

The Voice From the Blue

by A.J. Russell

A.J. Russell's sermon emphasizes the transformative power of sharing personal faith experiences in the context of Christianity.

Scripture: Matthew 10:32, Acts 17:6, Romans 3:23, Philippians 2:15, 1 Peter 3:15, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Sin And Redemption", "Personal Transformation"

Description

A.J. Russell preaches about a book that delves into the lives of sinners, written by a sinner, addressing the unlovely subject of sin and the transformation it brings. The book introduces a remarkable group of Christian adventurers who are changing lives selflessly, embodying a movement that may shape the future of Christendom. Through a series of articles by famous novelists sharing their religious beliefs, the book sparks public interest, challenges traditional views, and highlights the importance of personal experiences in seeking God.

Transcript

This is a book about sinners, for sinners, by quite a big sinner.

You may not like it. You may even hate it, as some are sure to do.

You may dislike the theme, for, though it introduces lovely people, it comes to grips with an unlovely subject. And solves its riddle.

You may dislike the characters as they are limned in print, but not in real life. As they are all living, you may encounter them yourself some day, and discover their excellence. At least one will live on as an historic figure when this generation has merged with the ages. Perhaps many.

Meanwhile, none can disprove the contents of this book or avoid its challenge. The story is true; the challenge is to you.

From the end of 1923 until the middle of 1926 I was Literary Editor of perhaps the most virile and progressive London daily newspaper. During that period certain events happened which drew me into the heart of the most astonishing group of people I shall ever meet. To-day groups of them are sprinkled about the earth changing the lives of those they encounter, giving all they possess and asking no return.

They are not an organization. None can tell their number. For in their own words: "You can't join; you can't resign; you are either in or out by the quality of the life you live."

They are probably the most extraordinary association of Christian adventurers since the first century. It is much too early yet to forecast their destiny. Their movement, in its sweep, may take one of two forms: it may become just another gem or facet of Christendom like those affectionately associated with Augustine, Francis, Luther, Wesley, Booth, and Moody; or it may speed up the reunion of Christendom, even Catholic and Protestant. It may revive first-century Christianity in every denomination, expel compromise from the lives of nominal Christians, make the church a true healer of broken homes, give purpose and direction to purposeless and misguided lives, set aloft to a fiery cross in every office, workshop, and institution, and really start the Christian millennium in this our twentieth-century.

As Literary Editor my job was to provide compelling newspaper features to engage the public interest and expand our circulation. In a surprising manner I stumbled on two unusual means of achieving my purpose, which I found were two cardinal practices of the amazing group I was subsequently to meet. I called these means Inspiration and Confession. They called them Guidance and Sharing.

It was Saturday, my free day, usually spent in my garden at Kent. Not that I enjoyed gardening, but it was a good exercise and kept me from the race-course, where I had spent many more exciting and inexpensive holidays.

I worked on, thinking of nothing in particular. Suddenly a strange experience came to me. There seemed to be a faint electrical crackling in the clear air about me. There was positively nobody else in the garden, but someone or something spoke to me: a voice that was audible and yet (paradoxically enough) quite soundless. That seems the only way to express what I shall always believe was a supernatural experience.

I felt a message impinge on my brain from the air. It alighted softly like the caress of a leaf or the touch of a gentle zephyr. It was accompanied by a sense of exaltation both pleasurable and unforgivable.

As to the message, there was nothing particularly striking about it, though when translated into action it produced phenomenal results. At this stage I do not clearly remember the exact phrase that came. I was just told to get twelve novelists to confess their religious beliefs in our newspaper. Apparently a good idea, but nothing to differentiate it from others that have come to me and thousands of other people. Only -- that queer feeling of its being implanted from without, perhaps for some specific purpose. And the pleasurable physical and spiritual reaction which attended it.

Almost immediately afterwards, both the idea and the incident tucked themselves away in the recesses of my mind and were completely forgotten for several months. Then one day, in early September 1924, I was asked to provide a good series for an autumn circulation-raising campaign on which a fairly large sum of money could be spent in publicity.

