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Revelation 4:15–16—In Praise of Lukewarm Religion

In Revelation 3:15–16 Jesus condemns the church of Laodicea for being lukewarm in its embrace of the faith: “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”

While preachers have often taken up Jesus’s charge when urging their congregations to greater zeal, lukewarm religion has not been universally regarded as a bad thing.

Thomas Hardy

Thomas Hardy, in his novel *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), introduces a character named Gabriel:

On Sundays he was . . . one who felt himself to occupy morally that vast middle space of Laodicean neutrality which lay between the Communion people of the parish and the drunken section.
(chap. 1)

The Jesus of Revelation would urge Gabriel to make up his mind and join either the “Communion people” or the drunkards. But in the early twentieth century, he would be joined by two noteworthy advocates of lukewarmness.

Samuel Butler and George Bernard Shaw

In his 1903 novel *The Way of All Flesh*, Samuel Butler tells of a character named Ernest who comes to the conclusion that both religious extremism and anti-religious zealotry are equally harmful. At one point, Ernest writes an essay, declaring,

We should be churchmen, but somewhat lukewarm churchmen, inasmuch as those who care very much about either religion or irreligion are seldom observed to be very well bred or agreeable people. The Church herself should approach as nearly to that of Laodicea as was compatible with her continuing to be a Church at all, and each individual member should only be hot in striving to be as lukewarm as possible. (chap. 85)

The above citation became somewhat famous in its own day, and about two decades later received an endorsement from the famous playwright George Bernard Shaw in the preface to his work *Back to Methuselah* (1922):

The world is kept sane less by the saints than by the vast mass of the indifferent, who neither act nor react in the matter. Butler's preaching of the gospel of Laodicea was a piece of common sense founded on his observation of this.