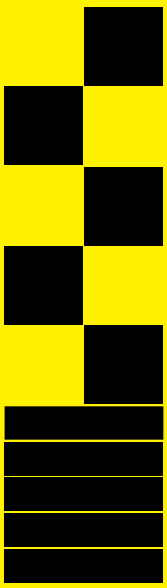
1934

Our Master's Voice: Advertising

James Rorty



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James Rorty

OUR MASTER'S VOICE

ADVERTISING

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

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18 RELIGION AND THE AD-MAN

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WEEKS before real beer came back, the beer gardens sprang into bloom along Fourteenth Street. They are cheap. Fifteen cents buys a roast beef sandwich, a portion of beans, a portion of potatoes and a slop of thin gravy. You sit at an enamel table, look and listen. Imitation tile. Imitation Alps. Imitation Bavarian atmosphere. Imitation beer. Three people sit at the next table: an imitation pimp, an imitation stage mother and an imitation burlesque show manager. Maybe the burlesque show manager is real. He is gray-haired, red-faced, thickset and voluble. He declaims:

"I'm a faker. God in his blue canopy above—that's out of Shakespeare—God knows I'm a faker. When the priest baptized me, he shook the holy water on my head (snap, snap) and said: 'Taker, faker, faker!' "

I saw that. I heard that. If I had sat there long enough I am confident I could have seen and heard anything. If one wishes to discover America, all one has to do is to forget all the solemn and reasonable things that solemn and reasonable people have spoken and written, and then go listening and pondering into cheap restaurants, movie palaces, radio studios, pulp magazine offices, police stations, five- and ten-cent stores, advertising agencies. Out of this atomic, pulverized life, the anarchic voices rise. They are shameless, these voices, and truthful, and wise with a kind of bleak factual wisdom. Each atom speaks for itself, to comfort itself, to assert itself against the overwhelming nothingness of all the other atoms: each atom sending out an infinitesimal ray of force, searching for some infinite reason, and protesting obstinately against some infinite betrayal.

Fake. Baloney. Bunk. Apple sauce. Bull. There are over a hundred slang synonyms for the idea which these words express, most of them coined within the last two decades. No other idea has called forth such lavish folk invention, and this can mean only one thing. It is the pseudoculture's bleak judgment upon itself. It is possible for an inhuman society to pulverize humanity, but the human essence is indestructible. It is meek, or it is bitter; it remains human, truthful and essentially moral, even religious.

What is religion, if it is not the framework of instinctively felt values of truth and beauty and honor by which the race lives—if it is to live? Reverse these thin worn coins of the folk argot—bunk, baloney, etc.—and you find the true currency of the human exchange. Honoring truth, the burlesque comedian pauses in his exit, shakes his rear and says: "Horsefeathers!"

But what we are concerned with here is not the deep human core of the religious spirit, but the make-believe against which these atomic voices are crying out: the fake religion, the moral, ethical and spiritual make-believe of the acquisitive society, of the ad-man's pseudoculture. If the inquiry were to be in any degree systematic and exhaustive, it would lead us far back in time, back to the medieval synthesis of church and state and its breakup by those Knights Templar of the rising trading class, John Calvin and Martin Luther.

There are plenty of able and informed advertising men, and some of them know this. Yesterday I was in the research department of a large agency gathering certain statistical data. A former associate paused, greeted me and we fell into conversation. Knowing me, he guessed what I was doing—in fact I had never at any time tried to conceal anything—and, helpfully, he offered his own explanations. He blamed Martin Luther. For the long sequence of cultural disintegration, climaxed in our time by the paradox of mass production and mass starvation and by the development of the advertising agency as a mass producer of fakery, human stultification and confusion, he blamed Martin Luther.

This man started life as a traveling salesman. He never went to college, so that his mind remained fresh and avid, if cynical. And he had known great charlatans in his time—notably Elbert Hubbard. He understood them very well, and, being of a speculative turn, he had checked up on their origins. He blamed Martin Luther. He was greatly interested when I told him that the famous German scholar, Max Weber, author of *The Protestant Ethic*, also blamed Martin Luther a little, but John Calvin a great deal more.[1]

My friend had only a few minutes for gossip, however. He had to get back to his desk and read proof on a new toothpaste campaign in which, by a trick of pragmatic self-hypnosis, he had come to believe fervently. When he had finished he would placidly stroll to the station, buy a paper, and solve a cross-word puzzle en route to White Plains and his comfortable and charming suburban family.

