

ORTEGA AND CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

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RELIGION as a perspective¹ intensifies life and enhances it from within more efficaciously than any other (objectively speaking; subjectively and in practice there may be any number of gradations possible in this). But is it to the exclusion of every other perspective? Does the religious perspective, once adopted or taken up, or, to allow for a more passive process, slid into, impose the renunciation of every other? This is the much discussed question of Christian humanism, the eschatological question that claims to dominate every other, the question of the precise significance of asceticism in the Christian life. Christian tradition in all this has been complicated by the fact that at different epochs there has appeared an extremism which has made it difficult to focus the question with a calm judgment. There seems to be a contradiction between the Gospel and History. Christ speaks of the Cross and of abnegation, even of total abnegation, but he leaves no room for doubt that he proposes to all men the specifically new relationship with the Father which he came to implant in humanity, nor that he reserves for the stronger souls a more intense religious cultivation: this means that ordinary human life is to be taken up into that new relationship and that the intenser cultivation of religion is neither the norm nor intended to supplant ordinary human living. The evangelical teaching gathered up and handed on by St Paul, in the same way, leaves no room for any out-and-out rejection of the 'world'. His teaching on marriage and his exhortation in Philippians 4, 'And now, brethren, all that rings true, all that commands reverence, and all that makes for right; all that is pure, all that is lovely, all that is gracious in the telling; virtue and merit, wherever virtue and merit are found—let this be the argument of your thoughts', establish of themselves other perspectives than that of either hypertrophied religiosity or the religious perspective properly so-called. Nevertheless, the history of Christianity

NOTE: References are to the uniform edition of Ortega's *Obras completas*, published by the *Revista de Occidente*, Madrid.

1 cf. BLACKFRIARS, April, 1952.

shows us the frequent spectacle of an extreme asceticism that rejects the 'world' absolutely.

I cannot presume to discuss the main question in itself here: it is too deep and would be a lengthy process. Moreover it is much discussed by contemporary theologians, some of whom, at any rate, seem to lean towards an attenuation of the ascetic exaggerations of some periods of Christian history. This rejection of human values which we have ambiguously designated 'world' (for we ought to distinguish between 'world-without-God', to be rejected out of hand, and 'world-with-God' which is in fact the only one that there is), has a double origin: on the one hand the mistaken expectation of a speedy arrival of the Last Day that possibly some or all early Christians entertained, and, on the other hand, the innate tendency of man to extreme positions. To these two origins may be joined the dualist tradition which all through history appears under different forms, but always faithful to its fundamental principle of the inherent evil of matter.

In his study on Galileo, Ortega expounds a concept of the progress of Christian thought down to the Renaissance. In it he reaches the conclusion that with St Augustine we have the extremist position of Christianity, in which:

. . . all concern with the things of the world lacks meaning and is tolerable only as a miserable compromise with human weakness. Man only properly lives when he concerns himself with God, in intellectual or affective contemplation or in acts of charity undertaken and carried out only as gestures towards God. This amounts to saying that the Christian had to be a cleric, a monk or something of the sort. (V, 127.)

This attitude, according to Ortega, was to be somewhat modified by St Anselm, for whom the Augustinian motto: *credo ut intelligam* became *fides quaerens intellectum*:

This signifies a very important change in the structure of Christian life thanks to which man, who before was annihilated, now initiates the affirmation of himself, confidence in his own powers. (V, 129.)

And for St Thomas, reason, intelligence, is

. . . a separate order and of itself radically distinct from faith . . . St Thomas, relatively to the whole of the Christian past, reduces the exclusive area of faith to a minimum and widens the role of human science in matters of theology to

its maximum. . . . Thanks to this we may speak of an equilibrium between faith and reason—between supernatural and natural. For a Christian of the early centuries, this equilibrium, this acknowledgement of human reason, as an exempt power, would have been horrifying and would have smacked of the abomination of paganism. (V, 130.)

There is something arbitrary in this outline of Christian history—in the sixth century, for example, after the appearance of augustinianism but long before St Anselm, we have Boethius whose platonism was well mated with his Christian faith, and we have the phenomenon, fundamental for later religious history, of the evolution of St Benedict, as far as the life of the counsels is concerned, from a strict, even fierce, asceticism, that of the desert, to a rule inculcating moderation and benignity, a rule which, in the last resort, made both St Anselm and scholasticism possible. But still, accepting Ortega's presentation of Christian history as well enough founded, it only means that up to the thirteenth century, Catholicism was able to develop and adapt itself, constantly adjusting itself more closely to human reason, and that in the fifteenth century it was unwilling or unable to adapt itself instantaneously to the humanist expansion of European man—this inadaptability was perhaps more administrative than spiritual at first—but that is not to say that such adaptation is impossible and that the moment has not at last arrived for curing the scission of the fifteenth century, now that the 'world' of science is itself in a crisis of adaptation to the needs of human life.

