized the poor and the oppressed -- black and white alike. And Campbell has made these victimized blacks and whites the special focus of his ministry. Campbell speaks prophetically against these institutions of oppression, warning people not to misplace allegiances, calling Christians, liberal and conservative alike, from unholy alliances with sinful institutions and back to a life as a reconciled people.

Campbell has also been an outspoken critic of the electronic church, but his criticism of American religion has extended far beyond the television evangelists to the "do-gooders" of the liberal church. His iconoclasm, his radical critique of American religion, his concern for the outcast are exemplified well in the following excerpt from a recent interview. After bemoaning the opulent lifestyle of Jim and Tammy Bakker before a Wisconsin audience eager to hear about the decadent South, Campbell recalls, he went on as follows:

> "All that was built off the backs of the poor. If you chase wealth back far enough, you get into the mines and the fields. It's not the boss man who's digging the coal out of the ground and raising the crops. What's wrong with all this affluence in the name of gentle Jesus is that it's built off the exploitation of the poor." And of course, everybody listening was in general agreement. So I paused and said, "All right, what's the difference between that and the pope's jewels, or all those Lutheran and Presbyterian and Methodist steeples out there casting shadows on whores and pimps and addicts and bums with . . . seldom a gesture in their direction from any of us proportionate to what we spend on ourselves? If you push it to its conclusion, the difference is simply one of taste."
>
> So someone got up and said, "Surely you're not saying that the Sistine Chapel is as ugly as some goddamn condominium with mirrors on the walls?" I answered by saying that I guess it's all right for the poor peasants of Italy to put their pennies in the box for the Sistine Chapel, but it's not all right for the widow on Social Security to send the $5 and $10 to the TV preachers. Then what we're talking about is the annihilation of the hillbillies and the rednecks. And I think when you get right down to it, that is what liberals upset over the electronic church and Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority is all about. (Gibble 572)

Like John Crowe Ransom, Will Campbell calls out for a return to old-time religion. While Ransom called for a return to the Old Testament God, Campbell calls American religion back to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. What he means, apparently, is that the church should return to small independent ministries to the poor and outcast. The church should renounce its reliance upon the state and its entanglement in institutions that violate the individual. The church should exist as a genuine community of reconciliation with open arms to all. Only then will the church truly be the church.

The differences between Ransom and Campbell ought not to go unnoticed. While both invoke the old-time religion, their understandings of that old-time religion are radically divergent. Ransom calls for a return to a stern, inscrutable God. Campbell believes the face of this God has been revealed, that some, even if not all, mysteries have been resolved, and that this God can be known as a God of love.

Despite these differences, there remain significant areas of agreement. Both recognize the presence of social or institutional forces of evil in the world, an evil that does violence to the dignity of the individual and the possibility of a good life. Both agree that man's humanity is under attack from forces beyond the control of the individual. The pastoral, agrarian ideal of Ransom is not far removed from Campbell's vision of the communal life, free of entanglement in institutions of oppression.

Both recognize the tragic nature of human existence. Ransom wrote in *God Without Thunder*, "In tragedy the mind makes the critical confession that human goodness and intelligent work . . . do not actually produce their triumphant effect upon the material world. . . . The moral order is a wished-for order which does not coincide with the actual order or world order" (47). He is no utopian idealist, nor is Campbell, with his understanding of the depth and extensiveness of social evil. Instead they acknowledge the finitude and limitations of individuals. And both believe that religion is essential for the preservation of the dignity and humanity of persons. Religion, true religion, makes one aware of the forces of evil which denigrate persons and provides resources for combating these forces.

Cleanth Brooks in "The Enduring Faith," published in *Why the South Will Survive*, writes that

> contrary to other Americans, the collective experience of Southerners includes decades of scarcity and poverty rather than of abundance; of guilt rather than innocence; of frustration and defeat rather than of unfailing victory and success. Such a regional experience has made Southerners skeptical with regard to the myths that undergird American nationalism. The Southerners' "historic" experience has given them a better grasp on reality, a heightened suspicion of all utopian schemes, and an antidote to moral complacency. (208)

I think this brief look at Ransom and Campbell bears this out. And, it seems to me, this Southern experience, this Southern theology, is a valuable antidote to the smug candy-coated religion so dominant in America in the current age. The warnings of Ransom and Campbell are important words for Southerners and all Americans as we sit complacently with the instruments for world destruction at our fingertips.

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