

CONVERSION IN LANGLAND

By

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LANGLAND has vividly portrayed the life of sin in the world. From the realm of vice, social as well as individual, the soul steps into the realm of grace through what is known as the first conversion. By this act the dead is quite literally raised to life; it is quite literally an event of a standing with the raising of Lazarus—a miracle. As with all miracles, the act can be examined on the purely natural plane; the psychologist can describe what he discovers on the human side of the process. It is well to look at conversion in these test tubes first, even if it comes to be regarded in the partial light simply as a process of unification or of a vital synthesis.¹

Conversion has been described as the shifting of the centre of gravity of the inner self, a psychological phenomenon common to science, art, letters . . . as well as to religion.² The individual's ideas are first of all grouped in bunches, more or less isolated and independent like the amoeba in a very low form of life. But through concentration on a single idea, the other ideas group themselves round this central aim and unify all the individual's energies, just indeed as the amoeba is grouped in a higher form of life. The ideas which do not fit may however gather round another, more or less antagonistic central purpose and the result is a 'divided self'—one group may be selfish and vicious, the other dominated by charity. 'Conversion thus means that a certain set of ideas which had been "marginal", or had become an unconscious disposition, more or less suddenly emerges and takes the central place. To these the man devoted himself and from these he now works'.³ The set of ideas accumulates energy in the unconscious mind until it bursts forth into consciousness so that the process is in fact a gradual one.

This is one way of describing the phenomena, and does seem to convey something that happens normally to the converted, with the exception of the undeniably sudden conversion such as that of St Paul. But even for St Paul there may have been some predisposing reflection on the ideas of the Christians whom he had been persecuting. And we may apply the diagnosis more closely to the

¹ Cf. Sydney Herbert Mellone, *The Beginnings of a Psychology of Religion* (Oxford 1939) pp. 152 sq.

² Cf. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 176.

³ Mellone, p. 153. St Catherine describes the first conversion in chapter 51 of her Dialogue: 'The soul gathers together *with the hand of free choice* her powers in my name . . . etc.' Conversion must include an act of free will; this the psychologists tend to overlook.

conversion which concerns us here, that is not so much of a conversion to the faith as one from death to life within the faith. Hitherto the faith has been a reality in the man's mind but inoperative and without effect upon his life, because it had been independent of his other ideas and pushed to one side. The sinner in this sense is a divided personality—one set of ideas is practical and concerned with his daily life, the other inoperative concerned with the realm of the divine from which his life is severed. Fluctuations there may be when the faith tries to take the centre of energy, but this does not necessarily mean the beginning of conversion; there may be no true synthesis or unification of the two selves and the faith in effect remains 'marginal'. The Vision of Piers Plowman is full of characters who have 'God in their gorge' but not in their hearts. The unconverted Christian is a contradiction to himself.

For William Langland himself the central idea bringing vital energy had not been the Catholic faith in which he had been reared, or at best this had been only fitfully in the centre. He had hoped that with a moderately faithful return to his duties from time to time he would, as a 'city beggar' deserve some little share in the reward his faith pointed out to him.

'This is certain', I said, 'and sadly must I confess it'.

I have tost time away and time wasted.

And yet I hope, as he who has often bargained,

And lost and lost, but at last happened

To buy such a bargain that he was blest forever,

And held his loss at a leaf beside his latter fortune,

Such wealth had he won through the words of his Master:

Simile est regnum coelorum thesauro abscondito in agro, etc.

Mulier quae invenit dragmam, etc.

So I hope to have from him who is Almighty

A glimpse of his grace, and begin a season

When all times of my time will turn to profit.

(*Passus V*, 96-107. cp Dawson in *The English Way*, pp. 167-8.)

But Reason and Conscience easily discern that this good intention will remain inoperative unless he acts upon the impulse at once, so that the idea may cease from loitering on the circumference, a mere velleity, not fitting in with the rest of his life. *Gratia cooperans* is offered by God at this point; reason and conscience are not working independently of the special, divine intervention; their voices are not simply natural words of admonition, the grace of God lies in their words. They insist that William act upon this divine instinct and thus he is a convert.

'I counsel you', quoth Reason, 'to begin quickly

The life which is loyal and lawful in the spirit'.

'Yea, and continue it', said Conscience—*And I came to the Church.*

I came to the Church to do God honour,

Before the Cross on my knees I knocked my breast. . . .

(*Passus V*, 108-112.)

So, touched by contrition, he enters on that season when 'all times of my time will turn to profit'. Faith becomes a vital force at last as he kneels in the church before the crucifix, whence flows grace to all mankind.