While somewhat exceptional, this man is far from being a unique figure in the business. To those atomic voices heard above the clatter of dishes in the Fourteenth Street beer gardens, we must add the voices of the speakeasy philosophers of the Grand Central district—advertising men, many of them, college men and more or less self-

[1] [Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930 [1905]).]

conscious fakers. God in his blue canopy above knows they're fakers, but it is perhaps somewhat to their credit that they know it too.

2

In discussing religion and the ad-man we are not concerned with the sales publicity of the churches. There are plenty of texts on the subject. What concerns us is the extent to which the culture of our acquisitive society, as represented and publicized by the ad-man, has become a rival of the Christian culture, represented by the Protestant and Catholic Churches of the United States.

Since it is our purpose to compare these two cultures, it may be useful to note what social scientists think culture and religion are. Culture may be defined as the total social environment into which the individual is born; religion is a behavior pattern which seeks to dominate the culture. As sociological phenomena, religion, nationalism and radicalism, although dissimilar in many respects, are categorically the same. The sociologist would note the similarities between religions, nationalism and radicalism, by calling them all behavior patterns. The layman would call them religions. The name is not important. What is important is the fact that they have common characteristics.

Each of these religions has an inclusive pattern for human life and society. Each of them would prefer to be dominant and to exclude other behavior patterns from the scene. Witness Russia and the Christian Churches, or Nazi Germany and the Socialist and Communist Parties. As a practical matter behavior patterns do succeed in living side by side, but though the competition may not be overt, it is present. Every behavior pattern has to be sold, more or less, continuously, to the public. This is true, as the anthropologist, Malinowski, has pointed out, even among primitive peoples. He says: "The reign of custom in a savage society is a complex and variegated matter just as it is in a more civilized society. Some customs are very lightly broken; others are regarded as mandatory." The more effective techniques used in selling the public a behavior pattern may be considered techniques of rule. Religious rituals belong in this category; so do the publicity engines of Mussolini, and of Hitler. No proper perspective can be gained in relation to such behavior patterns as religion, nationalism and radicalism, unless one realizes that they are highly important in relation to group survival. As Bagehot has said: "Any polity is more efficient than none." But the more shrewd and complete the polity, the more efficient an instrument it is in the struggle for survival.

There are certain interesting parallelisms between the techniques of persuasion and admonition used in religious rituals and those used in contemporary advertising. Jane Harrison, the distinguished student of Greek religions, notes that ritual in its beginnings has two elements: the *dromenon*, something which is done, and the *legomenon*, something which is said.[2] In the beginning, the words of the ritual, according, to Miss Harrison, may have consisted of "no more than the excited repetition of one syllable." The action of the ritual is something that is "re-done, commemorative, or predone, anticipatory, and both elements seem to go to its religiousness." The points at which the techniques of religious ritual and advertising correspond are the following: In both instances, there is repetition. In both instances the symbols used in the ritual, or the ad, have the same meaning to the audience. A symbol, which always has the same meaning, is called by Durkheim, "a collective representation." A number of social scientists have pointed out that the Utopias of the radicals become comprehensible if one realizes that they serve as collective representations. In advertising, the name of the product, the slogan, the packaging and the trade-mark, are obviously used as collective representations.

[2] [Jane Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912).]

The net result of religious ritual is to leave the participants in a religious ceremony more restless than soothed, simmering gently, or boiling violently as the case may be, in an impressionable, emotional state, which cannot find complete release in immediate action. (Note the ritualistic function of the movies already described as a want-building adjunct of the advertising business.) While the audience is in this impressionable state, the minister or priest makes strong persuasive or admonitory suggestions in regard to the action which the individual should take in the future. In advertising, the admonitory or persuasive voices of the priesthood are also present.

The close analogy between the sales publicity methods of the Christian Church and those of the modern Church of Advertising was noted in 1923 by Thorstein Veblen, who missed little, if any, of the comedy of the American scene. Veblen's long foot-note (p. 319, *Absentee Ownership*) should be read in its entirety in this connection. It is particularly interesting as showing the rapid movement of forces during the intervening decade.

