William Law – An Appreciation

One cannot pursue an interest in religion or in devotional literature without encountering the name of William Law again and again. He wrote extensively, but two of his works in particular, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* and *The Spirit of Love,* are considered by many to be great classics of Christian literature. Such diverse personalities as John Wesley, Cardinal Henry Newman, and Samuel Johnson testify to the profound influence Law's writings had upon them. Aldous Huxley's famous study of religion titled *The Perennial Philosophy* quotes William Law more often than any other Christian person.

So when the Paulist Press published Law's two major works in one volume as part of its series of Classics of Western Spirituality back in 1978 I dutifully bought it, and for the last nearly thirty years it has sat quietly and undisturbed on my shelves. I do not know exactly why this is so. Perhaps my interest in spiritual things, which I consider the primary motivation in the choices I make, was nevertheless somewhat daunted at the prospect of more than 500 pages of exhortations to holiness.

One of the purposes of our self-taught Adult First Day School curriculum is to allow us an opportunity to share with each other the enthusiasms we have found in the field of religion and spirituality. But another purpose is to challenge us, in the process of agreeing to lead a discussion, to take a look at something we have not been familiar with before, and in the course of pursuing enough study of it to be able to offer to a class at least a preliminary orientation to the matter, to broaden our own horizons and knowledge. So I am grateful that the curriculum this term has afforded me the opportunity to dust off a thirty-year old volume and finally to carry out a long-held intention to explore William Law's approach to the Christian faith.

The first thing I like to do when approaching a new personality or work is to establish the relevant historical context, and, in the field of religion, to have in mind as well what was happening in Quakerism at the time.

Let us recall just briefly that George Fox had his vision on Pendle Hill in 1652, and that the Religious Society of Friends was gradually being formed throughout the 1650s, and is generally considered to be essentially established in the traditional form we know by 1660.

We also remember that simultaneously with the formation of the Religious Society of Friends, England itself was undergoing enormous stress. There was a bloody civil war between the King and Parliament which ended with the execution of the King in 1649. This was followed by a period of governance by Oliver Cromwell and Parliament, first known as the Commonwealth and later as the Protectorate, which lasted from 1649

until 1658. In 1660 the monarchy was restored, but was wrenchingly, if bloodlessly, revised once again in 1688, when the so-called "Glorious Revolution" occurred. James II of England was de-throned and exiled to France, and William of Orange and Mary began the first constitutional monarchy, with defined arrangements for power-sharing between the crown and Parliament. These power sharing arrangements have been revised bit-by-bit over time, with more power being given to Parliament and less to the crown, until today we see a situation where the monarchy in England has only symbolic authority within the government. This gradual, constitutional evolution in England offers a significant contrast to the situation on the European continent, and particularly in France, where absolute monarchy and the concept of the divine right of kings held sway quite rigidly until the great cataclysm of the French Revolution.

Both before and after the civil war and the Protectorate, British monarchs belonged to the Stuart family. But there was great mistrust of those Stuarts who were Roman Catholic because of their tendency to believe excessively in the divine right of kings and to mimic the autocratic habits of European sovereigns. With the deposing of James II and the importing of the Protestants William and Mary from Holland, England saw the last of Roman Catholic monarchs. Succession difficulties arose when William and Mary had no children. The throne passed to the Protestant Queen Anne, second daughter of the Roman Catholic James II, but when she, too, failed to have children, the Parliament passed a succession act mandating that the crown should be passed to George I of Hanover, a Protestant, bypassing several Roman Catholic Stuarts who would ordinarily be in line to inherit the throne.

William Law was born in 1686 in the county of Northamptonshire, a county in the English midlands which abuts both Cambridgeshire and Oxfordshire.

