

THE PROBLEM.

CHAPTER 11.

I hope by now that I have at least convinced the reader that I believe that the danger threatening Christianity is irrelevance, unless it at least learns to support the secular State; it must do that, even if it cannot create a world view. The danger facing Islam is a descent into barbarism, unless it disowns the suicide bomber. To illustrate the gulf that exists between the clergy's official orthodoxy and the congregation's unreasonable pedantry, may I tell the following story? The church where I worshipped for 30 odd years only had a congregation of about 10 by the end; so most of us were on the Church Council. At one Meeting we complained that when the lay-reader took the service, she was not allowed to consecrate the wine; we only got the rice-paper wafers. We made no complaint about the lay-reader; she preached very well, better usually than the clergy. And there was much to be said for our complaint, in that Article 30 of the 39 Articles says, "The cup of the Lord is not to be denied to the Lay-people". Both parts of the Sacrament should be ministered to everyone alike. Now every clergyman in the C.of E. has subscribed to the 39 Articles at some time; it is the fundamental document of our Protestant Religion. A clergyman who has not subscribed to them, or who is unwilling to do so, should go and become a papist. That of course would normally mean losing his job, and being unfrocked. Undeterred by that somewhat unpalatable sanction, we were told that the whole tradition of the Church stood in our way, there were insuperable difficulties in transporting consecrated wine from one church to another, but we need not worry because on each wafer a drop of consecrated wine had been dropped, so we were getting both bread and wine! For good measure, we had to listen to a sermon that his turning the bread and wine into the very body and blood of Christ, was a greater miracle than all Jesus' healing miracles put together. It seemed to me that this was a proposition so preposterous that the same day, or possibly the next day, I wrote the following essay.

Nothing is sacred nowadays. The thief and the hooligan have at least taught us that. The collection plate at church is a legitimate object of theft, if the congregation is so foolish as to leave it unattended for a moment. Any suggestion that a vandal should respect church property, is met with abuse. If anyone says they are without sin, and are not responsible in any way for the ills of society, the standard response in polite society is to roar with laughter. So when the clergy tell us that the Eucharist is the most perfect miracle, transcending all Christ's healing of the sick, in that it changes the bread and wine into the very body and blood of Christ, is this most profound mystery, or is it dangerous farce? It is a dangerous claim; it ignores the blatant science that nothing material changes when the consecration

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takes place. It ignores the danger of descending into magic, with its sinister undercurrent of cannibalism; which is exactly what the early Christians were accused of doing. It ridicules the view that the Eucharist is pure symbolism, and was never meant to be anything else. That it was meant to symbolize Christ's spirit dwelling in us we all agree; the prayer of humble access makes this absolutely plain. But it does not condescend to explain why a spiritual truth needs more than a symbolic ceremony. And when you think about it, it uncomfortably parallels the thought that if all the reputed fragments of the true cross were gathered together, they would amount to a veritable timber yard. Is it similar to the sale of Indulgences in the 16th century, when if you paid for the rebuilding of St. Peters, not only would you go to heaven, but the local hills would turn to solid silver! What is the truth?

Well part of the truth is that the public are unimpressed. I suspect the average lawyer would say it was the most ridiculous rubbish he has ever heard; I suspect the average man-in-the-street would just gape for a moment, and then carry on with his own business. Christ's miracles, if they happened, left his public profoundly impressed, if the Gospels are accurate. Why work a transcending miracle that leaves you open to ridicule? What is at stake?

What is at stake is the authority of the clergy. They cannot perform lesser miracles, like healing the sick. Nobody believes they can forgive sin, when they cannot heal paralysis or mental troubles of any sort: which Christ himself said was as easy as forgiving sin. Their public standing has collapsed with the collapse of authority generally. So how do they differ from the Club Secretary? Their last citadel is that they alone have the legal right to consecrate the sacrament; so matins is dispensed with, the Eucharist is made the paramount service, and they hold the key. Without them it is a truncated service. Is this a legitimate use of power? Or is it an egotistical use of power?

Take egotistical power first. There was not much place for egotism round the historical Jesus. The parochial jostlings of the disciples were quickly put to shame. Annas and Caiaphas did not commit murder to preserve their jobs, but to preserve the nation, as they thought. Pontius Pilate was not egotistical; he was weak in the face of mob violence, and the risk of casualties among his soldiers. The only person who was seriously egotistical was Judas. Tradition says he wanted to force Jesus to adopt the zealot's concept of the Messiah. On any view he must have been utterly frustrated with Jesus' concept; and determined to pursue his own path. No-one wants to see the clergy in this role. Luther felt driven to it; maybe he was right, but look at the result. The last thing we want now is more schism. So I will assume the answer to this question in their favour.

