

## GROUND-FLOOR RELIGION

### I

If there is a common bond among all the non-Catholic sects it is probably their opposition to the Church; and if there is a similar bond between the various Philosophies ranged against Catholicism to-day it would seem to be their opposition to the idea of a Transcendent God. Many are willing to admit a Spirit of some kind, but Immanent in Nature, in Men, in History, or in Time. And this is true not only of those whose main concern is with life and evolution, such as Bergson and his later followers, but also of those who hold that the one reality is History or the operation of mind, such as Croce and Idealists of the extreme type. We will, therefore, examine some of these systems to see, if possible, the reasons for this condition of affairs.

Among the many causes there can be no doubt that one of them is the present-day tendency to exalt Experience at the expense of Reason. One bad effect of this is a loss of objectivity, which is well illustrated by a story of the war when a returned soldier was convicted of a glaring contradiction in relating his adventures. His retort was: 'Oh, I thought you wanted experiences, not a blooming argument.' For while Experience may satisfy an individual of the existence of an Immanent Spirit, reason is required to demonstrate to others the reality of a Transcendent God. As Maritain says, 'it is in virtue of that intellectual operation which is the activity most profoundly distinctive of man, namely ratiocination, that it (the existence of God) becomes evident to us.'

Unfortunately even among those who are prepared to reason, some will do so only in departments. They seem to despair of attaining a coherent view of the Universe as a whole. Thus Bertrand Russell appears to think that Philosophy had better divide itself among the various sciences, and aim at particular results by the method of science. That is, instead of Philosophy being the hand-

maid of Theology, it would become a gang of char-women each 'doing for' one of (departmental) sciences. And as the Catholic philosopher has had to deal with the Philosophy of Pluralism, so now he would have to oppose the Pluralism of Philosophy. But, really, thought that does not concern itself with the whole is no longer philosophy, though it may very well be science. Indeed, perhaps here we touch on one of the great errors of our time, namely the substitution of Science for Philosophy, and the acceptance of scientific truths as of philosophic validity and extent.

To illustrate this we may go back for a moment to the *Contra Gentiles*. Here St. Thomas remarks (almost as a thing that every schoolboy ought to know) that everything that is imperfect comes from something which is perfect. The modern man reading this will probably smile and say that it only shows that St. Thomas lived a long time before Darwin. The Catholic philosopher, on the other hand, realises that a short statement of some scientific view of evolution, *i.e.*, that the more perfect follows the less perfect, would have made an excellent *videtur quod non*. And may we venture to suggest that St. Thomas would have replied by making a distinction, pointing out that (quite roughly and in general) it is a principle of *science* that the perfect comes from the imperfect, while, on the contrary, it is a principle of *philosophy* that the imperfect is from the perfect. The former deals with development in time, the latter with ultimate origins. The former may be a matter of experience and observation, and harmonises well with the idea of divine immanence, the latter is a matter of thought and reasoning and leads to Transcendental Reality, which is far the more important element of the two. To quote Maritain again: 'Act is prior to potentiality . . . absolutely speaking this is true. In the order of material causality, on the other hand, potentiality is prior to act . . . the seed to the tree. But the seed itself presupposes the tree which produced it, and at the beginning of the entire process the actuality of the first cause.'

And yet this scientific truth—that the perfect comes from the imperfect—has been erected by many into the position of a great philosophical principle. These are the people who give explanations and solutions of many minor problems, but no account of the ultimate origin or reason of things. They traffic in ideas without revealing the fact that they are undischarged bankrupts. The fact is that scientific thought is by its very nature penultimate, and its answers are soothing but not final. (Eucken.)

A modern case of this substitution of science for philosophy is to be found in *The Scientific Outlook*, by Bertrand Russell.<sup>1</sup> He is discussing the origin of the world and says that personally he thinks that it had a beginning at some remote date in the past. But this, he hastens to add, does not mean that a Creator is required, for the Universe might have originated 'spontaneously,' the only thing to be said against this being that it would be odd, still there is no law of Nature to prevent odd things from happening, he remarks. Later on he says that his argument can be put into a nutshell—which is perhaps the best place for it. His dilemma is this. Either God is subject to the physical laws of the Universe, or He is not. If He *is*, then He is subject to the second law of thermo-dynamics and therefore could not be everlasting. If He is *not*, then 'He cannot be inferred from physical phenomena, since no physical causal law can lead to Him.' Really one might as well say that there is no law of grammar to show that a book must have had an author. There is, too, in his reasoning the underlying assumption that the First cause must be of the same kind and in the same category as its effects, which is an assumption that science by its very nature is bound to make, and thereby shows itself incapable of leading us to ultimate origins. Philosophy, on the contrary, is free from such limitations. And Lord Russell's attitude is really a refusal to get off the moving stairway of science on to the stationary platform of philosophy, while

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<sup>1</sup> George Allen & Unwin; 7/6.

his search for origins resembles that of the man who was always looking for the 'beginning' of rope, only to find whenever he examined a length that the beginning had been cut off.