The several biographical materials I have been able to access do not give any information about his family background, his parents' occupation and station in life, or his family's political orientation. He did go to study at Emmanuel College, part of Cambridge University, and was ordained an Anglican priest in 1711. He taught at Cambridge University, but marginalized himself by refusing allegiance to the Hanovarian dynasty of George I when it was installed in 1714 upon the death of Queen Anne. As a result Law lost his teaching post at Cambridge. This act of political rebellion early in his career profoundly affected the course of Law's life. Yet there is a certain paradox here, which I shall get to as we discuss the content of Law's religious philosophy.

At any rate, having been thrown out of Cambridge University, Law apparently went to London to serve as a humble curate, although the records are a little unclear at this point. But eventually, in 1727, Law was domiciled in the household of Edward Gibbon, the very wealthy grandfather of the famous historian of the same name. His job was to serve as tutor to Edward Gibbon's son, also named Edward, who would eventually

become the father of the famous historian. At any rate, in addition to serving as tutor, Law apparently became the much-honored friend and spiritual director of the whole family. Law remained in the Gibbon household for more than ten years, acting as a religious guide not only to the family but to a number of earnest-minded folk from the region who came to consult with him. Included in this circle were John Wesley, who was eventually to be the founder of the Methodist denomination of the Christian Church, and his brother Charles Wesley.

Edward Gibbon lost his fortune in the notorious South Sea Bubble scandal, and although he was eventually to regain most of it, the Gibbon household was dispersed in 1737. Law was parted from his friends, and returned to his birthplace, where he inherited a house and small property from his father. There he was eventually joined by two ladies. One was a rich widow who had been a member of the circle of people who had sought out spiritual direction from Law when he was at the Gibbons' household. The other was Miss Hester Gibbon, sister to the young man who Law had been hired into the Gibbon household to tutor in the first place. This curious trio, Law and two lady friends, lived celebately together for twenty-one years in a life wholly given to devotion, religious study and charity, until Law's death in 1761. They kept a regular and methodical schedule, assembling three times a day – morning, noon and evening – for corporate prayers. They attended their local parish church for services every Sunday.

Law himself had received a financial grant from an anonymous benefactor, a grateful reader of his writings. Hester and Mrs. Hutcheson were both wealthy in their own right. So of their large joint income, these three lived on about a tenth, giving the rest away. They gave clothes, soup and money to the poor, and they founded a school for poor girls and various almshouses. They were utterly uninterested in whether the poor people they served merited their benevolence or not. That fact of need alone was enough to claim the charity of these three pious souls. This caused their neighbors to complain that they were turning their village into a gathering place for the idle and the worthless.

A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life, Law's most famous work, was completed and published while he was in the Gibbon household. While reading it I kept in mind that Law's life substantially overlapped with that of John Woolman, that Law was on one side of the Atlantic and Woolman on the other, and that Law favored high church Anglicanism, while Woolman was a Quaker. I found that there were intriguing resonances between Law's approach and a Quaker view of things, and also some stark contrasts.

I found that Law writes in a plain, straightforward and highly readable style, a style which serves him well as a clear and compelling thinker. He is often witty, never merely to entertain but always to make a point. One of the charming and unique

characteristics of the book is his strategy of making points by using made-up characters which portray enduring human types: the shrewd businessman, the man of fashion, the easy-going clergyman, the literary scholar, the cultivated dilettante, and various worldly and unworldly women.

I will share one of these characterizations with you. In the chapter from which I am about to read Law is explaining how it is possible to lead a Christian life no matter what one's profession or occupation. As a foil, he describes a made-up character whose way of living is the anti-thesis of Christianity, even though the person is a professing Christian.