This adaptation and adaptability of religion is nothing else but the progressive interpretation, or, more strictly, the progressive understanding of it by its followers. Newman demonstrated the development of Catholic dogma. We are now beginning to understand the possibility of the existence of an analogous development of morality (we do not attempt today, for example, to square a theory of the justifiability of physical compulsion or civil punishment in matters of adherence to orthodox belief with the fact and theory of the validity of only voluntary subscription to religious truth—more briefly, the Spanish Inquisition has gone, and not only gone, but its theory discredited); and in the same way, there may and must exist a progressive development in our understanding of the relations between religion and culture within the life of man. Von Hügel showed us the way, to some

extent, in the early years of the century. Extremisms have no justification in the New Testament, and if they are to be found in history, it is only because history is the history of human beings. As believers, we are quite free to supply the deficiencies of the subjective understanding of religion in the minds of those who have preceded us. As for the contemporary Catholic, Ortega says, and not without some justification:

. . . the Catholic of today, with all his fervent Catholicism, is lodged in the contemporary world in the posture of a naturalist, and this position is not an extrinsic incident in the world, but rather the very nature of the world today, it means that the individual is this particular kind of world. . . . The Catholic is vitally upheld, carried along in and by that naturalist attitude in the same way as his opponent . . . the only difference is that the Catholic uses up part of himself in denying it, attacking it.

The mental experiment necessary in order to understand the situation of Catholicism, and of Christianity in general, in our day would be that of seriously trying to imagine that Catholicism suddenly had really to take into account, radically, exclusively, contemporary humanity. But the reverse is the case: the Catholic is in opposition, which is always a comfortable position, and consists in taking just what suits in every changing situation and refusing to accept responsibility for the rest. Ah, no! In our imaginary experiment, Catholicism would have, for example, to carry the weight of every science, *every* one, and note: *science*, not anticlerical speeches which it is wretchedly easy to answer. (V, 153.)

The question here at issue is, not the out-of-date 'conflict' between science and religion in the sense of the truth of science and the meaning of religious dogma, but the attitude of religion to the pursuit of any knowledge at all, not directly bearing upon the dogmas of Christianity. Ortega's passage above quoted must be seen in its context: it was written twenty years ago and in Spain. Nevertheless, the essential problem remains: does man's proper cultivation of religion stifle or diminish his discovery of the total world in which he lives? Must the pursuit of this discovery necessarily lead to inflation of the human and the shrinking of the divine? Does not the claim of the Church to authority

over the human will in belief and morals carry with it a claim to control the pursuit of that discovery?

Of course, from within the life of faith, those of us who are temperamentally predisposed to humanism naturally see all this as a false antagonism, a conflict that is not really there, or that is only really there as a conflict, because one of the terms has been suppressed: namely, when humanism has in fact inflated the human and pushed the divine right out of the sphere of the individual will altogether. But does it not happen that the divine inflates the human too, and pushes the human right out of the picture? I look about for some examples and I think of *Father and Son*, but I am unwilling to trespass on Protestant territory; I wonder whether St Symeon Stylites was very anti-humanist, and feel that even if he were (and the facts would be hard to come by), a figure—any number of figures—so bizarre cannot carry weight in a matter of this kind; when I look about for something other than these and other than the strange shadow of nineteenth-century Catholic puritanism and narrowness which we must, I think, regard as a passing phase, provoked by a no less disagreeable antagonism from the side of 'the world', my attention hovers over and finally pins down the *Imitatio*, and with it, the *devotio moderna* and the crisis of the Renaissance which is what has led Ortega on to this subject.

On Ortega's side we may see what ground there is for healing the breach between Humanism and Christianity. As far as human psychology is concerned, it would be hard to improve on Ortega's own assessment of the change wrought in human history by the advent of Christianity:

When everything around us fails us we realize that none of it was, really, authentic reality, the important thing, decisive; the reality left for each individual beneath all other apparent realities is his own life. Then, once more, man sees his life as what strictly and in the last resort it is—the absolutely individual, untransferable problem of his own destiny. It is this disposition of man that leads towards the Christian solution. Nothing else (no other thing) is any longer a problem, but the very life of the person in its integrity. It is no longer a matter of hunger, sickness or political tyranny, it is no longer just that he lacks knowledge of the stars. Now it is the very being of the subject that has become a problem.

And if the answer to those other deficiencies and lacks is called a solution, the answer that must be given to this absolute problem of personal being is called salvation—*soteria*. (V, 103.)

