

Coercion Through Belief

Some thoughts from reading the life story of Bernadette Soubirous.

(1 December version: this may be modified, am not done with the topic yet)

Three things I want to make perfectly clear:

(1) Coercion is part of life. The carrot and the stick are everywhere. Want a paycheck? Come to work. Want to go faster than the limit? Pay your fine. Want a degree? Work for it.

(2) I admire those whose beliefs make them abjure the normal way of being in the world and instead seek and make their own some alternative vocation such as priest, monk or nun. Marvelous. Not everyone is happy or productive in the more 'normal' roles that nature and society seem to expect from us. Marriage and children is not for everyone.

(3) The past and present had and still has instances of coercion to believe. Modern Christians think of Muslim examples as soon as this is mentioned, but it wasn't all that long ago that there was a Christian Inquisition that punished unbelief with death. Muslims and Jews, for example, were violently driven out of Spain. Staying, without converting to Christianity, meant death. Converting made one a "converso," one who could stay but always suspected of hidden heresy, never quite trusted, never fully integrated into Christian society.

That is about coercion TO belief. What about coercion through belief?

What about those who are coerced into an alternative vocation? This was common long ago when well-to-do households made sure their surplus daughters would end up in convents that they endowed or at least gave substantial gifts to. I suppose if that person "caught" the spirit of her calling, it was well in the end, but surely there must have been much grief and suffering along the way. Hopefully no one is coerced into such lifestyles anymore, and so it is safe to assume that those whom one sees in religious attire are wearing them because of their own desire to live their life in such a dedicated manner. Good.

Coercion through belief is common, It can have a "happy ending." But does the end justify the means?

A believer, when he or she decides to either abstain from a given action, or to engage in a given action, because not doing so, or doing so, seems to be in harmony with his or her religious sensibilities, his or her faith, is self-directed and living in harmony with their internalized faith. Can't fault that.

But now let us assume that person 'X' actually believes that another person, representing a religious institution, has the keys to their salvation. They have faith in their religious institution and in its leadership. They may even feel that the institution is a Divinely established one, and that the leadership is Divinely appointed and empowered. That will make 'X' likely to want to do as bidden by a person in a leadership position in that institution. As long as what is requested/suggested doesn't obviously violate the tenets of the religion as our 'X' understands those tenets. One wants to avoid imperiling their salvation through willful disobedience of God's appointed leaders.

I do not want to argue the likelihood that there is such a thing as a Divinely established institution or a Divinely appointed person in a leadership role in such an institution. My personal opinion needs to be set aside here or this turns into a very different discussion. So, for the sake of this discussion, let us accept that both institutions and persons can be God-ordained, appointed, inspired, etc.

One of the most illustrative and perhaps extreme examples I have written about before is the argument from a male leader of a church that teaches and believes that a man's having multiple wives is God's requirement for gaining entrance into the highest heaven for a man as well as for a woman. It is such a sacrifice, especially on the part of the woman, that she is guaranteed salvation in this highest heaven, and on her merit thus gained her closest relations are also saved. Put together a man in a leadership position in such a religion and a young woman he desires as an additional wife, and the following poetic, even romantic, and yet very coercive discussion makes perfectly good sense:

<http://www.thoughtsandplaces.org/polygdefense.html>

When John Taylor, Mormon prophet and President, was in hiding from federal authorities in 1886 at a friend's farm in Kaysville, Utah, the friend's daughter became his nurse. Taylor was weak, and was to die within seven months of the time he proposed to her, a girl fifty-one years his junior.

In his proposal he promised her "a seat among the Gods," and an eternal life:

**In robes of bright seraphic light; and
With thy God, eternal -- onward goest, a
Priestess and a queen -- reigning and ruling in
The realm of light. ...
Josephine, the cup's within thy reach; drink then
The vital balm and live.**

She did, her father performing the ceremony, and sixty years later Josephine crossed over into the next life to claim her promises.

All parties believed, in this instance. All parties believed in the doctrine of plural wives as being necessary to this highest degree of salvation where faithful men would gain the status of becoming Divine Beings, Gods, with their women as their eternal Queens. So it was well understood that "thy God" would be her deified husband, to whom she would be a Priestess and Queen. Seven month of servitude is a small price to pay for such a guarantee!

But didn't Josephine have the normal urges to marry a man closer to her own age. One with whom she fell in love as people do, and one with whom she would look forward to having and raising children with? She had a higher calling, one from the very President of her church, a person whom she revered as God's only Prophet on Earth! The rest of her life she would remain spiritually married to him.

