

A RELIGIOUS VIEW OF NATURE AND THE UNIVERSE.

PREFACE.

Henry Drummond, who was a prophet of the Free Church of Scotland in the late 19th century, and a most eloquent man who preached to large audiences, declared with shame that there were 30,000 people in Glasgow who did **not** go to church. In November 2002 the Daily Telegraph published an article which declared that, round Hull, only 1% **did** go to church. In ordinary language, the Church has done a “Marconi”; and anyone who thinks that tinkering or papering over the cracks is going to achieve much is in for a rude awakening.

Civilizations come and go. And Toynbee and Spengler prophesied some time ago that ours was coming to its end. Indeed there is a parallel between the decline of our society and the decline and fall of the Roman Empire long ago, with this difference that with us the barbarians are within our society, whereas it was the barbarians from without who overwhelmed Rome. Most people agree that Britain has a Christian culture, because Christianity has been the official religion in this country for the last 1400 years. And Winston Churchill was able to declare after the Battle of Britain that the few hundred young pilots of the Hurricanes and Spitfires, who had won the Battle, had saved Christian civilization for the world. I believe he was right. But it is beginning to look as if the venality and short-sightedness of our politicians and the apathy of the population as a whole is throwing away that victory as fast as ever they can. At the moment the Church of England, whose job it is to uphold the official religion, is in decline. It is not only that just a tiny proportion of the population go to church, but the intolerant secularism that is striding across Europe, to use Pope Benedict’s striking phrase, both insidiously works its way into people’s minds, and also activates the conduct of many in authority too. And fewer and fewer people protest against it. So Christians are convicted in the Law Courts of the new shibboleth of “Discrimination”, when they try to uphold their values; and the C.of E. is persecuted in many more subtle ways. Does it matter that our native culture is being undermined? If so, what can be done about it?

Part of this process of decline is the race for supremacy between Christianity and Islam. Whatever the virtues of Islam as a religion, it is an alien culture in England, at least as compared with the indigenous Anglo-Saxon culture that has grown up here since the Canterbury St. Augustine came to our shores in about AD 600, that is over 1400 years ago. There were others, Columba, Cuthbert, Bede; but in the end Celtic Christianity submitted to the iron discipline of Rome, which at the time was probably just as well. In many ways today it is an uneven race; for whereas any insult or even criticism of Islam is resented, often with murderous violence at least in speech, Christianity is expected to turn the other cheek, to all

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blasphemous ribaldry that is heaped upon it. The media regard it almost with derision. So at the moment it looks as if Islam will win. Yet Islam has dug itself into the same hole as Christianity, by demanding that its doctrine be deemed infallible. Both religions suffer from a stultifying lack of imagination. And perhaps the true race is to see which religion can break free of its prison-house first, and evolve?

Suppose Christianity loses, how long does it take mankind to recover from a new dark age in which freedom of thought is suppressed? Islam has been tolerant in the past; but no-one can say convincingly that Islam is tolerant today. It would suppress any other religion, and even suppresses freedom of thought in science. There has to be “Islamic science”. History records only one dark age, although there may have been a number in pre-history. The Roman Empire took a long time over its decline and fall, but the final collapse of Rome North of the Alps came very suddenly. After their disastrous invasion of Italy, the German tribes found the Rhine frozen on New Years’ Day AD 406. The natural defensive boundary of the Empire vanished almost literally overnight. The German tribes crossed over without opposition, and for three years turned Gaul into a flaming desert. And Gibbon confirms that this may be considered the fall of the Empire beyond the Alps. The clergy of the Catholic church at the time were not idle. The Gallic clergy exhorted Christians to repent the sins which had provoked the Divine Justice to bring about this disaster; and the Latin clergy busied themselves with the Pelagian heresy. Neither saw the disaster as being due to lack of valour. You could hardly imagine a more inept response; and the peril of the C.of E. is that things have not changed.

The poet Ausonius, who lived from AD 310 until about 393, and who wrote lyric nature poetry like Wordsworth I understand, had the inimitable privilege of living through a period when the Gallic war was but a distant memory, and the horror of the German invasion had not happened, and was not feared at least by the poet. Yet England’s turn came next; and history was wiped out in England from about AD 450 to 600, until the arrival of the Canterbury St. Augustine. Durham cathedral was built from about 1200 onwards, and for the first time buildings were erected which rivalled those of Rome. In 1300 Edward I was recognised as one of the foremost soldiers in Europe, and with the long-bow his army could be compared with the fighting power of the Legion. Most of us think modern history began with the Tudors in about 1500; but the modern mind only dates from about 1660, with the return of the Stewarts, the Royal Society and natural science, Dryden and modern prose, Locke and the enlightenment. Even in 1815 it was harder for the Duke of Wellington to travel

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in England than it had been for the Roman Legions. So it takes anything from 800 to 1400 years to emerge from a dark-age; and Hitler's 1000 year Reich was by no means a fantasy.

Hence my view that if Christianity is to contribute to a revival of national life, it is imperative to re-interpret it yet again; this time not only recognising scientific knowledge, but also integrating the Christian citizen with Society or the State. The whole point of trying to recreate a vision of Nature and the Universe is to integrate the lives of individual citizens into the life of the State, so that it is possible to say once again that Britain is an example of a Christian civilization, which the last War was fought principally to preserve. Not of course an uncritical member, but a loyal citizen, who does his duty for all that. Augustine was right; the City of God sits beside the City of Rome, reproving it if need be. The intricacies of Jewish thought of 2000 years ago, no doubt fascinating to scholars, do not solve our problems today.