I went back to my room and began to think. Then the memory of that spring day in my garden returned. Intuitively I knew that here was the right subject ready prepared. It was fortunate I had forgotten the message until now, the ideal period of the newspaper year to launch a new series. It would just catch the public returning from the holidays for the autumn.

Before then and since, when advocating other ideas on which large sums of money had to be risked, I may have felt trepidation. The arguments for were these; the arguments against were those. But this time I had a subtle confidence that some mysterious force supported the proposal and that nothing could prevent it succeeding. Naturally, psychiatrists would throw doubts on the supernatural origin of this series, and ascribe my experience to an emotional disturbance of the endocrine glands; or something thrown out by the subconscious. Let them. But I wish they could make those same glands work or that same subconscious self get busy whenever I am in need of help.

It is comparatively easy to get a good idea accepted, but far harder to get a company of famous novelists to come in on it, sensitive as they are to their own dignity and status, especially when it means disclosing their private life to the curious multitude. Ten writers of outstanding eminence, all well known in England and most of them well known in America, were intrigued by our extraordinary request and readily agreed to contribute. They were:

Arnold Bennett. Hugh Walpole.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Compton Mackenzie.

Henry Arthur Jones. Rebecca West.

Israel Zangwill. E. Philips Oppenheim.

J. D. Beresford H. de Vere Stacpoole

I forget why the number of novelist contributors was reduced from twelve to ten, the figure I had been given, but I remember this series ended far too soon, although we added one article from an anonymous correspondent, a second by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and two extra by the Bishop of London.

Giving "an unknown man" a chance to join up with some of the best writers in England was a happy idea (suggested by "The Unknown Warrior") which proved very popular. Of thousands essayed to air their religious views in conjunction with celebrated novelists. I selected the winning article because it contained an illuminating reference to a common failing of our readers and of myself; and because it was a clear statement of simple Christian faith that the masses would understand.

"The gambling instinct," said the Unknown Writer, "so often perverted and used for unworthy ends, is one of the most valuable instincts possessed by man, and nowhere does it find a truer or more complete outlet and fulfillment than in religion. . . ." The writer continued: "Religion is betting your life and there is a God. I decided to bet my life there was a God, and more and more as the years go by I find that in so far as I yield up my will to God and open my heart to His indwelling, in so far as I try to live out my life in the Christ-spirit, the experiment works!"

Here, I thought, was something different for our friend the gambler: the man who was so consistently accused of being in the wrong -- praise from the quarter which usually attacked him. His praises could be used to prove Christianity. God wanted gamblers. Back God and watch Him win your own Derby. Perhaps an old idea to some in the Churches, but to the average gambler it was NEWS.

A born gambler myself, I had indulged a gambling instinct in the City, the casino, on the race-course. Like all gamblers, I had my successes. An occasional brief spell of victory, and then losses. Invariably I ended every gambling bout with a deficit balance, however "inside" the information -- and I was often right inside

being "inside" -- however posh is the gamble, however long or short I went or held on. At last I came to believe that some little imp of misguidance had been specially delegated to perch himself at my ear and whisper the wrong advice whenever I gambled.

Curiously enough, I was shortly to find the gambling instinct strongly in evidence among the group of people I am about to describe. They are gamblers all; gambling recklessly with their own lives -- gambling on God.

As only "unknown men" and had been asked to contribute the eleventh article, I was amused to hear a laughing feminine voice at the end of my telephone announce that she was the author of the anonymous article we had just published. To make quite certain, I asked for a specimen of her handwriting. It corresponded with the written article. I asked her if she wanted money. She said "No." Further proof. And she called -- tall, thirtyish, and attractive, she seemed to me. I asked her who she was. She hesitated. She asked me to promise never to publish her name; and I promised.

