

Modern Secularism

FAITH AND UNFAITH IN THE MODERN AGE

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CHAPTER I

FAITH AND UNFAITH IN THE MODERN AGE

From the earliest ages, men have differed from one another in their conceptions of Divinity, their notions varying according to the degree of their intelligence and the level of their culture, and being affected by manifold other factors in their lives and circumstances. The overwhelming consensus of mankind, however, has been that a spiritual order existed, and interpenetrated our visible world: that the establishment of a right relationship with that order was a matter of overwhelming importance, both to individuals and to the community. Man could not live well - or be safe from disaster of varied kinds - unless he rendered this due to the hidden Powers which overshadowed his life, and exercised their secret control over the material world, which was commonly regarded as "the garment of the living Spirit."

All the controversies of yesterday were between men who agreed, at least, upon the existence and importance of this Divine Order. This belief formed a basis of unity for Christians of every kind; and it linked Christendom with Judaism and Islam, and with the Platonist and Aristotelian philosophies, as well as with the pagan world of the Gentiles in Asia, Africa and America. To be sure, there were to be found a handful of disbelievers here and there - especially among highly civilized peoples: while there were a larger number of "worldlings" whose lives were conducted with small regard for anything but mundane motives and expediency. But one of the features of the modern world which seems to be new in the history of mankind is the systematic attempt which has been, and still is being made to expel or exclude the "spiritual idea" and its implications from the whole body of a civilization; an attempt which has, actually, achieved a very substantial degree of success.

Not only is full and clear belief in God more frequently absent from human lives than ever before, but the whole background of thought in which that belief is found is now very commonly rejected. It has become a basic assumption in our Western world that the temporal and material order is the only one of which we need to take practical account in our way of life, whether as individuals or as communities.

This assumption, it must be emphasized, is not peculiar to avowedly atheistic systems of thought like Communism: it underlies all the principal "ideologies" which have been contending for world power during the present 20th century: Fascism, Communism, Socialism and Democratic Liberalism as understood by many of its adherents. True, the "materialism" of these movements conceals an undercurrent of idealism whose origin is spiritual - and which gives them their driving force: but this force tends to grow weaker as the "perfume of the empty jar" of the rejected religious tradition gradually fades away, and the implications of a purely "space-and-time" view of man as a planetary social animal are realized in thought, and made the basis of action.

About the ultimate results of this process I shall have some reflections to make shortly: meanwhile I must re-emphasize the rampant fact of materialism of which any man of vivid and realistic supernatural faith must be aware in the world surrounding him - both in "new lands" like Australia and the United States, and in the older Western communities of Europe. Its outlook and values are reflected in our political and social life, in our press, radio, television, literature and cultural institutions, and in the day-to-day life of millions of our fellow-men. Just as the Western culture of the Middle Ages was Christian and Catholic, so the culture of our modern era is "secularist," treating religious truth, in effect, as non-existent.

The Two Worlds

The life of Faith, of course, continues to survive in the midst of this secularist civilization. We have - as Rosalind Murray has well said - "Two separate mental worlds, each self-contained" which exist side by side, intersecting and overlapping, though no more fusing than oil and water. Those who belong to one or the other are, in general, externally indistinguishable. They live side by side: they work together in office or bench or field: sometimes they are members of one family, or even sharers of one marriage-bed. Yet, spiritually, they remain poles apart: and it is becoming harder than ever to establish spiritual contact between one side and the other.

The Christian warriors and "Paynim" Moslems of the crusading era were far nearer akin to one another than many who dwell in constant and apparently intimate association in our own world.

We have said that the man of real faith cannot fail to be aware of this secret division between belief and non-belief. It is, however, largely ignored or treated as unimportant by public opinion and the organs through which that opinion is formed and expressed. Moreover, the attitude of "those who profess and call themselves Christians" reveals too often the unconscious infection of their thought by the prevailing tone of the world. They are, it seems, reconciled to this anomalous situation as though it were normal: and they, too, are accustomed to talk, act and think about everyday affairs as though the differences of basic attitude to life were of no particular account. It is taken for granted that political views, nationality, social class, intellect, taste, differences of technical knowledge and skill are important in classifying human beings: but classification according to "religious opinion" is regarded as giving undue importance to a purely private matter which has - or ought to have - no social significance. In the case of teachers, for instance, it is commonly assumed that "religious tests" are not only objectionable, but unnecessary - the official Catholic view to the contrary is regarded as reactionary bigotry. To the secular world it does not matter whether these people believe in God or not, so long as they can do their job without making life uncomfortable by insisting on their personal views about its meaning and purpose.