In order for anyone to create a Christian vision of Nature and the Universe today, they would need to have a reasonable knowledge of Religion, Science and Conflict. Too great a knowledge of all, or any, of these subjects, and they would find it impossible in practice to have any vision; they would be unable to see the wood for the trees. In Religion, even to be bogged down in parish affairs would disable you from seeing much outside the parish. In Science, you would need to have some experience of conducting experiments as well as having a grasp of fundamental theory, and the limitations of the idea of causation; but even at an elementary level, science exerts a subtle pressure on the mind to think in terms of simple mechanical models, which steers the mind towards materialism. So you do not want too much experience. In Conflict, which in all its forms is governed by the same basic principles, probably you do not want the experience of battle; or the trauma of that experience would swamp all other mental disciplines. One's reading too must be broad but not too deep, well informed but not scholarly. With too much scholarship, any vision would be distorted into pedantry. Of necessity therefore, any universal vision will be torn apart by those who possess more experience, and more scholarship in its various aspects, than one has oneself. No new way of looking at things is ever welcomed by those entrenched in the authority of convention, least of all by those entrenched in the authority of the Christian Church.

But is it necessary that Christianity should survive? Well, Science can do nothing for the yearnings of the human spirit, except open one's eyes to the wonders of Nature. Science's job is to provide a mechanical description of the Universe, that corresponds roughly to our experience of it, leaving out of account any spiritual content which it may have. And gazing at the wonders of nature does nothing to instruct men how to fashion the world to their liking. Indeed some scientists are so embarrassed by its impotence in this regard, that they pretend

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that the spiritual world does not exist. Nor is the State over-concerned with the welfare of the individual; it is more concerned with its own power. And one thing the Church has always proclaimed, even through the worst of its errors, is the worth of the individual soul. So without a religion of some kind, who is going to champion the individual?

But what kind of religion? My unhesitating opinion is that it must be a religion that promotes reconciliation. For although it may often be obscene to try to confront the victim of crime with the criminal; one cannot deny it was King Alfred's moment of deathless glory, when he sought and found reconciliation with his enemies. Most people think the object of war is victory; but unless there is a vision of peace and reconciliation at the end of strife, war leads only to a desert. In the Dark Ages it was perhaps an excusable mistake to make. But there was little enough excuse for the Church, as soon as it got a little power again, to forget its Founder and enforce conformity, by the Inquisition if need be. The Counter-Reformation, which represented a refusal to countenance the Protestant desire for reform, led to the atrocities of the Thirty Years War. Nor did Napoleon, the greatest man of action since Julius Caesar, know any better. He said you could do anything with bayonets except sit on them, so he knew an enforced peace did not last; but he ended his life on St. Helena. And it is a valid criticism of Clausewitz that he never grasped that the true aim of War is peace, not victory.

Most religions have not learned this lesson either. They still tend to think that anyone not of their number should either be excluded from their imaginary heaven, or be compelled to conform. They cannot understand that the mysticism of all religions, the ecstatic union of the soul with Supreme Reality, is expressed in the same language in all religions. There is nothing to choose between any of them! Whereas to avoid another Dark Age, from which we may never emerge, what is required of men and women is right conduct, especially in the leaders. That means surely an inspiration sufficiently adaptable to stand a re-interpretation that accommodates science, the greatest creation of the mind of man, with the deepest yearnings of the human spirit? I may be prejudiced, but I think there is only one religion that is capable of this evolution. The others are not so much false or wrong; as likely to prove unadaptable to change. If so, they will probably allow themselves to be taken down an evolutionary cul-de-sac, due to the ineptitude of their leaders, like the ants and bees and dinosaurs before us. There is nothing to prevent vast swathes of mankind following them.

So who or what is going to save us from that? There are so many dangers to avoid; of being bewitched by the mechanisms of science, of taking refuge in the false certainties of myth and legend, of fighting for a fair share of all the resources until there are no resources left, of allowing hope to degenerate into Political Correctness. How do we avoid going down

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an evolutionary cul-de-sac without knowing it, which every other species has done? Ironically evolutionary biologists have no advice on avoiding evolutionary cul-de-sacs. So you really need to think like a god, to cope at all! But to adopt the vision of The Creator, means being reconciled with Him. And the essence of the Book of Job is that you need the comfort of God within, to face the terrible presence of God without. Or as St. Paul puts it, we have not sufficiency of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God. You can try to avoid the fear of God without, by saying He does not exist; but a knowledge of Jung's work on archetypes and the collective unconscious suggests you have to be far gone in delusion to do so. The great myth of Christianity is that God became Man, so that Man might become God. Indeed it is hardly surprising the Creator insists that His spirit alone is capable of solving the problems mankind has made for itself? And who would have guessed the Almighty had the urbanity to invite a reconciliation, as an alternative to Man extinguishing himself?

But God never does Man's work for him. So is it possible once again to re-create a religious view of Nature and the Universe, this time on a realistic basis?