There are princesses in the movement dealt with in this book. But without that saying that she is a princess, I can state that her home is an English palace, though she was not living in it. At the time she was suffering from an apparently incurable disease, but had given her life to social work in a London slum. As her illness Her indoors for a good part of the day, I advised her to drop her self-immolation in squalor and returned to the country and sunshine. She laughed at my lack of understanding, and went back to her social service. Some years after, she wrote me a letter appreciating the work of the people described In this book and reminding me of my bad advice. Instead of going to the country for a sunshine "cure," she had worked on in the slum for her Lord -- and been marvelously restored to health!

She told me a had written her manuscript for "My Religion" under what she believed to be "direct guidance," although not without trepidation, as she saw the invitation was only extended to men. But she had written a letter of explanation giving her full name, which somehow escaped my notice. Her article came to me interred in a high pile of manuscripts, written on both sides of the paper (sin of sins in journalism). The opinion was more than once expressed that her contribution, breathing as it did the spirit of confident faith and loving understanding of the prodigal mind, was the best of all. I am sure it did the most good.

Contributors to the "My Religion" series were not hampered by editorial restrictions. They could advocate what ever religion gain shows. If they had none, they could let their article explain why, provided there was no blasphemy. Judged by their writings, they were not a deeply spiritual company. Some were believing Christians; some were agnostics; all were honest. Compton McKenzie (a great writer) wrote a strong plea to Roman Catholicism, and the late Sir Arthur Conan Doyle for Spiritualism. I enjoyed the article by Hugh Walpole, who revealed himself as the typical son of a bishop. His article was well-liked, as was that Rebecca West, who wrote with her usual brilliance. Not one tried to define the word Religion, but that omission was atoned for by Father Roland Knox, who, because of the interest awakened by this and subsequent religious series, which this one evoked, wrote a book dealing with the phenomenon of Feet Street's sudden interest in religion. His title was uncomplimentary, though he was not unfriendly. It suggested that we were Calibans of Grub Street. There was no congestion that we might be practical mystics.

Father Knox showed us that religion was something which restrained us from doing what otherwise we might do, just as conquered people were restrained by their conquerors, foot on neck, in the bad old days

when power was as much synonym for right as money is to-day.

Many beautiful passages were contained in the articles written by these representative novelists describing their religion. Outstanding among them, like St. Paul's Cathedral, was a marvelous symphony in prose by that delightful playwright, Henry Arthur Jones, which is surely destined for immortality. Its sheer beauty stood out in clear relief as I read the article, and has haunted me ever since. I turned to my little staff and read it over for their delectation. Listen to the song behind the screen of words, the yearning and the heartbeat of a lovable Englishman:

Whatever call to wander in strangely haunted spheres of ether, or fields asphodel, in new moods of being, amid new duties and new pleasure; whatever call to prolong and fulfill its existence my spirit may obey when it has earned its release from the flesh, it is to this earth that it turns and returns and passionately clings to-day; this earth that is the mother of all I'm know and feel, this earth where I have lived and sinned and suffered and loved and fought and stumbled and tramped and despaired and laughed and wept and eaten my fill and drunk deep draughts of pleasure and success and bitter cups of misery and defeat and shame; this earth whose dawns and sunsets and variegated pageantries are nicely suited to my eyes and her harmonies and discords exactly tuned to my years; this earth whose biting winds and angry hailstorms have buffeted me, but whose sunny skies and blue haleyon days have restored me -- this very earth, the only place where my foot finds firm standing and where my spirit feels at home.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Henry Arthur Jones were friends; if otherwise, this article would have made them friendly. For in it Henry Arthur also declared that no future state would be intolerable for him if he found Sir Arthur waiting at the entrance to greet him. In rejoinder Sir Arthur quoted the "asphodel " passage in a public address and commented: "I have looked upon Henry Arthur Jones as one of the very first -- if not the very first -- prose-writers that we possess. He has that rare gift of rhythm which marks a great artist. For this alone his article would be memorable. There are few living man who can write prose like that."

Praise indeed of one master by another, both of whom have since "earned released from the flesh."