The Secularist Mind and Religious Persecution

Indeed, the typical secular-minded "Modern Man" has become so profoundly alienated from religion that it is incomprehensible to him that anyone can truly regard the order of things with which believers are concerned as real and of ultimate importance. When the fact of religious persecution or conflict is presented to him in the modern world, his first reaction is one of sheer disbelief. The stories are "propaganda," invented to discredit the movements accused of intolerance. When the mass of evidence presented makes it impossible for him to hold this opinion any longer, he tries to interpret the conflict in terms of secularist "realism." The Christian is a victim because he is suspected of Fascism, or "reactionary associations"; the militant "anti-God" atheism of the U.S.S.R. and Red Peking is a party-gesture which he deprecates but explains away, treating it as without fundamental human or social significance, and therefore unfit for more than passing attention.

The "real" issue - as seen by most of the foes as well as the friends of Communism in this country - has no relation to this side of Red activity: it is concerned rather with questions like whether Soviet planning works efficiently or not, and whether the new "world order" which the Marxist-Leninist Revolution proposes to establish will be comfortable from the point of view of man's peace and social well-being, and will help or hinder his "progress" in the sciences. Again, there is vivid interest in the possibilities of a compromise which will enable the Communist and Democratic-"Capitalist" ways of life to flourish side by side: or in that of a modification of the Communist ideology so that its adherents may pursue their objectives in a humane and efficient way, without resorting to the nastiness of police-terrorism, servile labour and armed blackmail and aggression. If some change of this sort could be accomplished, the great multitude of our people, as well as their leaders, would be perfectly satisfied. They are entirely uninterested in the tragedy of the mass-destruction of spiritual belief and religious tradition by deliberate, organized pressure on the part of atheistic authorities: and - generally speaking - they regard the improvement of "living standards" and literacy as more than compensating for the destruction of human faith and hope and the vision of spiritual truth. And this multitude of secularist-minded people includes a large body of those who would profess themselves "believers" in God, and even in the Christian religion.

Tolerance and Intolerance

The secular assumption of the unimportance and unreality of religion is behind all the current smooth language about "agreeing to differ," "living and letting live" and the rest of it. In effect, the believer is told that no one will interfere with his religion if he will conform in his actions and words to the secular convention that God is of no account. But if he ventures to challenge openly the current local standards of secularism, he is soon made to feel that he is a "peculiar" person, and that his sort of views are repugnant to the ruling influences of his world. For example, while Catholic beliefs about the Virgin Birth, Purgatory, the Assumption, Holy Images and so forth, are widely regarded with good-natured indifference, tinged with romantic sympathy or "scientific" contempt, it is different with the rulings of the Church about such things as divorce, "mixed" marriages, contraception, sterilization, abortion, difficult cases in childbirth, or euthanasia, in which the law of God is asserted dogmatically in fields which "modern thought" regards as governed solely by social expediency. Here, the reactions to Catholic views are frequently violent: and it is made clear that the intrusion of God as a Reality into the sphere of public policy and social life is regarded as intolerable. For the rest, the secularist "standard pattern" has been imposed on the free public education systems of this country and others, which is based on the implicit assumption of the unimportance of religion

in the sphere of culture and general knowledge: and those who will not conform to this principle of secularist orthodoxy are obliged to pay a part of the expense for the secular school system based on it, as well as bearing the whole burden of their own "dissident" Christian educational structures (so sadly the position of Catholic schools in the Australia of the 1950s).

There are, in fact, no terms of reconciliation between the worlds of those who believe that Theism is an "opinion" of no account socially, and those who believe that "the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever," and that He is the Supreme Reality upon which all mundane things depend. This is already realized by the more radical secularists on the one side and the Catholic Church on the other: and as our civilized world moves on from one crisis to the next, the terms of man's choice will become clearer, and the irrepressible conflict may be expected to grow more bitter in one social sphere after another.

CHAPTER II

THE SECULARIST LOOKS AT THE WORLD

Let us take a closer look, now, at the "way of thought" which has replaced the Christian faith of our ancestors. We must remember, of course, that secularism is not a definite, thought-out philosophy except in the case of the few, and that there is considerable variation in the detail of the opinions of those who stand by it. In general, the design here set forth is implied in the actions and attitudes of most men, rather than systematized in their minds.

(1) The "Real World" is conceived as the visible, tangible order in which man lives, as a denizen of the planet Earth: everything beyond this is, more or less, "Gas and gaiters." Nothing certain can be known about it, so that it can and must be treated as non-existent for the ordinary purposes of practical life. The discussions of "supernatural truth" in which religious controversialists engage are, in effect, discussions about the government of fairyland: their dogmatic statements are no more valid than the fantastic utterances of astrology. And with these go all the assumptions about "sacred authorities" and other sanctities in the sphere of social life.