OK, now let's finally get to Bernadette. She was 14 when she had her visions. What did she foresee for her life at this point? To meet a fine young man, get married, and have children? Or to instead become a Bride of Christ, to live a dedicated life of service and obedience in order to prepare, the rest

of this life, for a spiritual marriage with Christ, to be realized in the next life? The fact that all sisters of all Christian lands and times were to similarly become brides of Christ was not an obstacle. The marriage would be a spiritual one.

What was Bernadette's idea of her future life, after her period of visions had concluded?

If you read Chapter 8 of René Laurentin's *Bernadette Speaks*, you get the impression that from the time of her first communion, she had wanted to become a nun. Page 233 has her aunts Basile and Bernarde Castérot say precisely that. Aunt Basile wrote this:

I understood that Bernadette wanted to become a nun. I even heard her say that she had been longing to enter the convent, without being able to say just when the idea came to her. But I think she was considering entering a more cloistered convent and a stricter order, and that it was the Curé Peyramale who advised her, because of her health, to go with the Sisters of Nevers.

Laurentin does not give us the dialogue between Bernadette and Curé Peyramale. But the fact that this aunt was under the impression that Peyramale influenced her decision to become a nun is giving some indication that the account in the novel by Franz Werfel, *The Song of Bernadette*, is plausible. That account comes in two parts, the first is a discussion between the Monsigneur in charge of the bishop's investigation that is starting and Peyramale, who is being instructed to tell Bernadette that she is to join an order (page 319). The Monseigneur is instructing Peyramale as if Peyramale is speaking to Bernadette:

“Consequently, Monseigneur went on, raising his voice, “you are one of those rarest of mortal beings who can demand to be honored at our altars, and therefore you must disappear—make no mistake—because we can't let a saint loose in the world. A saint who flirts with boys and takes a husband and bears children, that would be a rather too amusing innovation, wouldn't it?”

The bishop's tone changed suddenly to one of gentleness and thoughtful softness. “Therefore, little Soubirous, the Church must take you under its guardianship. Therefore, little Soubirous, the Church must plant you, like a precious flower, in one of its best gardens, that of the Carmelites or that of the Carthusians, where the rule is very strict, whether you desire it or no.”

“She will certainly not desire it, Monseigneur,” Peyramale broke in, in a voice scarcely audible. “Bernadette is a natural child of this world and has, so far as I know, no vocation for the life of a religious. And she's so frightfully young, under fifteen.”

The Monseigneur tells Peyramale that she will grow older, and he is to watch over her carefully as she does. The bishops' commission he appointed to look into the matter for several years of intensive investigation and deliberation may declare her a fraud. Or she may come to her senses and confess to fraud. Then she will end up in a reform school for her own good. But just in case she survives the commission, she is to be watched over.

As this commission completes its four years of work and readies its very positive findings for transmission to the Pope, Peyramale carries out his instructions from the Monseigneur a complex dialogue with Bernadette recorded on page 353.

First, Peyramale suggests that the commission's report is about her and makes her

. . . “the centre of a story such as our age has not hitherto witnessed. Do you really believe . . . that you can now say” 'I've done my share; now let me live my own life'? Do you”

“But I did do my share.” said Bernadette, pale now to the very lips.

Curé Peyramale, called “dean” in Werfel's book, one of his titles, now lays down the law:

The dean thrust his index finger out into the void. “You are like a bullet that has been shot, Bernadette. No one can change your course. Listen to me carefully. The commission has written a very important report about you. This report admits the possibility that you are the one chosen by the powers above and that to your hand and to your hand alone which brought forth the spring itself are to be traced a great number of proved miracles. Do you understand just what that means? This is the report which, signed by our bishop, is being sent to Rome to the Holy Father himself and to his cardinals, and the greatest and wisest men of the Church will be watching you for years, nay, for decades, and then . . .”

Peyramale goes on in rather circumspect language to hint she may very well, at some future time, be made a Saint. Bernadette understands what is being told, and reacts this way:

Deathly pale, she jumped up. “But that is frightful!” she cried. “It can't be, I don't want it!”