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What about legitimate use of power? The outstanding rebuttal is that both outstanding prophets of the Old and New Testaments are against them. When complaints were made to Moses that men were prophesying who had not been to theological college or got the right diploma, he said he wished all God's people were prophets. When complaints were made to Jesus that unqualified men were healing in his name, he said if they were not against him, they were for him. Both in effect said that if you have the power to work miracles, you also have the authority; which is a very reasonable attitude to adopt. The historical Jesus had no diploma and would have said laymen could consecrate the sacrament.

So what is this miracle that takes place in the Eucharist? If you analysed the consecrated bread and wine, my guess is that not one molecule, not one atom, would have changed its structure. I cannot think the clergy would ever allow analysis; so one goes to the old authority of *Armory v. Delamirie*, which said in effect that where a person has a chattel (or knowledge) which he has a duty to disclose, but does not produce it, you may draw the worst inference against him, that the case reasonably bears. Not the worst possible inference; the worst the case reasonably bears. In other words, without analysis, one is entitled to infer that the consecration changes nothing physical. There is no need to draw that inference; but one is entitled to do so. If there is a duty to disclose, one would draw a much worse inference: that the clergy knew nothing had changed. Of course consecration changes the way communicants treat these objects; but so does a wedding present assume a value above other presents in the eyes of the bride and groom. It symbolizes more. The gift has enhanced value though only to them, and to people who respect their wishes. An auctioneer would be more phlegmatic. No-one suggests the gift becomes miraculous; though it helps to symbolize a profound spiritual truth. Nor is it obvious that the miracle of Christ's indwelling spirit is helped by a consecration, whose effect is said to verge on magic.

My conclusion is that some of the clergy do in fact believe that their consecration changes the bread and wine into the very body and blood of Jesus; but it certainly does not do so for those members of the congregation who are more sceptical, or who view the whole ceremony as symbolism anyway. Educated atheists would say the clergy have mistaken words for reality. Words are seldom reality: usually they are mere ciphers to convey ideas. If words are reality on this occasion, then one would expect the clergy to be able to say to a man, "You are healed", and for the man to be healed. But they do not dare to say it. If words are not reality on this occasion, then the clergyman who is claiming this miracle is leading us down Professor Eucken's cul-de-sac. He was professor of philosophy at Jena in the early 1900s; and his theme was that though Christianity was much the best religion the world had

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known, the clergy had led it down a cul-de-sac, “in which there is lost all inner relation to reality, all inner obligation, any striving to construct our own existence...so that life loses all soul and value and becomes mere appearance”.

The Rule for the prophets of old was that if they did not prophesy truthfully, or if prophesying truthfully they added a few words of their own, the penalty was death. The reason for this drastic Rule was that, if they added a few words of their own, none of their hearers would know whether the earlier words came from God or not. They could only judge if it was from God, if the whole were genuine. So here, if more is claimed than can legitimately be claimed, it vitiates the whole ceremony. Some of those present will see the addition as bogus, and will inevitably see the whole ceremony as tainted. For them, the ceremony becomes divorced from “all inner relation to reality...and becomes a mere appearance”. In other words, if a clergyman claims consecration turns the bread and wine into the very body and blood of Christ, then he must be sure that it is so, and his arguments and practice must be entirely convincing. If someone who could heal the sick, make the blind see, and the lame walk, made this claim, most people would believe him. But if this is the only miracle this clergyman claims to perform, it is legitimate to smile at his credulity.

The 39 Articles have much to say on this subject. Article 28 deals with the Lord’s Supper. To those who worthily receive in faith, the bread and wine are a partaking of the body and blood of Christ, but only after a heavenly and spiritual manner. And it clearly does not think much about reserving, carrying about, lifting up, or worshipping the sacrament; although it does not forbid it. Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of bread and wine) is repugnant and superstitious. Article 30 says the cup of the Lord is not to be denied to the Lay-people: for both parts of the Lord’s sacrament ought to be ministered to all Christian men alike. Article 23 says only those who have been lawfully called and chosen should administer the sacraments: appointed by men having public authority given them in the congregation. This presumably means men who have authority in the congregation: not men who obtain their authority from the congregation. Nothing here to prohibit Lay-ministers consecrating; it suggests anyone who can take a communion service, can do the whole thing.

Of course, all this may have been changed by canon law; but it is reassuring to find that the basic document of the Church of England agrees with common sense as regards the ministering of the sacrament, and what happens when this is done. Partaking of the body and blood of Christ is something the congregation does in a heavenly or spiritual manner, and depends on the faith of the participants; it does not depend on the expertise of the minister, because provision is made for unworthy ministers. If the bread and wine are transformed into

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the very body and blood of Christ in a heavenly or spiritual manner, it is the congregation who perform the miracle, and not the minister!

The problem for any religion is how to hold fast to the truth, both in the material and spiritual worlds; and to leave magic, and anything resembling magic, behind.