(2) The universe is a sort of machine, working according to natural laws which are unalterable: these laws govern all life, both physical and psychological. They can be observed and described by human science, and are actually being so observed and described more and more.

(3) The stories of "miraculous" events and revelations in human history are, therefore, "legends": they can sometimes be explained as due to natural causes, or symbolical interpretations of natural phenomena; but many must be dismissed as purely mythical. Some of these myths may have moral value for children - or for simple-minded people who need their aid for good living and happiness: but the growth of man's mind to its full stature involves the progressive rejection of "all that nonsense" and the "facing of facts" as revealed by "scientific modern thought."

(4) The laws which govern ethical conduct are not based in a "Higher Law" either implanted in the minds and hearts of men by God, or positively revealed by Him (e.g., through Moses, or Zoroaster, or Mohammed, or Jesus Christ). They are simply based on the agreement of men to follow certain customs in order to live peacefully together, and develop their higher faculties. The practical standard of ethics is that of "good citizenship," and good neighbourhood, the observance of the customary code of "decency, kindness and tolerance" in private relationships, and so on.

(5) The idea of "revealed" Truth is commonly felt to be somehow degrading to human reason: "We can work things out for ourselves and save ourselves." Belief in immortality and justice in the "after-life" is sneered at as "escapism," and regarded as "anti-social," on the ground that it leads men to neglect social reform here on earth, and to endure tyranny and injustice in hopes that all will be eventually made right in Heaven. Men should have the courage, we are told, to face the grim truth about personal mortality without this sort of "wishful thinking," and to work for an earthly consummation of communal happiness through enlightened goodwill. The Christian way of thought is condemned as undemocratic as well as cowardly since it derives human authority and justice from a Divine Despot rather than from the creative powers of ascendant man himself.

(6) Unlike revelation from above, however, revelation from below - through the subconscious animal instincts - is to be taken very seriously. These must not be "repressed," but their demands met - especially in regard to sex: a "healthy frankness" about the body and its functions is to replace the "unnatural" reticence of the past, caused by religious superstitions concerning "purity."

(7) Since the authority of Government comes from man alone, the only legitimate form is that in which rules are regarded as delegated by the people to carry out their will and serve their material well-being. No Power "by the grace of God" is to be admitted as real. Hence the power of Church dignitaries is regarded as a spiritual tyranny exercised over superstitious minds: while monarchy, in its traditional form, is held

intolerable if the King exercises real political power. It is only to be endured, when politically inactive, as a concession to the irrational “romantic” instinct of the people, and their desire for a symbol of the nation’s unity.

(8) The “churches” are regarded as having real “value” only in virtue of their social function as agencies of humanitarian reform and of education and moral supervision - especially for the young. The criterion by which their activities are measured has nothing to do with sanctity: the “fruits” looked for are those of earthly well-being: and comparison is made between their activities in this respect and those of the State and other human organizations, without regard to the primary religious aims of teaching the Truth of Christ and drawing men to a higher life of grace through His Love.

The Decline of Liberal Humanism

At the end of the progress of four centuries from a fully “Christian” order to that of modern secularism the general mind has been stamped with a view of man which sees the animal side of human nature as fundamental, and regards him as “of the earth, earthy” in the strictest and fullest sense. But this descent did not take place all at once: nor is it yet complete. There was a long “middle period” in which the leaders of Western thought dreamed of an “ideal humanism” which would retain a sense of the high value and perfectibility of the human person, while denying the foundation of Christian thought and belief upon which that idea had formerly rested. But once the conception of man as wholly mortal was accepted, it was seen before very long that the short individual life could only have value and significance in relation to the larger, permanent life of the community, and the “human process” of which that community itself was a part.

This meant the doom of the “middle way” of liberal-humanism. The ideas of “human happiness” and “human well-being” could only be considered realistically in relation to a pattern of life planned by men for masses of men: the individual being a mere temporary “nexus” of social relationships. Secular intellectual interest shifted, therefore, from humanist philosophy and rational ethics to politics and social planning. The “new order” - the secularist substitute for “salvation” - must be set up by external organized action: the applied scientists and social technicians - not the pure scientific inquirers after truth - became the “significant men” of the new age to whom the communities of the world must look for the enhancement of human power and the new designs for well-being - even for the making of a new race by eugenic breeding and educational “conditioning.” Culture was no longer the perfection of the individual understanding, wisdom and sense of beauty, but the training and tailoring of the individual “social cell” for social purposes, so that he would “fit in” with the new organized pattern of communal living. For the new secularists, moral virtue and “social usefulness” are precisely equivalent. The “good” man is the active, trained collaborator in the tasks of the social hive, obedient to the directives of those who speak in the people’s name, living smoothly and easily with his fellowmen so as to avoid every kind of social friction. He is, in fact, the perfect “yes-man” conforming to the pattern of the hive in thought, word and deed.