On page 354 and 355 Werfel continued this discussion with Peyramale asking Bernadette if the sisters with whom she has been living in the local hospital run by the Sisters of Charity of Nevers are not very good and very sweet? Peyramale, as part of his effort to keep watch on her, and to take care of her during her bouts of ill health, acquired lodging for her in that hospital. Bernadette agrees they are very sweet. Then Peyramale asks her is she has ever imagined herself as being one of them someday? Bernadette says no, she is too low for such a lofty calling and would rather take work that has been offered her by an old widow, as her maid. Peyramale again goes into lecture mode, and refers back to the Monseigneur's (bishop's) words:

. . . “I understand it all. Life in the world is life in the world. . . . And no one must be forced to take the three sacred vows. One takes them only if the soul desires passionately and earnestly to sacrifice itself to God. The demand is stringent. The third vow, that of obedience, would probably be the hardest for you, little soul. You were obedient to the lady. True. But otherwise you love your own way and your freedom. Yet the bishop is right. Can we let little Soubirous, to whom the Most Blessed Virgin condescended, run about like a little savage? This was his question. Next the Holy Father and the cardinals will be sitting in council concerning her visions and miracles, and she desires to live as other women do! No, no, the bishop said, Bernadette is a precious flower which we must take under our care Don't you see that, child?”

Bernadette sat deeply bowed and made no answer.

“Long, long ago,” Peyramale reminded her, “I said to you: 'You are playing with fire, O Bernadette.' But it is not your fault that you did so. Your lady was the heavenly fire, O Bernadette. She raised you high above all men. It is actually possible, little one, that your name will survive your death. Do you think that imposes no obligation on you? You can't suddenly play truant from your destiny, as though it were school, and be an old widow's servant.

Heaven chose you, by my faith. Nothing is left you now but to choose Heaven with all your soul. Isn't that true? Tell me yourself.”

“Oh, yes, that is true,” Bernadette breathed after a long silence.

Peyramale continued by describing the Sisters of Nevers as doing important work with the sick and the poor, under a rule that is “beautiful and lofty,” and indicates that the wheels have already been set in motion for her to be able to enter this order. He then tells her that she need not worry over her family, they are being taken care of by the Church too, through an arrangement for her father to again be put in charge of a mill. Her father was a miller by trade, but had lost his mill and hit on hard times the last decade, as had the entire region for that matter.

This Peyramale/Bernadette story reminded me of the Taylor/Josephine story told above.

In my mind both stories are tales of coercion through belief. Not that Josephine was ever unhappy about her marriage to John. Not that Bernadette did not grow into her own person as a nun and nurse. Both Werfel and Laurentin make it very clear that after some rough times, Bernadette took to her new life and lived it with great zeal and passion. Werfel makes the observation that in order to do so, Bernadette had to shake off some of the indoctrination and regimentation she had undergone, which I found both heartening and interesting. On page 403 Werfel notes that at one point a change came over her. She was no longer a pupil of her vocation, but a serious practitioner. Then came a war, and on pages 404 and 405 Werfel describes the horrible conditions in her hospital due to the casualties coming in from the war with Prussia. Werfel suggests that this challenge brought out the best in Bernadette [the reference to Casterots refers to her mother and relatives on that side of the family with several members known to have knack for healing]:

No one knew in the halls of the hospital that Sœur Marie Bernarde was the girl from Lourdes. She seemed a nursing sister like any other, distinguished solely by her unusually large eyes and pleasant features. Yet it came to pass that ever more of the wounded and the sick asked for her, even in rooms where she had never been on duty. Day and night there was a crying for Sœur Marie Bernarde. Alleviation seemed to flow from her touch; her glance brought refreshment. Victoriously there re-arose that resolute aspect of her character, the Casterot heritage, which the conventional life had repressed. . . . The work was beyond the strength of any. Bernadette's energy grew to meet the demand. Colour returned to her cheeks. The doctors and the clerics in charge sang her praises. . .

So it took several years for her to come to grips with her vocation as a nun, which did not fit her well for some time, and once she adapted herself to finally be a nun, she also re-grew some of her innate abilities and personality traits, under the pressure of dealing with war's horrors. Werfel says she was especially popular with the wounded from her home region with whom she joked in their own dialect, rather than in French, much to their surprise and delight.

It was not long after this war that her ill health caught up with her, and she died. But it was very gratifying to me to read about her coming into her own in terms of her native personality, her native abilities, and her talents, though a nun.

If good results ever justify bad means, then the coercion of Bernadette by her belief may be somewhat justified by her seeming to have become a happy, well adjusted woman toward the end of her life. Poor excuse, though.

Would it really have made a difference to the Church if she had married and had children? We would not have seen her sainted, surely. I would never have read either Werfel or Laurentin, surely. But so what? The cures at Lourdes started before she was ever sainted. And I hear it told that the cures continue even now.