> The Propagation of the Faith is quite the largest, oldest, most magnificent, most unabashed, and most lucrative enterprise in sales-publicity in all Christendom. Much is to be learned from it as regards media and suitable methods of approach, as well as due perseverance, tact, and effrontery. By contrast, the many secular adventures in salesmanship are no better than upstarts, raw recruits, late and slender capitalizations out of the ample fund of human credulity. It is only quite recently, and even yet only with a dawning realization of what may be achieved by

> consummate effrontery in the long run, that these others are beginning to take on anything like the same air of stately benevolence and menacing solemnity. No pronouncement on rubber-heels, soap-powders, lip-sticks, or yeast-cakes, not even Sapphira Buncombe's Vegetative Compound, are yet able to ignore material facts with the same magisterial detachment, and none has yet commanded the same unreasoning assent or acclamation. None other has achieved that pitch of unabated assurance which has enabled the publicity-agents of the Faith to debar human reason from scrutinizing their pronouncements. These others are doing well enough, do [*sic*] doubt; perhaps as well as might reasonably be expected under the circumstances, but they are a feeble thing in comparison. "Saul has slain his thousands," perhaps, "but David has slain his tens of thousands."[3]

[3] [Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times: The Case of America* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1923), 319–20.]

Within a year after this footnote was written, Mr. Bruce Barton published *The Man Nobody Knows*, in which the life and works of the Saviour are assimilated into the body of the ad-man's doctrine, and in which the very physical lineaments of the traditional Christ begin to take on a family resemblance to those of the modern ad-man, so excellently typified by Mr. Barton himself.[4] The discussion of this brilliant job of rationalization must be reserved for a later chapter. At this point it is sufficient to observe that today Veblen's ironic patronage of the emerging priesthood of advertising sounds astonishingly inept and dated. For it may well be contended that today the Propagation of the Faith is relatively nowhere, while the religion of the ad-man is everywhere dominant both as to prestige and in the matter of administrative control. Granted that both religions are decadent, since the underlying exploitative system which both support is itself disintegrating by reason of its internal contradictions; none the less, the ad-man's religion is today the prevailing American religion, and the true heretic must therefore concentrate upon this modern aspect of priestcraft. The ancient Propagation of the Faith continues, of course, sometimes in more or less collusive alliance with the Church of Advertising, sometimes in jealous and recalcitrant opposition. We can give little space to the quarrels and intrigues of these competing courtiers at the High Court of Business. Clearly the present favorite is advertising, and we turn now to a brief resumé of the historic process by which the priesthood of ballyhoo attained this high estate.

[4] [Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1924).]

3

Starting, as any discussion of the economic and ideological evolution of modern industrial capitalism must start, with the breakup of the medieval church-state synthesis, we note that the Christian feudalism of the Middle Ages did not live by buying and selling. As John Strachey puts it in *The Coming Struggle for Power*, "what Western man

accomplished by some four hundred years of struggle, between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, was the establishment of the free market."[5] The development of monopoly capitalism in the modern period qualified this "freedom" of course; it also intensified the fundamental contradictions of capitalism, and sharpened the ethical dilemma which is concisely stated by the conservative philosopher, James Hayden Tufts, in his *American Social Morality*:

> The impersonal corporation formed for profit represents in clearest degree this separation of the modern conduct of commerce and industry from all control by religious authority and by the moral standards and restraints grounded in the older professedly personal relations of man to man in kinship, neighborhood or civic community.... To turn over all standards to the market was to lay a foundation for future conflicts unless the market should provide some substitute for the older standards when man dealt with his fellow and faced the consequences of his dealing.[6]

[5] [John Strachey, *The Coming Struggle for Power* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1932).]

[6] [James Hayden Tufts, *America's Social Morality: Dilemmas of the Changing Mores* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1933), 125.]

The market did provide such a substitute, of course—a fake substitute. It provided the religion of advertising and developed the forms and controls of the ad-man's pseudoculture.

It is this utilitarian fakery with which we are here concerned, rather than with the economic and political conquests of the trading class. We are concerned with the ideological and religious rationalizations by which these conquests were both implemented and justified. My former advertising colleague who blamed this long history of serio-comic rationalization on Martin Luther would seem to be somewhat in error, just as Max Weber probably overemphasizes the rôle of the Protestant Ethic, the Calvinistic doctrine of "justification by works."