> Calidus has traded above thirty years in the greatest city of the kingdom; he has been so many years constantly increasing his trade and his fortune. Every hour of the day is with him an hour of business; and though he eats and drinks very heartily, yet every meal seems to be in a hurry, and he would say grace if he had time. Calidus ends every day at the tavern but has not leisure to be there till near nine o'clock. He is always forced to drink a good hearty glass to drive thoughts of business out of his head and make his spirits drowsy enough for sleep. He does business all the time that he is rising, and has settled several matters before he can get to his counting room. His prayers are a short ejaculation or two, which he never misses in stormy tempestuous weather because he has always something or other at sea. Calidus will tell you with great pleasure that he has been in this hurry for so many years and that it must have killed him long ago, but that it has been a rule with him to get out of the town every Saturday and make the Sunday a day of quiet and good refreshment in the country.
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> He is now so rich that he would leave off his business and amuse his old age with building and furnishing a fine house in the country, but that he is afraid he should grow melancholy if he was to quit his business. He will tell you with great gravity that it is a dangerous thing for a man that has been used to get money ever to leave it off. If thoughts of religion happen at any time to steal into his head, Calidus contents himself with thinking that he never was a friend to heretics and infidels, that he has always been civil to the minister of his parish, and very often given something to the charity schools.
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> Now this way of life is at such a distance from all the doctrines and discipline of Christianity that no one can live in it through ignorance or frailty. Calidus can no more imagine that he is born again of the spirit, that he is in Christ a new creature, that he lives here as a stranger and pilgrim, setting his affections upon things above, and laying up treasures in heaven)John 3:5; 1 Pet. 2: 11; Col. 3:2(. He can no more imagine this than he can think that he has been all his life an Apostle, working miracles and preaching the gospel.
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> It must also be owned that the generality of trading people, especially in great towns, are too much like Calidus. You see them all the week buried in business, unable to think of anything else, and then spending the Sunday in idleness and refreshment, in wandering into the country, in such visits and jovial meetings as make it often the worst day of the week. (Pages 80-81)

Law goes on to explain that it is possible to be a businessman in a way which expresses devotion and service to God. One should buy and sell the things that are necessary to help people to live, but which do not tempt them to vainness and excess. By toiling to serve the reasonable ends of life, and to carry out such a volume of trade as is only necessary to support one's family in a pious way of life which avoids such finery as a sincere Christian spirit has no occasion for, one can make of one's trade a kind or prayer and act of devotion.

In this way, and in many others, Law's approach seems to resonate with Friends ideas. One thinks of John Woolman deliberately limiting the size of his own business because he saw it distracting him from the life of the Spirit. What I missed in Law throughout his writing is a sense of social justice. He never questions slavery or the slave trade, although he alludes to it several times. He accepts all the hierarchy and classism on display at Cambridge and in the Gibbon household. He never proposes any adjustment in social arrangements, but merely a softening of them which would result if all tradespeople and businessmen became like John Woolman, and all the inheritors of great fortunes gave 90% of their wealth away as he and his two disciples did. But there is no questioning of the social arrangements which lead to these inequities. Law merely scrutinizes the people and practices he sees around him in terms of how they express or fail to express a personal way of life resembling the ideals of piety held up by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

Yet there are several other respects in which Law is close to Friends. He believes in the possibility of union with God, either temporary or permanent, in this life, and he believes that religious inspiration or revelation did not stop with the end of the New Testament, but continues, as the Holy Spirit discloses truths which the world was not earlier ready to understand.

Law opposes all forensic theories of the Atonement, those commercial and legal theories that Christ paid upon the cross our debt to a God perceived as an angry father. Nor does he accept the Calvinist doctrine that humankind is totally corrupt. Law claims that there is in the human person a "seed of life" or a smothered spark of heaven in the soul. Nor did he interpret the Bible literally, but gave generous allowances for figurative accommodation. He interprets God as pure love. To those who objected to this, pointing out all the scriptural references to the wrathfulness and vengefulness of God, Law seems to argue that the wrath of which scripture speaks is not in God but in us, who are angry at God and who see God as made in our image.