Towards “Insectification”

In a word, in “emancipating” man from Divine Authority, modern secularism has begun a process towards what has been well called the “insectification” of the human community - the total absorption of the life of the person in the life and activities of the hive within which alone it can have “meaning.” “Modern thought” moves already in the direction of giving the State full control of its members’ bodies and minds.

First,

the “unfit” are to be eliminated by scientific eugenics - including marriages “planned” under medical supervision, enforced sterilization or contraception in certain cases, and “euthanasia” - so-called ‘mercy killing’ - for the hopelessly sick, insane or deformed.

Secondly,

the public communal authority of the State is to be substituted gradually for the family in the moulding of citizens. Little ones are to be cared for in crèches; the young are to be fed and receive medical attention at school; and their educational “conditioning” is to be handed over to vocational experts, who will decide upon their training and placing according to the requirements of planned social construction.

Finally,

“humane” social pressure is to be used to eliminate recalcitrant groups and organizations from the field of culture, and to oblige all to submit to the planned secular pattern of thought and life.

Once again, let me emphasize that I am describing the trend of secularist “modern thought,” rather than setting forth a doctrine accepted by secularist-minded people generally in Australia at the present time. Among these, there are still wide differences as to what their way of thought implies, and most still cling to the illogical outlook of liberal humanism. But the process of “materialization” goes on apace, and is very

widespread: and a vivid sense of non-material truth and sanctity as affecting the whole life of man and the community is already comparatively rare, even among Christians.

CHAPTER III THE PHENOMENON OF DISINTEGRATION

The ordinary modern man - whether nominally infidel or "Christian" or even Catholic - is "disintegrated" in the sense that he is found to be holding simultaneously opinions which are logically incompatible with one another. In the case of the Christian, this means that his thought is "dashed" with materialism, national idolatry and national blood feuds, the politics of class hate and envy, false secular "humanism" and so on. On the other hand, the thought of the actual materialist is "dashed" with all kinds of remnants of Christian idealism and "personalism" which have no proper place in the materialistic system of thought at all. People who deny all real value to individual life and personality except in relation to the "social mass" are nevertheless shocked, sometimes even more than Christians, at the infliction of indignities and cruelties upon their fellow-men, or the ruthless "social engineering," "conditioning" and liquidation carried out by the Nazis or Communists, who accept the full consequences of their philosophy of man and the universe. This mingling of a secularized Christianity with a secularism tinged with Christian sentiment has the effect of producing a general common level of social conduct and standards, such as prevails in communities such as our own at the present time. It tends, also, to foster the illusion of the insignificance of religious thought and belief in relation to practical conduct.

The materialist's outlook logically leads to the view that the word "should" has no true meaning, since a man's conduct is determined by the social pattern in which he finds himself, together with his physical structure and the laws which govern his psychological life. Yet he usually continues to talk and act as if he, and he and other men were morally responsible beings: and his designs for secular living - the very idea that such living can be consciously designed - are still based on that assumption. He is horrified, as I have noted, at social cruelty and injustice; on the contrary, he approves humanity, virtue, heroism and zeal for the cause of liberty.

Exhausting Moral Capital

It should hardly be necessary to point out the danger of the prevalence of this state of mind. The man who practises virtue only because of his instinctive habitual attachment to values which in terms of his philosophy he must hold to be irrational has a moral foundation for his life which is essentially unstable. A society of such men is living on its moral capital without replacing it from one generation to another. Faith and the rational morality based on theism no longer has a firm hold over the desires of rulers and peoples: their concentration on material achievement and wealth and power means that their control of nature through applied science becomes increased, while they also become progressively less fit to exercise such control. That is why we find that natural science, in our own secularist age, is prodigal of promises for human betterment which remain largely unfulfilled: while its development for purposes of destruction have reached sinister heights under the guidance of the "will-to-power." That is why the highly-developed techniques of large-scale organization which we have mastered are used so much to create engines of oppression and falsehood and human de-formation of which the devilish imaginations of our ancestors never dreamed.