We need not spend time in considering the ordinary type of evolutionary thought which holds to a Finite God who dwells in time, except perhaps to notice an article in a recent number of the *Hibbert Journal*, by an 'Enquiring Minister.' He said he was perplexed (as well he might be) by the utterances of those he regarded as his leaders in religious thought, and almost pathetically appealed to them for light and explanations that he might be able to utter the words 'Almighty God' in all sincerity. Some of the writers he sees fit to quote are of the sort who regard God as more or less subject to the laws and conditions of the Universe. As to this type of thinking, at least in its extreme forms, one can only say that if similar reasoning were applied to other matters it would lead one to suppose that every principal or proprietor was in the same class as his products or property. It would be natural to conclude, for example, that Madame Tussaud was herself a waxwork, or that the members of the Zoological Society were animals.

## II

We now come to consider some particular systems, and first of all Emergent Evolution, as being to-day very much to the fore. This theory is to ordinary evolution what Bridge is to Whist, it gives one a freer hand and honours count. The good old doctrine of evolution has been retained in general outline, but certain important modifications have been introduced. It has at last been recognised that there are some events or qualities which, unlike the rest, cannot be explained as the mere resultant of what has preceded them, so these are said to 'emerge.' Lloyd Morgan, for instance, speaks of the advent of life, the advent of mind, and the advent of reflective thought. The emphasis is on the 'incoming of the new.'

But seeing that originally the word Evolution was employed to deny the implication of novelty, it seems near to being a contradiction in terms. It would appear that while evolution was ever a bed of Procrustes, Emergence is a spring mattress fitted thereto.

However, we must rejoice that common sense has prevailed thus far. It is frankly acknowledged by this theory that such elements as Life and Mind cannot be the merely mechanical and necessary products of the Matter below and behind them, though, on the other hand, there is no explanation offered as to why there should be this progress. In Professor Alexander's form of the theory there is no Deity in existence to produce anything, to say nothing of such superior entities as life and mind, which seem to come from nowhere. The Professor has thus retained nothing of the doctrine of creation except what is usually considered to be its chief difficulty—how something can come *ex nihilo*. Indeed so far from God creating the Universe, it would be truer to say (according to this teaching) that the Universe creates God, or rather is always in process of doing so, for it will never be actually accomplished. We are told that there have been well-marked stages . . . . Matter . . . . Life . . . . Mind . . . . and the process and advance will continue, for running though it all is what is called a Nisus which 'as it has borne its creatures forward through matter to life and mind, will bear them forward to some higher level of existence'—a statement strongly reminiscent of a verse in one of Newman's hymns.

And Deity is always and ever the stage higher, the next-to-be, 'not actual as an existent, but as an ideal,' which when realised 'ceases to be God.' It is a Being that seems to dwell neither in Eternity nor in time but in the vague future. Indeed, Alexander says that 'it seems to him more reasonable . . . to worship . . . a being whose love draws us to him from in front, and whom we thus help into existence, rather than a being independent of our efforts who pushes us from behind.' We seem to remember some words of Sir Oliver Lodge, who in maintaining that there was no

such thing as a pull, pointed out that the horse did not really pull the cart, but pushed the collar—an example which helps at least to show the necessary priority of a cause to its effect.

Now we come to the most important point. How can a highly intelligent man speak of a deity who does not, and never will exist? It seems that he holds equally to a truth and an error. He rightly thinks that Deity must exceed and excel what is finite and accomplished. He wrongly refuses to believe that it exists independently of the world, to use his own words God is 'caught in the general movement of time.'

### III

Closely connected with these theories are those which are concerned to deny the Personality of God. It is customary to speak patronisingly of the 'tendency to personify.' Croce, for instance, alludes to it and it seems to be a reason for his sweeping assertion that Religion is to be identified with Mythology. Of course there is a tendency to personify, and early man was in too much of a hurry to find personality behind phenomena, and too liberal in his attributions thereof. But he was perfectly right in feeling that when he had arrived at a person, and not till then, had he reached an explanation that was ultimate. Moreover it is a strange thing that some of those who accuse us of this tendency appear to have contracted the malady themselves. As a modern writer says:

'After all . . . on which side is the Myth? . . . What is it we are to worship? . . . The Sacredness of Life. And that is quite as mythological as anything to be found in Genesis. For the talk about 'Life' is pure mythology—the personification of an abstract idea.'—(Barry, *Relevance of Christianity*, p. 150).

Perhaps it is worth while to ask why these writers should be so anxious to eliminate personality. It is probably due to their being intoxicated by local and partial successes. Many phenomena which used to be considered as the direct operation of some personal being are now known to be the

result of natural laws, so some people rush on to suppose that the same must be true of everything in particular and of the whole in general. But, to take a little illustration, one may be surprised on visiting one's bank to find that one has been personifying the work of some cute adding machines, nevertheless the manager remains a person all the same.