In what follows, there is somewhat of exaggeration along the lines we have already noticed concerning his attitude to historical periods of extreme asceticism in the progress of Christianity, and unacceptable to the contemporary Catholic as springing from an inevitable imperfect understanding—subjectively—of what the doctrine of Christ must imply; but Ortega uses one phrase which is of the utmost importance for our problem:

This paradox, *this absolute inversion of perspective*, is the basis of Christianity. The problems of the natural man have no solution: to live, to be in the world is constitutively (of itself) and irremediably, perdition. Man must be saved by the supernatural. This life can only be cured by the next. The only thing man can do . . . is negative—deny himself and deny the world, . . . be absorbed by God. (V, 104.)

To this we may add the following subtle intuition of what (I repeat, in the order of human psychology) Christianity is:

If there had never been any Christianity, it would never have occurred to man to dedicate his life to anything. This is the fundamental thing about man's Christian experience: all the rest is secondary, almost trivial by the side of it. To have discovered, to have realized that life in its final substance consists in having to be dedicated to something . . . that is the fundamental discovery of Christianity. (V, 154.)

Our problem is to discover whether the interference of Christianity in man's life incapacitates him or not for living, in the sense of understanding, enjoying, making use of the 'things' of this world. On the one hand, man is in a state of solidarity with all creation; on the other, the Creator introduces him into the divine life, the life creative. In saying—it 'leaps to the eyes'—that the two lives, created and creative, are not opposed but rather constitute a continuum, what does this mean? That created life must sink into nothingness to leave no room for anything but the life creative? I think not. In the psychological order the origin, the purpose, of asceticism, justified and inevitable, is simply to make man realize (and this Ortegianism also aims at making us realize) that man does not live wholly by things, nor does he live indefinitely from

their perspective (this perspective itself is a changing one within the span of his individual life). None of that is of lasting use to him for living to the full. Only the *absolute inversion*, only the responsible dedication of himself to something superior to himself, superior to 'value', can release the springs of profound, prolonged, inexhaustible life (in abstract terms: life absolute, infinite and eternal). But it must not be forgotten that although, and that while (during the time that) we are invited and proceed to the invitation of the *iuge convivium*, we do not stop belonging to created life: to it we are bound, it is there 'in' our life, in our circumstance, and we have to live it out, because of what we are. And what does Christianity tell us about it? Of course, it tells us that things, perspectives, must not and cannot be substituted for God; as much as that, we *can* already know without the need of revelation to affirm it to us. But in the presence of God, these things of created life retain their inherent goodness, truth and beauty. Not only *may* we make use of them, live them, but we cannot *not* live them. The greatest ascetic does not escape from air, from the light of day. The basic detachment of Christianity is the same, in its negative aspect, as the truth that things cannot be a substitute for God (and, in its positive aspect, it is abandonment, which presupposes the filial relationship with God that, in the theological order, is the foundation of Christianity).

Man fully alive and living, precisely because of what he is in himself and in his circumstance, must see and root the divine 'perspective' in his most fundamental being, in his life. But this divine 'perspective' differs from all others in its omnipresence. It is not that it is the only perspective, the one that, according to Ortega, is the false perspective (*La sola perspectiva falsa es la que pretende ser la única*—'the only false perspective is that which claims to be the only perspective', III, 200). God is the super- or trans-perspective present or presentable in all other possible and existing perspectives. If you like, God is the 'constant' of all perspectives. But if we do not give to religion inwardness (and here we come to St John of the Cross² again) then it may properly be termed a false perspective. The function of the divine perspective is to transform and give a new content to the rest of life, not to be a substitute for it. The function of other perspectives, the perspec-

² cf. BLACKFRIARS, April, 1952.

tives of the created, the perspectives of time, is to give life its awareness; in looking along a perspective we know the one who looks, the subject; its function is not to be the last and only perspective, but to make us aware further of the constant, the divine perspective.

'I have learned by now to be content with my circumstances as they are', said St Paul. The lesson of his Christian experience (and it was a very complete one: apostolic, sacramental, a personal revelation, mystical, active and intellectual) brought him to that point. We may crystallize our problem in this way: is our nexus with the world to be considered a valid part of our circumstance? It seems to me against the whole tenor of Christianity to deny it.

NOTICE

In the course of this year there will be a series of week-ends devoted to the arts (Music, Painting, Writing, Drama) at Spode House, adjoining the Dominican Priory at Hawkesyard, Rugeley, Staffs. Spode House is being completely refurnished and redecorated and will offer comfortable accommodation to those who wish to attend the various retreats, summer schools and study week-ends that are being organized there. Readers of *BLACKFRIARS* will be specially welcome at the week-end in July which will be devoted to 'Religion as the Writer's Theme'. Well-known writers and critics will be among the lecturers, and there will be ample opportunity for discussion. Details may be obtained from the Warden, Spode House, Hawkesyard, Rugeley, Staffs.