Secularism, then, would appear to be essentially a destructive and parasitic way of thought and life, since it can only survive by making use of values which are constantly eroded by its own action. Having noticed this feature - reflected in the instability and inconsistency of individual lives, and the growth of destructive forces in the social sphere, let us look more closely at certain common secularist assumptions, and see how far they are coherent from the standpoint of the common-sense idea that human thought has some relation to real life.

CHAPTER IV THE SUICIDE OF THOUGHT

We will begin with a common "line" set forth by secularist "modern minds" at the present day. "I don't" they will say "maintain the position that everything can be explained in terms of matter and energy, because I don't know enough for that. But I intend to continue trying to explain everything in this way until I can find something for which other assumptions are required."

Now that sounds a fair enough proposition: so let us offer one fundamental problem for our secularist to explain in terms of matter and energy if he possibly can: namely, the fact that he is thinking. He will answer, no doubt, that the study of the mind itself is by no means excluded from the world view of modern secular science: and point to the results of psychological research, the work of Freud, Jung and others, in order to

show that the process of thought is increasingly being explained in terms of matter and energy. Actually, what the new psychologists are concerned with is the results of mind: they classify the way people behave, giving an exterior view of their mental life: and the results they have attained by this research are very valuable indeed.

It would not, however, be of any value at all if the minds of those engaged in the research were no more than a mass of “complexes” produced by a material process. If we argue (with the Freudian) that “thoughts” are merely due to a process of this sort: or (with the Marxist) that they are due to “class conditioning” we have to make an exception of the particular thought-process we are using in our argument.

True or False?

The dilemma may be expressed more simply in this way. We have two propositions, based on two arrangements of thoughts, which, on materialist principles, are reducible to terms of matter and energy. One is “The moon is made of green cheese, and is eaten slowly by the sky-giant every month.” The other is “The moon is a satellite attached to our planet earth, and the monthly ‘phases’ we observe are caused by the variation of its position in relation to the earth and the sun.” How is it that one of these propositions comes to be qualified as objectively “False” and the other as “True,” if they are no more than different arrangements of “matter and energy,” in the human thinking organ? What is the basis of this valuation, and how can it have any meaning? And if it has no meaning, how can we reach any conclusion about life or reality by any process of thinking whatever?

This argument has been set forth in brief by Professor J. B. S. Haldane - himself, strangely enough, a zealous Marxian - who says, “If any mental processes are determined wholly {italics mine} by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose my beliefs are true . . . and hence, I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.”

To sum up, materialistic logic has no explanation of the function of the human mind as a truth-finding organ: a function which must be assumed, in some fashion, in order to relate thought to objective reality. If the psychologists cannot tell us truth, they can’t tell us the truth about how our minds work! All knowledge and therefore all science, has become impossible: all language unmeaning.

A way of thought which is reduced to this idiotic incoherence in its attempt to describe the nature of thought itself, and which finds it necessary to doubt or deny the freewill which is assumed as a fact in every human relationship of our lives, can only be described as a road to the suicide of thought. This suicide, in fact, is the inevitable consequence of the view that man’s thought and action is simply part of the process of nature, determined in the same way as other physical phenomena.

The Rational Approach to Faith

The difficulties involved in accepting a non-materialistic philosophy or faith are real and serious: but, in tackling them, we are not brought to the same kind of impasse. The method of argument which leads to such conclusions as God’s existence, the possibility of Divine Revelation, and the probability of the survival of the human soul after the death of the body, is a rigorously rational one: and where there are problems - such as those of evil and pain - they are faced up to by the great philosophers of Christian Theism in an honest and realistic fashion, even though their conclusions remain tentative and imperfect. The trouble is not that the secularist “modern man” cannot find an answer to the questions he asks: but that he either does not ask the questions at all, or refuses, like Pilate, to “stay for an answer,” on the dogmatic assumption that there is none of any worth to be given. He will say, “I don’t know: no one can know: and, anyhow, it doesn’t signify.”

The first word (or sentence) is, no doubt, true: the second he has not tested: the third is both false and foolish - since it ought to be clear that enormous practical consequences are involved in the great questions about what man is and to what destiny the human race is moving, individually and collectively.

CHAPTER V THE REVOLT AGAINST TRUTH

The startling truth about the world in which we live is that most of those who guide its thinking are not really interested in objective truth at all. The rebellion against religious “dogma” is, in fact, a far more profound revolt than most of us realize. It is not - as its maintainers seriously and sincerely contend - simply an impulse to slough off inessential and “unreal” ideas which have cribbed, cabined and confined the rational mind. Rather, it is a fundamental revolt against the laws of man’s being - a refusal to accept objective truth. If we look at the points of our faith most generally attacked by modern thinkers, it will be realized that they are those which embody the basic truths about man’s position in the universe and real nature.