Faith indeed holds the first place in conversion. And at risk of seeming Protestant this must be insisted upon in the elementary stages of a spiritual career. Evidently faith must precede all the other virtues in respect of its being the first link of the soul with God in the supernatural order, training the mind upon the one object, known only through this gift of belief and known in such a way as to inspire all good actions. *Nihil volitum nisi prae-cognitum*. A man cannot place his foot on the first rung of the ladder unless he see that there is a ladder, leading up to something supreme.

We are not here speaking so much of the necessity of faith for salvation as of the nature of the initial faith of the newly converted, and of the part it plays in the first purification of the soul. In his treatise on faith St Thomas includes a short article on whether the purification of the heart is an effect of faith; for in St Peter's speech to the assembled apostles and ancients, in *Acts xv*, 9, he speaks of the faith as purifying their hearts (II-II, vii, 2).

Elsewhere St Thomas has written: 'The spiritual life is attributed to faith in so far as in the act of faith the spiritual life is first manifested' (*De Veritate*, xxviii, 1 ad 5). The first glimmer of the spiritual life appears in faith, even though that faith be unformed by charity; the soul is converted only in one section of its mind, not as a whole, as was the case with those for whom Langland was writing. But by subjecting itself to First Truth in faith the intellect is at least purified from an inordinate attachment to lower creatures, for in the intellectual order such an attachment amounts to the impurity of error. Even 'unformed' faith, faith without charity, purifies the mind from this dross of blindness and stupidity. The mind realises the supereminence of divine truth and prostrates itself. The mind requires a fundamental catharsis before it can be joined to the supreme Object of all knowledge and the supreme End of all willing. This implies an action fraught with salutary, intellectual 'pain', in which the mind is straightened, is conformed to a truth it cannot see. In those things that it can see distinctly and essentially the intellect retains a special type of freedom. It occupies a place of superiority whence it looks down in judgment upon what is perceived. Always constrained by truth, the intellect demands the right to see and sort the evidence before it decides. But in faith the intellectual action, ruled here by the will, is blind. The mind assents to what it cannot see. The chariness with which people will accept anything only on authority, the strong sense, and almost fear, that the

Catholic faith demands a step in the dark, these reluctances show clearly that the subjection of the mind to the revelation of First Truth involves a 'mental mortification'.

Thus in the assent of faith are implied the first movements of purification and the first step into that sphere at the centre of which lies the Beatific Vision. If we are speaking of a complete purification of a man as a whole, however, we should not consider the unnatural state of the soul having faith without charity, for in unformed faith we use the conception of purification only analogically, of one particular faculty alone. St Thomas, in the article referred to above, considers the fulness of faith informed by love; and it is in this that the first true purgation is to be found. 'The rational creature is more noble than all temporal and corporal things. And therefore he is made impure in so far as he subjects himself to temporal things by loving them. And from such impurity he is purified by the contrary motion, namely when he tends towards that which is above him, viz. towards God himself. But in this movement the first principle is faith: "For he that cometh to God must believe. . . ." *Hebrews xi*, 6. And therefore the first principle of the purification of the heart is faith, which causes a perfect purification if it is perfected by the formation of charity' (II-II, vii, 2). 'The first step in the spiritual life is therefore to base one's self, mind and will, on First Truth, which is God himself. Belief in and love of truth bring with them the '*aversio*' from the things of earth and the '*conversio*' to God, and in that turning away from evil and turning to good lies the act of contrition.

This is indeed the main lesson to be derived from the first part of the Vision of Piers the Plowman. Langland was writing, it must be remembered, chiefly for men who in his view believed the basic truths of the Catholic religion with a faith unformed by charity. The Vision opens with the sight of the castle of Truth—'a tower on a toft artfully fashioned'—and the pit of hell, with a 'field full of folk I found between them' (*Induction*, 14 sqq). This is the world he knew with all kinds of men gathered there. His purpose is to assist these people in their journey to the Tower of Truth, the *Veritas Prima*, God the Father (cf. *Passus I*, 14 sqq). This is the call that Piers the Plowman, the common man who becomes identified with our Lord himself, makes to all his kith and kin, the call to Truth.

God knows not, nor any saint in heaven,

The man who betrays truth, he tells us in the gospel:

Amen dico vobis nescio vos. . . .

Seek Saint Truth who may save all men (*Passus V*, 162-4).