That the denial of Divine Personality is in practice the same thing as a denial of a Transcendent God, is abundantly clear from such a book as *Religion without Revelation*, by Professor J. Huxley. He is convinced that 'the idea of personality in God . . . has been put there by man.' But he hastens to add that we need not be distressed, there can be worship as usual, that is to say we can go on registering the 'religious' emotions, and the forces of the universe will take our salute. Prayer, too, he assures us, is still possible, though it would appear to be a case of 'kindly address your supplications to the Universe and not to individuals.' The strange thing, however, is that while Huxley denies personality to God, he rejoices in his own and that without giving us any account as to how he came by it. He gives no explanation of the origin of the Universe, nor any sufficient reason for its existence, and taking his stand on this philosophical emptiness he proceeds to deny the only reasonable explanation of it that has ever been offered. He has plenty of small change for the settling of minor demands and problems, but only because of this huge overdraft at the bank.

#### IV

So far we have been considering the teaching of the Realists, and we must now turn to the Neo-Idealists, and though their outlook is so utterly different from the former, yet they agree with many of them in their rejection of a Transcendental Reality; all is immanent.

In general it may be said that the Neo-Idealist takes his stand on Experience, present experience, the one thing of which he feels we can be really sure. All is mind, but mind

considered not as substance but as an activity. All is Thought, not the cogitatum of the old Idealists which was static, but the cogitatio which is ever active. Reality is History, but again not *historia historizata*, but *historia historizans*. Indeed, seeing that present experience only is admitted it is clear that the past can exist only as an element in present thinking. So mind as creative is History, it makes Reality; and mind as interpretative is Philosophy, it interprets reality.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that Croce posits a Universal Consciousness which is more than the mere sum of finite minds, but this Cosmic Spirit is a process altogether in time, all is immanent. So here he departs from a doctrine of his spiritual ancestor Hegel, who seems to have retained some relic of transcendence, as his Absolute was not wholly contained in historical development. For Croce, on the contrary, Reality is identified with History.

Indeed, it seems that Croce believes not in Heaven nor in Earth, neither are dreamed of in his philosophy. And by Earth we mean Nature as commonly understood, which, he holds, is but an abstraction posited by the mind for practical ends. So thoroughgoing is this Neo-Idealism that Matter and Objects and External World in general are no more than mental constructions.

But if there be no Transcendental Reality, nor Being nor Activity independent of our mental operations, what, we may well ask, does Croce mean by Philosophy? The answer is that for him it is not a Metaphysic, but a Methodology. It is not the business of philosophy to solve the problem of existence, rather is it 'the science of the formation of the historical judgment.'<sup>3</sup> He has indeed brought philosophy from heaven to earth. Further we get considerable light on the reason for this anti-metaphysical attitude from the same sympathetic exponent, who says:

'This tendency to identify philosophy with history and to reject the theological and metaphysical problems, or at least to

<sup>2</sup> *Introduction to Modern Philosophy*. Joad, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> *The Philosophy of B. Croce*. By Wildon Carr, p. 20.



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subordinate them to the problem of the historical judgment is, to a certain extent, a personal trait of Benedetto Croce himself. His own interest, the interest which has drawn him to philosophy . . . is not scientific, nor is it religious, but artistic and literary.<sup>4</sup>

In short the reason seems to be 'We are not interested.' There seems to be also another factor in the case. Croce feels that non-Catholic philosophers have not yet) completely emancipated themselves from all theological pre-suppositions. They have rejected Authority, but many still hold to some transcendental reality which is the ground and reason of this visible world. This 'other-world' concept, Croce thinks, should be banished from thought, being an undesirable relic of the theological system.

Finally, what does Croce mean by Religion? Here again he differs from Hegel, who though he held Religion to be inferior to Philosophy, yet included it in his final triad as (it would seem) a permanent element. Croce, on the other hand, says that Religion is but a transitory phenomenon, an imperfect and misleading philosophy destined to be displaced by the latter with the advance of thought and education. He identifies Religion with Mythology, as we have seen, holding it to be a world-view expressed in images (which are proper to Art), and not in concepts (which are proper to Philosophy). To the man who believes in a religion, it is his philosophy, while to the man who does not believe in it, it is a form of Art. Myth, says Croce, is valuable as metaphor, the divine world is the beautiful world, and God the image of sublimity. Religion, then, has no independent existence as a 'form' of the spirit: and the affinities with Modernism are obvious. Very significant, too, are some further words of Wildon Carr in which he states that the fundamental reason for Croce's polemic against religion as we know it is that it is the concept of a Transcendent and not of an immanent life. For, as we have seen, Croce holds that present experience is our only concern. He, therefore, refuses to believe that History is the manifestation of any transcendent

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<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

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mind, or is over-ruled by any final causes; such events as the Incarnation or the Final Judgment are to him quite meaningless, as coming from 'above.' All is immanent.

'Man is the measure of all things,' said the old Greek philosopher, and no one to-day can be quite sure of what he meant. No doubt the statement is capable of an orthodox interpretation, but in its other sense it will very well describe the common factor in the various theories we have been considering. And one practical conclusion to be drawn therefrom is the immense importance of the doctrine of Creation, whereby we maintain the existence of a Transcendent God, of a real world, and no confusion between the two.

A. G. HERRING.