Thus, the Divinity of Christ is rejected as an incomprehensible fantasy: and we substitute the myth of a "higher human" raised by his own power and acquired social virtues to a sort of earthly divinity. The initiative in redemption is transferred from God to man: man replaces God as the focus of adoration. The process from material being to rationality, from rationality to the new higher humanity, is a process which takes place in defiance of all the laws of thought perceived by reason - it involves adding two and two to make five at each stage. But it is pleasing to man's self-assertion: it makes him a master, a self-creator - not a created being saved by the descending love of his Maker. The whole concept of secularist "progress," in fact, is a mass of "wishful thinking": the materialization of the idea of "salvation" has turned it into an erection of nonsense built on pride.

Again, denial of eternal punishment is represented as a humane reaction to the primitive conception of a vindictive Divinity - those indignant about the doctrine of hell almost invariably conceive it in crude and childish imaginative terms, and refuse to trouble themselves to examine the careful statements of Christian philosophers and theologians. In reality, at the back of it there lies something very different: a refusal to accept the principle of retribution which runs through actual life. Once again, the secularist will not have the nature of the universe, in which inexorable consequences result from the misuse of free-will. "Don't worry: it won't really happen" "It does not really matter." This is the other facet of the rejection of religious dogma to the impulse to self-assertion. The serpent, you may remember, told our first parents that they would not die, by their disobedience, but would become as gods.

The Habit of Self-Deception

Of course, our attitude does not affect the truths we are running away from: but they do not seem so near and so menacing if we can manage to pretend that they are not there. This gesture of "non-recognition," therefore, has become a characteristic feature of our world even in lesser matters than those of the foundations of life and thought. We have a powerful school of politicians and "intellectuals" who hold that the way to peace is to pretend that the aggressor-powers are sincere in their desire for an accommodation; that they do not hold by their Marxist principles, but by others less uncomfortable in their implications: that they are not really guilty of the crimes against religion and humanity of which overwhelming evidence exists: or that those crimes are not related as they really are to the fundamental aims and beliefs of those who have ordered them. They invent new smooth names to describe ancient evils, and deem that they have thereby exorcised them: they propose solutions to bitter, menacing problems by doing the comfortable thing and "wishing upon a star." Communism is to be "cured" by social well-being without arming to repel the Red totalitarian power-machine: Asia is to be reconciled without any real concessions to inter-racial justice . . . and so the dream-story goes on.

Science and the New Thought

Even the Laws of Science - hitherto assumed to be the immutable and authoritative ultimate basis of existence in our secularist world, as those of faith were in Christian ages - are no longer immune from the subjective erosion which has undermined the idea of "Truth" in other spheres. Thus in a Scientific Charter of Scientific Principles, drawn up during the recent Second World War, by the British Association we find the statement: "That the basic principles of science rely on independence combined with co-operation, and are influenced by the progressive needs of humanity." A letter of 13 October 1941 to the British Daily Telegraph draws attention to the implications of this oracle. "Men apparently do not rely on the basic principles of science, but the basic principles rely on man! The law of gravitation, the principle of the conservation of energy, the theory of relativity, depend for their validity on the proceedings of men, and are influenced by their progressive needs. Newton's apple would have acted quite differently if men had been less independent and co-operative, or if their progressive needs had been different!"

So, the "truth of the senses" which secularism alone admits, faces the denouement of its own dethronement. Scientific propositions themselves are mere "conventions," expedient for the operation of this or that individual or group. Scientists are even found contending that they are not concerned with reality, but formulate their schemes "as if they corresponded with reality." But if science is not concerned with reality, what is it concerned with? And if its sages talk in these terms, what can we expect of political and social ideologues except a "truth" which is conceived purely in terms of temporary expediency; a criterion according to which Hitler's and Stalin's dogmas have precisely the same validity as those of the civilized democratic world! And, with the downfall of truth, man tumbles from the lofty pedestal upon which he was set by liberal-secularism as a "seeker after truth" to the level of an animal intent on the exaltation of his greed, his appetites and his egoism by means of "rationalizations" of various kinds.

CHAPTER VI THE MORAL CHALLENGE TO MEN OF FAITH

One of the commonest answers of the secularist to the Christian who speaks to him of the merits of his faith is, "If the difference between your way of life and mine is as great as you claim, why is it that Christians are in practice so difficult to distinguish from us pagans in the fashion of their actual behaviour?" He will go on to cite examples of Catholic drunkards and lechers, Catholics who are uncharitable and grossly dishonest, cruel and narrow-minded . . . and so on.