Although he wrote more than two hundred years ago, all of the circumstances and spiritual conditions of which he writes seem very familiar and current. His prose seems direct and modern. While I was inclined to resonate sympathetically with him as I progressed through his text step by step, the total impact of his thought struck me as burdened with a chilling degree of puritanism and austerity. He sees no middle ground between virtue and vice, between industry and sloth. There are no innocent amusements, no sport or play. This uncompromising dualism winds up ruling out the fine arts, theater, painting, all music except hymns, all poetry, all novels. In other words, there is nothing left of what we would call culture. Also gone are cards and dancing and entertainments of any kind. Television and cinema, had he known of them, would most certainly have been off limits. In this spirit of austerity Law

resembles early Quakers, if not modern Friends.

This is where the paradox lies to which I alluded earlier, and which I cannot explain. For the Stuart monarchs of the Restoration, out of loyalty to whom Law sacrificed his career, were the opposite of the sober Cromwellians they replaced. Charles II was accurately understood by his subjects to be a fun-loving monarch, and the Court of the Restoration was characterized by opulence and decadence and by the revival of theater and masked balls and other amusement which had disappeared under the austere Protectorate of the Puritans. Nothing in the biographical material, or in Law's own writings, at least as far as I could delve into them, explained why Law, who advanced so austere a spirituality, would feel so deeply loyal to the Stuart dynasty.

Law lived in a time which in some key respects was very much like our own. England of the 1700s, like the United States today, was a country where huge numbers of people professed Christianity. But can anyone claim that this Christian culture genuinely expresses the spirit of Christ? Or has the world, by its favors, done more to undermine the Gospel spirit than it ever did by the most violent persecutions? In times like these the danger to the true Church comes not from the assaults of pagans or atheists, but from the flattery and compliance of the principalities and powers. Christians are publically humored, and tend even to congratulate each other, for their accommodation to Caesar and Mammon, for their adjustment to the powers that be. The enemies of the authentic Church are thus within it.

In the face of such a situation, Law seeks to inspire reform, to inspire a recovery of lost integrity and innocence where Christian commitment has become merely nominal. So Law's uncompromising austerity is provoked, I suppose, by his perceived need to overcome all habits of slothful compromise with the world's ordinary business as usual.

I have found in William Law's thought a useful challenge. Certainly, in my own life, to the extent that I have managed to free myself from preoccupation with worthless entertainments and with fads and fashions I have found a greater measure of peace and happiness, a greater feeling of authenticity, a greater closeness to God. But how far can this process be carried? Is there a point at which it becomes counterproductive, where the spirit becomes distorted and abused by unnatural deprivations? To contemplate the cast of ascetics and puritans in religious history is not always to behold an edifying spectacle. Many seem to have a genuine sweetness of temper and a disposition to charity. Others are harsh and cruel and even demonic.

William Law's text is certainly not characterized by cheerlessness, by a grim love of duty over humanity, by false fears of Satan and witches. In this he is unlike some others of an ascetic or puritan disposition. Throughout he seeks by gentle persuasion, rather than by dire threats, to convince the reader that a holy life is a happy one, is genuinely an attractive possibility. And, as far as outward evidence can indicate, Law not only talked the talk, but walked the walk; he apparently found great peace and satisfaction in doing so, and held up for us an worthy example of Christian piety and charity. I find William Law much less easy to dismiss than other exponents of radical puritanism and asceticism that I have encountered.

"To a neurotic person, a normal life seems commonplace and dull, without excitement;

a neurotic, under therapy, fights to retain his anxieties, without which, so he thinks, he will not feel alive, will not be himself. He is asked to find a new center. To a man of the world, a life of either study or of good works is a boring one. Both the neurotic and the man of the world must be converted, turned around, born again, before they can judge of the happiness proposed by a holy life."[1] A holy life can not be properly judged from outside observation, but must be known and experienced from within.

To solve this dilemma, a gentle, step-by-step, experimental approach seems the best way forward. Let us taste and see. Perhaps we too will find that the path to holiness is beautiful and pleasant and joyful and familiar.[2]

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[1] Quoted from Austin Warren's "Introduction" to *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* by William Law. (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

[2] Paraphrase of Mesiter Eckhart.