In Weber's view the Calvinistic doctrine of worldly success in a "calling" as a means of winning divine favor constituted a necessary theological counterpart of capitalism; without such reinforcement of the normal lust for gain, he argues, the extraordinary conquests of capitalism in England and in America would have been impossible. Calvinism reconciled piety and money-making; in fact the pursuit of riches, which in the medieval church ethic had been feared as the enemy of religion, was now welcomed as its ally. It is important to note, as does Tawney in his introduction to Weber's great essay, that the habits and institutions in which this philosophy found expression survived long after the creed which was their parent had practically expired. So that, quoting Tawney, "if capitalism begins as the practical idealism of the aspiring bourgeoisie, it ends ... as an orgy of materialism."[7]

An orgy is an irrational affair. To the writer, the most interesting and suggestive aspect of Weber's interpretation, as applied to the

[7] [R. H. Tawney, Foreword, in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930 [1905]), 3.]

contemporary phenomena of the ad-man's pseudoculture, is this divorcing of the acquisitive drive from any control by hedonistic rationality. The pursuit of wealth, for the Calvinistic entrepreneur, was not merely an advantage, but a duty. And this sense of duty persisted long after the Calvinistic sanctions had ceased to be operative. Moneymaking for money-making's-sake, like art-for-art's-sake, supplied its own sanctions. Both are self-contained disciplines, fields for the display of an irrational and sterile virtuosity. Weber, in the concluding pages of his essay, sets forth this consummation with moving eloquence:

> In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often give the character of sport. (The advertising "game." J. R.)
>
> No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrifaction, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved."[8]

[8] [Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 182.]

But note that this was written in 1905. What Weber saw with horror was not "the last stage," but the next-to-the-last stage—perhaps not even that. The cage was kept spinning, not merely by its accumulated momentum, but by the organized application, on a tremendous scale, of the great force of emulation. Ten years before Max Weber wrote the paragraph quoted, Thorstein Veblen had written *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, which gave currency to his fertile concepts of "vicarious expenditure," "conspicuous waste," etc.[9] These concepts, all revolving about the central motivation of emulation, are the stock-in-trade of the modern advertising copy writer.

[9] [Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan, 1899)]

New prophets did arise in America—Elbert Hubbard for one, Bruce Barton for another. America entered upon the "surplus economy" phase of industrial capitalism, and the appropriate religion for this period, which was interrupted, but also accelerated by the war, was the religion of advertising, which did not reach full maturity until after the war. The motion picture industry came along as an important adjunct of the emulative promotion machinery, used as such both at home, and as an "ideological export," to further the conquests of American imperialism in "backward" countries. Peering out of the vistas ahead were radio and television.

Seeing all this, Theodore Dreiser seized upon the great theme of emulation—keeping up with the Joneses—and wrote *The American*

Tragedy. And Carl Sandburg wrote, almost as a kind of sad ironic parody of Weber: "This is the greatest city of the greatest country that ever, ever was." And the cage spun faster than ever. And Robert Frost wrote *West Running Brook*, in which he symbolizes western culture as a stream disappearing in the barren soil of the American acquisitive culture. And Robinson Jeffers wrote:

> Man, introverted man, having crossed
> In passage and but a little with the nature of things this latter century
>
> Has begot giants; but being taken up
> Like a maniac with self love and inward conflicts cannot manage his hybrids.
>
> Being used to deal with edgeless dreams,
> Now he's bred knives on nature turns them also inward; they have thirty points, though.
>
> His mind forebodes his own destruction;
> Actæon who saw the goddess naked among the leaves and his hounds tore him.
>
> A little knowledge, a pebble from the shingle,
> A drop from the oceans; who would have dreamed this infinitely little too much?

When he wrote this, as a kind of an advance obituary of industrial capitalism, Jeffers was an unknown recluse on the coast of California, and the book in which it appeared was printed at his own expense. But that same year the presses rolled out the four millionth copy of Elbert Hubbard's *Message to Garcia*, in which the big business cracks the whip over the modern office wage slave.[10]

[10] [Elbert Hubbard, *A Message to Garcia* (East Aurora, NY: Roycrofters, 1903).]

The cage spun faster still. On an August midnight in Union Square, New York, a banner was flung out of the *Freiheit* office reading "Vanzetti Murdered!" and, in the words of the New York *World*'s reporter:

> The crowd responded with a giant sob. Women fainted in fifteen or twenty places. Others too, overcome, dropped to the curbs and buried their heads in their hands. Men leaned on one another's shoulders and wept. There was a sudden movement in the street to the east of the Square. Men began running around aimlessly, tearing at their clothes, and dropping their straw hats, and women ripped their dresses in anguish.

Thus the State of Massachusetts was killing the God in man. But Bruce Barton still lived, and, having written *The Man Nobody Knows*, went on to write *The Book Nobody Knows*, and *On the Up and Up*.