I have already answered this challenge in part by pointing out that our world is not composed of all-out Catholics living in the light of Catholic truth, and all-out secularists living in accordance with their own philosophy, but of Catholics infected by the values of the secularist world around them, and secularists who have inherited Christian habits of thought which raise their conduct above the level of their philosophy. Hence the tendency towards a certain common level of practical standards.

The reply, however, is not one which we Christians can accept as in any way satisfactory in answer to the challenge regarding our own inadequacy. The man who makes it is, often enough, really in quest of truth: and he is puzzled by the paradox of the elevation of Catholic principles and beliefs, and the contrasting insufficiency of the people who have received the new "Life of Faith" but show small sign of having been transformed by it, or by the torrents of grace to which they have access through the Sacraments.

The Christian of today, living in the world, carries a grave responsibility: for, willy-nilly, he stands for those who do not share his faith as representing the Church of God in action. "What has it done for you, anyhow?"

We may as well begin by admitting, with shame, that both as a community and individually we have failed lamentably to "Come up to scratch." Don't let us minimize a truth which is very patent to our critics, but rather make it clear that we realize it a good deal more fully than they can possibly do. Indeed, it belongs to our position that we should see our defects better than any outsiders can: and the degree to which we do so is actually the measure of our progress in the spiritual life. It is not without significance that St. Francis of Assisi, whose life was, in the opinion of some, more completely Christ-like than any in Christian history, should have cried out upon himself constantly as utterly degraded: "the chief of sinners." The ordinary Christian lives on an immeasurably lower level, yet he operates in the same medium: and is capable, therefore, of understanding that he is very far from what he ought to be.

We do not claim to be better as individuals than very many non-believers: but we do claim that the way is open to us, through Divine grace, to a level of goodness, even sanctity, to which those without the life of faith cannot aspire. We have been privileged to see further into the meaning of life: the scope of what we mean by good and evil has been infinitely extended for us, and with this extension of our understanding an immeasurable source of strength has been offered to us.

Through faith we see truth: through grace we can act upon it, by responding to the Divine Gift offered to us: but neither faith nor grace can make the Christian life an easy one. It is a "way of the Cross," and neither Christ nor His disciples have ever pretended that it was anything else. No mechanical transformation, no automatic moral regeneration is effected by faith. If we assent in a merely nominal and external fashion to the truths of religion, they will not be sufficient to transform our lives: if our reception of the Sacraments is automatic and superficial, we are failing to make use of the graces given to us. The force and dynamism of the gift is not affected: but our souls are deprived of the full benefit inherent in it.

The Half-Christian

That is the trouble with most "ordinary Catholics." Their faith is only half-alive: and it is because it lacks vitality that they become infected with secularism in their practical life, as an ill-nourished child "picks up" germs. That there should be so many "so-called Christians" who fail to appreciate and live by their faith may be a "cause of scandal" to secularist inquirers: but it is explained by the general tendency of human nature to turn away from the "hard and rare" in every field of activity. All higher religions and philosophies have been confronted with the same problem: in proportion to their demands has been the natural man's reaction to them. But no other religion makes so complete and "totalitarian" a demand on the whole nature of man as Christianity - which presents him with a goal to which his unaided efforts are incapable of attaining. This being the case, there is no ground for surprise that man being man, and in a fallen world, so few Christians do attain perfection, and "Christian civilization" has always been a patchy business, even in days when the Church's beliefs and standards were almost universally accepted in Europe, at least officially.

We Catholic Christians cannot avoid a large part of responsibility for the process which, beginning with the revolt of the Renaissance and Reformation eras, has ended in the nightmare of secularist nihilism in which our modern Western world now groans and tosses unrestfully. What are we going to do about it?

Showing the Flag

To begin with, it is necessary for the ordinary lay Christian to lay hold on the "Life of Faith" with something of the new zeal of converts in the ancient world of paganism, and in the mission-fields of our own day. He must do his utmost to grasp something of the pattern of Christian thought and make it his own, so that all the corners of his personal life and values may be "Christianized." He must not be content to carry the faith around in a bag as a sort of jigsaw puzzle of dogmas and cultural traditions which he has inherited: but he must open the bag, put the picture together and look at it himself, before showing it to others.

In a world of disinterested and confused thinking, men who "know their own minds" and have a clear-cut philosophy of life by which they actually live are certain to create an impression if they show their flag so that others can see it, and read the image and superscription upon it. That is one reason for the impressive success of the Communists - though there are others far less creditable to them. But while Catholics in their public lives and social relations are concerned simply to see how far they can go along with this or that secular movement, or approve this or that secular initiative; while the effect of their faith appears in nothing but a certain number of negations and criticisms concerning the details of secular organizations and policies; while they keep Christ and the Cross, and the Law of God, out of sight as though they were a sort of secret or even something a little indelicate, the destructive process of the secular system will not be reversed in our favour: there will be no return of our world to the sanities of Christian thought and the Christian order.

