

Spiritual Evolution of Giovanni Papini by William P. Giuliano

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SPIRITUAL EVOLUTION OF GIOVANNI PAPINI

GIOVANNI PAPINI, rather late in life, finally achieved Christianity and gave us the *Storia di Cristo*, one of the finest accounts of the life of Christ written in modern times. His inspiration, the warmth of his account, may come from the fact that he found Christ only after a long, bitter, struggle against Him, yet towards whom he always felt himself irresistibly drawn. This article will deal with the steps which painfully led Papini to the peace he found in the Catholic Church.

Papini's writings are characterized by a search for truth. He reminds one of a man searching for a lost object. He walks along, pounces on a thing which resembles it, shouts for joy, but examining it closely he realizes that it is not the thing he is seeking and dejectedly throws it away, continuing the search with fearfully beating heart. This search for truth is epitomized in *Un uomo finito*, a spiritual autobiography of his intellectual investigations up to the year of its publication, 1912.

This desire for truth is the motivation of all his speculations, but it in turn is generated by an infinitely potent desire to make himself great, to raise himself above the multitude, to become immortal at any price, in any field of speculation. He himself, affirms this fact in *Un uomo finito*.

"Volevo insomma, che s'incominciasse con me, per opera mia, una nuova epoca della storia degli uomini."¹

This egoism took an intellectual direction, perhaps because he began reading voluminously at an early age, and also because he was very conscious at an early age of his physical unattractiveness and wished to compensate for it by making himself intellectually attractive. In order to avenge himself on the rest of the world because of its aversion towards him, he decided to make himself a great man. He definitely alludes to this in *Un uomo finito*.

"Ero vestito malo; ero brutto; ero bianco in viso; avevo l'aspetto del malcontento; sentivo che nessuno mi amava nè poteva amarli. Chi mi guardava mi disprezzava con tutto il corpo. . . . Cosa credete di essere voi altri, uomini sciocchi e donne ben vestite, che mi passate di accanto con tanta strafottenza? Vedrete cosa farò io! Voglio esser più di voi, più di tutti, sopra tutti. Son piccino, povero e brutto ma

¹ *Un uomo finito*, 12 ed., Florence, Vallecchi, 1925, p. 151.

ho un'anima anch'io e quest'anima getterà tali gridi che tutti dovrete voltarvi e sentirmi."²

The youngster had made a decision. He was to become an immortal. His greatest asset and his keenest weapon was his intellectual capacity. Therefore, he wanted his name to be placed alongside that of Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, Aristotle, etc. to be revered for all time by all men. His first god was Papini. His first church was the library. Later he enrolled under the banner of pragmatism and appropriately called his ultimate goal L'Uomo-Dio.

According to Papini, man wants to become l'Uomo-Dio in order to attain perfect and lasting peace. He can reach this state of beatitude in two ways; by simply renouncing all desire, Nirvana, or by becoming omnipotent and thus so satiated with power as to be bereft of desire, also Nirvana. The first, the Nirvana of Buddhism, Papini says, is a failure. Consequently man must make himself omnipotent.

By means of metaphysics, religion, the arts, occult arts, and performances of miracles, he must make himself capable of doing anything, and, upon knowing that he has the capacity to do anything, he will have no further desires. Hence, he will have achieved Nirvana, eternal peace, perfect immobility and absolute cessation of all action.

Papini of course did not succeed in making himself omnipotent. He wished to attempt the impossible precisely because it was impossible. Finally, even he made no further attempts to attain the unattainable. Philosophy had failed him, not only in his pragmatism, his Uomo-Dio, but also in the philosophies he had so joyously embraced before that venture. He had been a Schopenhauerian pessimist, a positivist, a monist, an idealist, a mystic, and an occultist. He had discarded them one by one. He had no further use for philosophy, and he took his leave of it in *Crepuscolo dei filosofi* (1906).

In *Crepuscolo dei filosofi* he discusses Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Spencer, Nietzsche, and Comte and reduces their systems to mere plays on words. He attempts to prove that all their speculations are devices to justify their own beliefs by dialectics based on unproven premises. These were the men who had previously impressed him most, and by crushing them, he had liberated himself.

This is the first of his disillusionments. He now turned to creative writing. He had not succeeded in the realm of the logical, the real,

² *Ed. cit.*, p. 33.

so he was constrained to direct his efforts to the illogical, the unreal, the fantastic. He could not fathom the real world so he had to create a world of his own. He then wrote *Il tragico quotidiano* (1906), *Il pilota cieco* (1907), *Parole e sangue* (1912), *Buffonate* (1914), *Le memorie d'Iddio* (1912), *La vita de nessuno* (1912), and *Cento pagine di poesia* (1915). The first four books are collections of articles written by Papini in many newspapers and magazines. The first two from 1904-1906, *Parole e sangue* from 1907-1910, *Buffonate* from 1912-1914.