William Law

Chronological Placement

Political History	Religious Developments
1625-1649 Reign of Charles I	1624 Birth of George Fox
1642-1645 First English Civil War	
1648-1649 Second English Civil War	
1649 Execution of Charles I	
1649-1658 Commonwealth / Protectorate	1652 George Fox had an "opening" on Pendle Hill
1660 Restoration of English Monarchy	1660 Formation of Religious Society of Friends substantially completed
1660-1685 Reign of Charles II, son of Charles I	
1685-1689 Reign of James II, brother of Charles II	
1688 "Glorious Revolution," deposition of James II	1686 Birth of William Law
1689-1702 Reign of William III and Mary II (Mary died 1694). They had no children.	1691 Death of George Fox
1702-1714 Reign of Queen Anne, second daughter of James II. The last Stuart monarch. She had no children.	1711 Ordination of William Law
1714-1727 Reign of George I, first Hanovarian monarch.	1714 Willam Law refuses to abjure loyalty to the Stuarts and to pledge allegiance to the new government.
	1720 Birth of John Woolman
	1761 Death of William Law
	1772 Death of John Woolman
1776 American Revolution	
1789-1799 French Revolution	

Quotations from William Law

As a good Christian should consider every place as holy because God is there, so he should look upon every part of his life as a matter of holiness because it is to be offered unto God. (Page 75)

The profession of a clergyman is a holy profession because it is a ministration in holy things, an attendance at the alter. But worldly business is to be made holy unto the Lord by being done as a service to Him and in conformity with his divine will. (Page 75)

If a man had eyes and hands and feet that he could give to those that wanted them, if he should either lock them up in a chest or please himself with some needless and ridiculous use of them instead of giving them to his brethren that were blind and lame, would we not justly reckon him an inhuman wretch? , , , Now money has very much the nature of eyes and feet; if we either lock it up in chests, or waste it in needless and ridiculous expenses upon ourselves whilst the poor and the distressed want it for their necessary uses, if we consume it in the ridiculous ornaments of apparel whilst others are starving in nakedness, we are not far from the cruelty of him that chooses rather to adorn his house with hands and eyes rather than to give them to those that need them. . . . For after we have satisfied our own sober and reasonable wants, all the rest of our money is but like spare eyes or hands; it is something we cannot keep to ourselves without being foolish in the use of it, something that can only be used well by giving it to those that need it. (Page 97)

What is more innocent than rest and retirement? And yet what is more dangerous than sloth and idleness? What is more lawful than eating and drinking? And yet what is more destructive of all virtue, what is more fruitful of all vice, than sensuality and indulgence? (Page 105)

I take it for granted that every Christian that is in health is up early in the morning; for it is much more reasonable to suppose a person up because he is a Christian than because he is a laborer, or a tradesman, or a servant, or has business that wants him. . . . Sleep is such a dull, stupid state of existence that even amongst animals we despise them most that are most drowsy. He therefore that chooses to enlarge the slothful indulgence of sleep rather than be early at his devotions to God chooses the dullest refreshment of the body before the highest, noblest employment of the soul. (Pages 189-190)

Don't, therefore, please yourself with thinking how piously you would act and submit to God in a plague, a famine, or a persecution, but be intent upon the perfection of the present day, and be assured that the best way of showing a true zeal is to make little things the occasion of great piety. Begin, therefore, in the smallest matters and most ordinary occasions, and accustom your mind to the daily exercise of this pious temper in the lowest occurrences of life. And when a contempt, and affront, a little injury, loss, or disappointment, or the smallest events of every day continually raise your mind to God in proper acts of resignation, then you may justly hope that you shall be numbered amongst those that are resigned and thankful to God in the greatest trials and afflictions. (Page 327)