The Need for Holiness

The temptation of the "good Christian" today is to despair of the salvation of a society which is "non-conducting" to the Christian current. He withdraws into his shell, shrinking from anticipated rebuffs. He "hides his light under a bushel" and is content to remain unnoticed and unmolested. Even, however, if he does all that in him lies, he finds his action "insulated" by the character of his environment. He must choose between an inertia which belies his whole position, or an activity which is alien and distasteful to the social group in which he moves.

If he chooses activity, however - as he must - there is still another danger to be avoided: that of accepting the secularist standard which regards external visible action as the real action. The essential activity of the Christian is spiritual: holiness as distinct from social action - being as the most potent kind of doing. And the more we find our world idolizing external energy, force and "output," the more we ourselves need to cultivate contemplation, prayer, the "Life of the Spirit." It is only in proportion as it is a flowering of this interior life that our visible action can be effective against the hostile "principalities and powers" which lie behind the secularist revolt against God: it is only if our lamps are filled with the sacred oil of Divine love that they can "shine before men" in the sort of personal service which wins souls and transforms societies.

The Sign of Contradiction

But if hostile reaction is the chief effect of mere outward Christian action taken against the general secular opinion, it is not to be supposed that a spiritual contradiction will be more endurable to those who deny or ignore spiritual Reality. The contrary is the case. External opposition can be countered by methods which the secular world understands very well indeed: and it arouses correspondingly less fear among those who command the machinery of power and propaganda. It is precisely when it becomes apparent that the Catholic community really "lives by the spirit" and accepts its standards of value as the only real ones, that it provokes the deepest opposition: because this challenges the entire structure of the secularism which is today's orthodoxy.

The easygoing, low-tension quality of both Faith and the reaction to it has concealed from most observers in Australia the extent of the divergence between the believer and non-believer. But if there were to be an awakening: if Catholicism were to come alive, not as a "social action" or political pressure movement, but as a spiritual force permeating the community, we should find a corresponding strong anti-religious movement. We have to reckon with a positive non-religious standard of value held - however illogically - by many people in this country, varying from "anti-God" bigotry to cultivated "social-humanism": but wherever this standard is confronted with positive, dynamic Faith, it reacts with violence, as against a visible enemy. The position of the rebel heretic - the Voltaire or Diderot - challenging an officially Christian society is often recalled today by secularists with sympathy and admiration: but, it is the opposite situation which now confronts us increasingly everywhere - involving the much older question of the Christian's position as citizen of a non-Christian state.

We usually think of this problem as being peculiar to the "totalitarian" States - Nazi or Communist - where it has appeared in an obvious and drastic form. But it concerns this country also, since in Australia

Christians are in a minority in a community whose real standards, ideals and principles of action are based on a different principle from theirs. Our conception of our country's well-being will not be that of most of them if it is based on Christian concepts: the good we want for her is not what they conceive as "the good."

In time of crisis such differences of underlying standards tend to become intensified. The Christian, in so far as he is true to his own values, becomes to some extent suspect, as in but not of the community. Thus it was with the first Christians. They obeyed Caesar in all lawful things - they did not even resist active persecution: yet they were held to be dangerous, because they testified by their conduct and way of life the strength of their "other-worldly" loyalty. The diluted Christo-secularist is not feared; he is innocuous and "sterilized" by his conformity to the world. It is the "total" Christian, the apostle, who is a permanent challenge to the world's Caesars, whether they are styled emperors, or leaders, or "Sovereign People's Representatives."

Victory Through the Cross

The life of faith must be an apostolate, or it will perish: and its very nature makes it a sign of contradiction in relation to secularism. It requires that we give all we have, ourselves, our lives, in the service of Christ our Lord. This is costly: but there is no cheap and easy substitute. The Christian in our secularist world must choose between his faith and that world's "works and pomps." He cannot serve two masters - or combine "the best of both worlds" by some kind of tour de force. We have to save our world, it seems, if we are to save ourselves: but we have to begin by Christianizing ourselves. And we must face up to the fact that those who do the work of Christ must be prepared to pay the price He paid for victory. We, too, must be lifted up on the Cross, so that the peoples of the world may see and understand, and its valleys of dry bones may be filled with the hosts of a new Christendom, raised out of their death by the power of the renewing Spirit.

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