All of them contain a series of short stories written in a very fantastic vein. While they are fantastic to the point of absurdity, they retain an element of reality, and each one has a message to tell. They are the battleground of his thoughts, an attempt to liberate himself from the ideas he has rejected by putting them on paper. For example, in *Il tragico quotidiano* (*L'uomo che volle essere imperatore*) and No. 3 of *Parole e sangue* (*L'uomo desideroso*), we see a return to idealism. In No. 5 of *Il tragico quotidiano* (*Il demonio tentato*) he wants the devil to make the whole world one homogeneous substance (monism). In No. 9 of the same work, (*L'ultima visita del gentiluomo malato*), there is the desire to annihilate himself (Schopenhauerian pessimism). In No. 11 of *Il tragico quotidiano* (*Non voglio esser più quel che sono*) he has reached the depths of pessimism and wishes to transform himself into an entirely new person. *Memorie d'Iddio* is an acknowledgment of the failure of his Uomo-Dio. In it he achieves omnipotence but he is still unhappy.

Papini by this time has reached a state of complete and profound pessimism. He hates everything human and material. In many stories his characters die, led to their death by a relentless chain of circumstances. Papini is like Mattia Pascal. He strives incessantly to destroy his former self, but he cannot escape from his past. His past must forever be reflected in his existence at any given moment.

In some of the stories, however, he merely wishes to stimulate men into thinking. This is especially true of those in *Buffonate*. It may be said that all these stories are written with a double purpose; a mental catharsis, and the desire to reveal problems to those who have never stopped to consider them.

Of this group, *Cento pagine di poesia* stands out as an example of Papini's great lyrical qualities in his prose. One is carried away by its flowing rhythm and strikingly beautiful imagery. The content is also strikingly different. Papini here rejects mankind and turns to

nature and animals for consolation. In No. 1 (*I miei amici*) he shows a great love for a serpent, a toad, a scorpion and a jay. Only his immediate family is exempted from this scorn towards humanity, and he devotes two tender episodes to the eulogy of their charms. No. 3 (*Il mio fiume*) is a masterpiece of lyrical description. He vividly and beautifully describes the immortal life of a river. Man's life is short by comparison. Man is impotent against the great forces of nature. Each story of this work is an expression of Papini's innermost thoughts, told in an incomparably beautiful, rhythmic prose.

Papini still did not find the peace he was seeking. He had rejected almost everything of positive value, therefore he made one last effort to find himself by examining negative values in *L'altra metà*, first published in 1912. In it Papini starts from this premise:—every proposition begets its opposite. Consequently since we have failed to divine the real essence of Being, let us study Diversity, the Impossible, the Non-existent; for Knowledge we must study Ignorance, Error, and Insanity; for Action we should investigate Inaction, Evil and the Useless.

Papini devotes the entire book to the inquiries concerning these negative values. He is always logical and often makes significant and important observations, but he can never accomplish his objective. The last chapter, *Rimorsi*, is written in true Papinian style. He realizes the futility of his quest and says:

“Chi crede insomma, che in questo libro c'è la verità, un buon dato di verità, sarebbe uno stupido anche agli occhi miei, di me, padre ingrato e disconoscente.”³

The nature of the book clearly shows the desperate, abject pessimism of Papini. He has tried every field of knowledge to ascertain a rational truth, but again he has failed. In *L'altra metà*, however, the beginning of the acceptance of Christianity can be seen. Papini himself later had the book reprinted because it represented the initial stages of his conversion. For example, he says:

“Vi son cose, quali il nostro destino futuro o il principio del mondo che più di tutte le altre vorremo sapere, e sulle quali nè la nostra scienza, nè la nostra filosofia, per quanto chiaccherino a gara, posson dirci nulla che vaglia. Per rispondere a tali domande son nate le religioni, le quali danno meglio che dimostrazioni danno certezze.”⁴

³ *L'altra metà*, 4 ed., revised with new preface. Florence, Vallecchi, 1922, p. 211.

⁴ *Ed. cit.*, p. 123.