It was Faith, not law or logic, which cleansed 'the common woman in a public dinner' (*Passus XI*, 220 sqq). Belief is a loyal help and leads to Contrition and Repentance (*Passus XIV*, 90). Not only is Truth the guarantee of salvation coming down and dwelling

in the converted one (cf. *Passus* I, 129; V, 744), but the Christian life is simply seeking after truth. With this once realized all the well intentioned dwellers in the field of the world will desire to set out on the journey.

Then a thousand men thronged together,
Crying upward to Christ and his clean Mother
That grace might go with them to seek Truth

(*Passus* V, 641-3).

They do not yet know the true way and consequently stumble round in every direction until Piers arrives and begins to set them on the road to Truth.

An insistence on the importance of faith and truth in first conversion to the exclusion of other elements would lead to some form of Lutheran conception of justification by faith. The soul itself is changed in its very innermost being by this great miracle of transformation. St Augustine declared that the justification of the sinner is a greater thing than the creation of heaven and earth; and St Thomas is no less sweeping: *Bonum gratiae unius (hominis) majus est quam bonum naturae totius universi* (I-II, cxiii, 9 ad 2).⁴ The infusion of grace which is the essence of first conversion brings with it a whole system or organism of salvation. The first manifestation and the beginning of purgation lies in faith, as we have seen, but not without the other two theological virtues, especially Charity. At the same time, in that very instant when the soul suddenly throbs with the participation of the divine life, the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost and all the moral virtues flow into the mind and will. In the first infusion these virtues and gifts remain in a seminal state, hemmed in and limited by the corruption of the nature in which they reside. But immediately the conversion has been effected, purification begins, inspired by love, developing all these virtues, opening the heart to the movement of the gifts.

So Langland describes the way to Truth primarily as a learning to love, and Fr Dunning has written of this aspect of the Vision:

‘Every phrase of the description of the road to Truth has been carefully weighed. The pilgrims must first go through Meekness, Conscience and the precepts of the Decalogue. The significance of the position of Meekness is seen from the words of St Thomas: “Meekness prepares a man for the knowledge of God by removing obstacles to that knowledge, first by making him master of himself through the abatement of anger; and again inasmuch as it is a point of meekness not to contradict the words of truth, as many men do contradict them under the excitement of anger” (II-II, clvii, 21 ad 1). Compare Rolle: “He is stalwart, that is meek; for all ghostly strength comes from meekness. On whom rests the Holy Ghost? On a meek soul. Meekness governs and

⁴ Cf. R. P. Garrigou-Lagrangé, O.P., *Les Trois Conversions*, pp. 27 sq.

keeps us in all our temptations, so that they overcome us not" (*Form of Living X*; Heseltine's ed: p. 43).

'Conscience, here said to be the realization that Christ knows truly whether we are obeying the moral law or not, is a reference to Conscience in the proper sense: the inexorable judgment of Reason on the moral goodness or badness of human actions. . . . The Decalogue (with the sole exception of the determination of the Sabbath) is merely the Natural Law, the Old Law of the Israelites, and is the preliminary step—as Langland here depicts it—to the New or Evangelical Law, here signified by the Court, "clear as the sun".'⁵

This is Fr Dunning's comment on the passage where Piers describes the way to Truth:

You must go through meekness, you men and women,
Till you come to Conscience, and till Christ knows surely
That you love our Lord liefest of all things,
And your neighbour next, and in no way hurt him
Otherwise than you would he should do to you.
Etc., etc. (*Passus V*, 694 sqq.)

OUR KNOWLEDGE AFTER DEATH

By

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It is a commonplace to talk of death as the Great Change, but even men who revert quite often to the life of the spirit may sometimes realise with a kind of mild shock how utterly spiritual our lives must then become. We have before us an altogether unique experience, and it is natural enough that we should await its inevitable advent with interest and curiosity.

Yet the liveliest imagination will not help us in a matter so completely beyond the veil of the senses. In *Paradise Lost* Milton uses all the mighty imagery of a great poet to depict the war of the angels, and yet leaves us with a profound sense of unreality. We find ourselves in the position of being able to imagine almost any set of circumstances on this side of the grave, and yet quite unable to use such power to illumine conditions on the other, simply because it is a realm of the spirit. Neither does it help us to reflect upon our entry into this world, for that was the beginning of life and thought itself. Most of us cross that other river as developed, thinking beings.

Nevertheless, we can gather some definite ideas as to the nature of the change that awaits us, for even now we are spiritual as well

⁵ Dunning, *Piers Plowman A-Text* pp. 120 sqq. The whole of his treatment of *Passus V* gives strong support for our having used Langland for the First Conversion and it should be read in extenso.