"My Religion" ran with smoothness from start to finish, with the staff more excited than I have ever seen journalists excited by newspaper articles. And this by a simple series on religion in a street swarming with Pagans.

As for the public, they leapt for it. During a part of the run the circulation-staff was unable to cope with the demand. Each morning for a fortnight Young England on its way to the office scrambled for, almost fought for, bookstall copies of the morning newspaper giving it something up-to-date in religion. Arnold Bennett tramped the streets of Liverpool vainly seeking a newsstand not sold out on the opening day, the day he led off. Then he returned to his hotel and wrote amusingly to the Editor gently lampooning our circulation department. Yet probably he, too, had not foreseen how vast could be the public demand for the sharing of religious experiences by celebrated novelists.

Arnold Bennett's opening article gave our church-going readers a tremendous jolt. And no wonder! Had he not been asked to modify his language he would have shocked them more. He only agreed to his article be modified when I pleaded that we might harm the baby -- the newspaper. I said that our church-going readers would think we were turned atheist and leave us. He spoke somewhat peevishly about one whose views counted with us and who might disagree with our request, and then decided to cut his articles lightly, though reiterating he was doing it against his better judgment.

As it appeared, his self-censored article was the worst attack on Christianity I have ever seen in a respectable and popular English newspaper.

"It is curious," said Arnold Bennett, "how bold some very ordinary statements seem when they are put into print in a popular newspaper. I do not believe, and never have at any time believed, in a divinity of Christ, the Virgin birth, immaculate conception; and heaven, hell, the immortality of the soul, the divine inspiration of the Bible."

Quite a comprehensive Cardinal-of-Rheims catalog of fearless belief. No wonder half England rose up to answer him, many to disapprove his opening statements by his later admission of a leaning towards a future life. No wonder that he was vigorously attacked in the religious Press and in the pulpits all over Great Britain. Yet "the Unknown Man" (who spoke in the spirit of the characters of this book) was that among the critics. She understood exactly Arnold Bennett's attitude, the position he had reached, and the reason why he could not say more. To attack him, she said, was wrong when he was so obviously expressing his true opinion. How could a man who had not been born to this Spirit write otherwise?

The public interest awakened by the unusual feature was early reflected in the Editors mail-bag, which must have been about the largest ever prompted by a straightforward literary series. The letters were opened, but the staff was too small to read them thoroughly. They grew into a vast heap on one side of my room, into which I occasionally dug for interesting contributions.

London's society was aroused, as never before, by religious articles in popular Press. The provinces read widely and eagerly. Bishops and clergy swung into the debate. A swarm of novelists had invaded their realm. They had a right and a desire to be heard on the same all-important subject. Lake Archbishop of Canterbury (Dr. Davidson), reluctant to be disturbed by newspaper religion, wagged his statesman's head and elected to make a public reference to the series that everybody was discussing.

From the first it had been my intention to give the feature a definitely pro-Christian bias, and the replies of the bishops, clergy and religiously-minded readers, as well as some of the articles, were more than adequate for that purpose.

The same series was afterwards sold to America, where it ran in a chain of newspapers, and it was reproduced in a book form both in England and in the United States. The theme was also adapted for America by the publication of a new series entitled "My Religion" by "Ten American Novelists."

Echoes of the original stir in London are still heard.

Rebecca West wrote in a London journal for writers saying that the author of "My Religion" had shown himself a journalistic genius. I thought so, too, and wished I could have given her the author's name. But the mysterious voice that came to me from the spirit-world had left no name.

What was the reason for the astonishing success of the series? In the shrewd opinion of the proprietor it was the emphasis on the word "My" in the title -- an opinion I was to hear endorsed again and again when investigating the Oxford Group and their practice of "Sharing" experiences.

We had induced celebrated writers to confess their religious convictions, and in so doing had merely re-discovered a simple truth which religion had learned years ago: there is always a public eager to hear a man's own story of his search for God, if haply he might find Him.

Four was not a method by which the early Apostles spread Christianity through a Pagan world?

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