Thus Papini, unable to find a rational absolute truth, rejects reality and begins to look towards the supernatural. The event which finally made Papini a firm Catholic, however, was World War I. During the period 1914–1917, he was preoccupied mainly with matters concerning the war. He urged the Italians to fight on the side of the Allies and tried to enlist himself. He was greatly disappointed on being rejected because of physical defects. He soon learned, however, that war was a grim game. The innumerable massacres, and the destruction of countless lives and property filled him with horror, and thus for a second reason he rejected the world of reality and looked towards the supernatural. He was now a Catholic in every sense of the word. He did not explain the reason for his conversion until many years later when he published an article in 1932 (published in *La pietra infernale* later), entitled *Il Croce e la croce*.

"E vuol sapere il Croce come io sono stato condotto al Cattolicesimo? Non ho mai voluto scrivere, benchè ripetutamente sollecitato, la storia del mio ritorno a Cristo ma per dimostrare al Croce che io non mi sento offeso dai suoi acerbi e talvolta ingiusti giudizi voglio fare un'occasione per lui. Sarò naturalmente, brevissimo. Durante la guerra, e specie negli ultimi tempi, fui profondamente rattristato dallo spettacolo di tante rovine e di tanti dolori. . . . Il Cristianesimo dunque mi apparve, in un primo tempo, come un rimedio ai mali dell'umanità ma, proseguendo nelle mie solitarie e ansiose meditazioni, venni a persuadermi che il Cristo, maestro di una morale così opposta alla natura degli uomini, non poteva essere stato soltanto uomo ma Dio . . . e perchè in essa soltanto mi parve che fiorisse abbondante e splendente il tipo d'eroe che ritengo il più alto: il Santo."⁵

It would seem that the World War, and his philosophical disillusionments led to Papini's conversion rather late in his life⁶ but such is not the case. From the moment he took his pen in hand he was destined to be led to Christianity, for in his very earliest writings when he was very far from calling himself a Christian he showed a great deal of respect for the Church. In *Crepuscolo dei filosofi* (1906), he says:

"Ma il povero Comte ingenuo anche nell'imitazione di quel grande capolavoro di finezza e profondità che è la chiesa cattolica . . ."⁷

In the same book he defends the Catholic church against Nie-

⁵ *La pietra infernale*, preface by Piero Bargellini, Brescia, Morcelliana, 1934, pp. 150–153.

⁶ *Crepuscolo dei filosofi*, 5 ed., Florence, Vallecchi, 1927, p. 150.

tzsche, who declared it an instrument of the weak to suppress the strong.

Throughout his writings Papini constantly uses the terminology of the church; e.g. l'Uomo-Dio, Santo, etc. His means of reaching the state of l'Uomo-Dio are precisely those which lead to the canonization of holy men, that is, the working of miracles, fasting, solitude, chastity, and concentration of the spiritual faculties.

He also wrote a number of articles from 1908-1914 which, if read without reference to his other works, would lead one to believe that he had always been a staunch Catholic. He later collected them and edited them in a book, *Polemiche religiose*.⁷ A brief summary of the more important ones follows:

I. *La religione sta da sè* (1908). He defends Catholicism against Croce as a system independent of philosophy and in no way subservient to it.

III. *Ecce homo* (1912). He defends the literal interpretation of the Gospels against W. P. Smith who believed them symbolical.

V. *I liberi cristiani* (1910). He is hostile to the Modernists.

VI. *Puzzo di cristianucci* (1913) and

VII. *Esistono cattolici* (1913). He exposes the hypocrisy of many Catholics.

VIII. *Risposta a Benedetto*. (1914). This is a diatribe against Pope Benedict XVI for his incompetence in trying to end the war, and against the weaknesses of the church in general.

Papini during these years was strongly anti-religious, yet one cannot help thinking, after reading these articles, that his criticisms were not destructive ones, but rather were attempts to purify the Church by pointing out its faults.

As was pointed out in the beginning of this article, Papini's great inspiration was always the desire to make himself great, to create a new creed with himself as the head. After years of fruitless effort he gave up. He was no longer anxious to be the prime mover himself but was now content to accept a position as a pillar of the church, to strive to achieve his greatness within the framework of the Church, to become a saint. He no longer wished his name to be placed alongside that of Goethe, Shakespeare, and Cervantes but alongside that of St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Augustine. In the same selection which was previously quoted from *La pietra infernale* in answer to Croce, Papini says:

⁷ *Polemiche religiose* (1908-1914), Lanciano, Carabba, 1932.

