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The Religious Roots of Babbitt's Humanism

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I'M USED TO ROBUST REBUKE, SO I WAS PLEASED TO DISCOVER that my astute interlocutors, [Eric Adler](#), [William Smith](#), and [Bradley Birzer](#), found most of my lead essay, "[We Should Have Listened to Irving Babbitt](#)," agreeable. The credit goes to Babbitt, not me, for my priority was to summarize his complex claims in *Democracy and Leadership* without putting my own in the way.

The chief criticism of my piece was that I did not articulate Babbitt's notion of an "inner core" (Adler's accusation) or "inner check" (Smith's accusation). Guilty as charged! There's a reason for that: this symposium celebrates the 100th anniversary of *Democracy and Leadership* in which Babbitt favors the expression "inner life." Having reread the book from cover to cover since the

publication of my lead essay, I did not notice the term “inner core” used at all. The phrase “inner check” appears only once, in the final chapter, within a quotation of Stuart Pratt Sherman that numerous scholars have misattributed to Babbitt. I did detect the construction “inner control” applied to Edmund Burke and Confucius and, later, in Babbitt’s discussion of Freud and Berkeley. He also uses “inner working.”

Of course, I may have missed a reference. Copyright restrictions guard this text against the instantaneous search processes of artificial intelligence. I couldn’t extract keywords from an online edition, for example. Nor could I employ the “control + F” function to find instances of “inner core” or “inner check” in, say, Google Books. So, I proffer my claim with hesitation. However, the glaring absence of the phrase “inner core” would explain why Adler advances Babbitt’s definition of that concept from a different, earlier text, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919). Having devoted an entire section of my essay to “the inner life,” I had supposed I adequately covered the subject, but because my interlocutors are greater experts on Babbitt than I, I will defer to their judgment and admit to the shortcoming.

Adler sees error in my claim that “Babbitt’s humanism embraces agency and will whereas the naturalistic and religious modes suffer from determinism or fatalism.” If I was mistaken on this point, then I blame Babbitt, who, for all his brilliance, was prone to the kind of erudite overstatement that can cause confusion. Babbitt clearly locates himself in the humanist camp but prefers the religious to the naturalist mode. Adler is spot on in saying that Babbitt believed that “religious modes of thought *could* suffer from determinism or fatalism,” but “this was by no means a foregone conclusion.”

The three modes Babbitt articulates include major religions such as Christianity or Buddhism. In his framework, the tripartite categories (naturalistic, humanistic, and religious) are broader than any one religion. Christianity, a religion, does not necessarily fall exclusively under the heading of religion or the religious mode in Babbitt’s portrayal. Different versions of or traditions within Christianity might lean more towards the humanistic, religious, or naturalistic mode. These three modes have more to do with the organization of people under systems of government or associative communities than with any particular theology. Under Babbitt’s

classification, the religious mode specifically recalls theocracy rather than theology, except insofar as the latter influences the character of the former.

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In fact, over the course of centuries, the driving elements of certain forms of Christianity have been more representative of one of the three categories than another, depending on their influences (e.g., Platonic or Aristotelian). Sometimes Christian movements combine elements from more than one of the three modes. For example, Babbitt states, "Protestants, especially the Calvinists, and Catholics, especially the Jesuits, borrowed naturalistic concepts such as a state of nature, natural rights, and the social compact, but only that they might affirm more effectively the principle of divine sovereignty, with its theocratic implications, in the spiritual order."

Even *within* Christianity or Buddhism, according to Babbitt's paradigm, there are degrees of the humanistic or the naturalistic. Babbitt notes that Augustinian Christianity tends towards naturalism and that the doctrine of innate human depravity has humanistic and religious versions. He alleges that, in the Far East, the Confucian tradition of India is more humanistic than the Confucian tradition of China. These examples suffice to show that when Babbitt takes issue with the religious mode, he's not taking issue with religion *per se*. His problem, to my mind, is with the governmental arrangements or social orders that flow from different varieties of the three modes.

I did not suggest that Babbitt is hostile towards religion. In the chapter "Rousseau and the Idyllic Imagination," he takes pains to defend the Christian virtue of humility against the expansionist hubris and patriotic pride of Rousseau. Babbitt, as Adler and Birzer point out, was open to religion even if he did not embrace orthodox Christianity or conventional institutional worship or religious expression. The religious *mode*, rather than religion itself, he associates with theocracy, a form of government or political association that he contrasts with democracy. "If," he says, "a people is deeply religious, a government with a more or less strongly marked theocratic element is possible." He identifies India as the country where the religious mode and theocratic view most clearly persist. But his rejection of

the religious mode and theocratic view—both of which he prefers over naturalism—does not mean he opposed religion itself.

Babbitt saw religion as the root of all other ideas; accordingly, for him, political institutions are traceable to some religious views. “When studied with any degree of thoroughness,” he says, “the economic problem will be found to run into the political problem, the political problem in turn into the philosophical problem, and the philosophical problem itself to be almost indissolubly bound up at last with the religious problem.”

Owing to the written format of these symposia, whereby we cannot interrupt one another to add nuance or correct misunderstanding, I may have come across as more defensive than I actually feel. Truly, I’m nothing but grateful to Adler, Smith, and Birzer—each of whom I admire—for inspiring a deeper dive into *Democracy and Leadership*. Had our conversation occurred over drinks in a bar, we would, I suspect, find ourselves in general and merry accord. For the sake of precision, I felt the need to clarify a few key points, but only in the spirit of friendship. Unquestionably and emphatically, Adler, Smith, Birzer, and I agree on the essentials, most notably that our intellectual and political culture would benefit from Babbitt’s influence and example.

A RESPONSE TO

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[VIEW FULL FORUM](#)

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