"E tanto era forte in me l'amore per quel divino maestro dell' amore ch'io decisi di far qualcosa perchè le sue parole giungessero anche a quelli che non le conoscono e non le intendono o non le apprezzano. E incominciai a scrivere, solo, in campagna, non spinto di brame di acquietamento o di fortuna ma dal sincero bisogno di giovare a qualche mio fratello, la *Storia de Cristo*."⁸

Thus, ironically enough, Papini's first step into the fold brought him more fame than any he had ever achieved while striving to remain outside of it. The *Storia di Cristo* (1912) deservedly merits the praise it provoked. It has a fresh vividness which brings it very close to the reader and makes Christ a very close friend of his. Throughout the book there is evident a strong love for Christ, a nostalgia to behold Him and adore Him which reaches its climax in the epilogue, a fervent prayer to Christ.

Christ's greatest and most important axiom was, for Papini, "Love thine enemies." It is the leit-motif of the whole story; the doctrine Papini wishes to teach a war-torn world that all peoples might unite in everlasting peace.

The key to the new Papini lies in his book *Sant'Agostino*. Papini felt very close to Saint Augustine because Saint Augustine had exalted the intellect, and had been converted from a life of sin to Christianity. He says as much in his preface:

"Mi sembrava quando ero giovane, che tra lui e me qualche somiglianza ci fosse; anche lui letterato e amatore delle parole, ma insieme creatore inquieto di filosofie e di verità, tanto da esser tentato dall'occultismo, anche lui sensuale, e desideroso di fama. Gli somigliavo si capisce, nel peggio, ma insomma gli somigliavo."⁹

And later:

"Paragonarsi ad Agostino è certo superbia, ma ingegnarsi d'imitarlo è dovere."¹⁰

Papini then proceeds to devote most of his time to the propagation of the faith. He writes of the lives and works of great Catholics both ancient and modern, that we might emulate them (*Scala di Giacobbe*, a collection of articles written between 1919-1930 (1932), *Sant'Agostino*, *Gli operai della vigna* (1929)). He even takes Dante to task in *Dante Vivo* (1933), for not following the road he has shown to others. He takes pains to point out the contradictions between Dante the poet and Dante the man. He says that Dante could never be an

⁸ *La pietra infernale*, ed. cit. p. 152.

⁹ *Sant'Agostino*, Florence, Vallecchi, 1929, p. 8.

¹⁰ *Sant'Agostino*, ed. cit. p. 341.

imitator of Christ because he was proud, revengeful, lascivious and cruel. He condemns him as a Christian but admires him as a poet and as a Catholic who indicates the good road to others.

Papini is relentless in his attacks upon the enemies of the Church, and unstinting in his praise of the great Catholics. He is now a firm pillar of the Church.

In 1931 the old Papini rose up once again to face the new one and he wrote *Gog*. All the conflicting ideas and emotions which had so tormented him before he had found peace in the Church, visited him again. *Gog* is a worthy and suitable companion for *Il tragico quotidiano*, *Il pilota cieco*, *Memorie d'Iddio*, *Vita di nessuno*, *Parole e sangue*, and *Buffonate*. It is again fantastic but at the same time critical and purifying. All of his discarded ideas return to torment him and perhaps by writing them down he thought he could liberate himself from them just as he had freed himself from his previous philosophical beliefs in *Crepuscolo dei filosofi*. In the story entitled *Filomania* (study of insanity) we see the return of *L'altra metà*. *Egolatria* seems a regeneration of *L'Uomo-Dio*. *Siao Sin*, and *Sir C. Frazer e la magia* are a return to occultism. *Il viale degli dei* savors of the old anti-Catholicism. In *Caccavone* he reduces Being to *il Nulla*, and lastly *Ripulitura difficile* is the re-birth of the desire for the complete extinction of our species (Schopenhauer). He adversely criticizes poetry, music, the theater, our ideas of progress and our institutions. We see traces of his former idealism, pessimism, and fatalism. He is still the seeker of glory—

"E necessario esser nati grandi per sopravvivere nella storia? Non credo, ma è necessario, però, far qualcosa d'enorme e di singolare, che non possa esser mai dimenticato."¹¹

Thus the militant Catholic Papini still retained some of the elements of his former self just as the atheist Papini had in him the seeds of Christianity.

Papini may not be canonized by the Church he has so well attacked and defended, but he has left his mark in the literary world and he can rightfully say that he has fulfilled the wish he so determinedly expressed as a child:

"Son piccino, povero e brutto ma ho un'anima anch'io e quest'anima getterà tali gridi che tutti dovrete voltarvi e sentirmi."¹²

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¹¹ *Gog*, Florence, Vallecchi, 1931, p. 195.

¹² *Un uomo finito*, ed. cit. p. 33.