

GOETHE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

THOSE of us with a taste for idle speculation may be tempted to wonder how Goethe would have turned out if he had been born in Munich or Vienna instead of in Protestant Frankfurt and gone to school with the Jesuits. Voltaire, we may recall, was a pupil of theirs; and a certain respect for his old masters never left him. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that in the absence of any direct Catholic contacts in Goethe's early years it was from Voltaire and the Encyclopédists that he acquired his first notions about the Church. For although the young poet reacted against the French classical tradition in verse which Voltaire represented, he was like the whole age in which he lived deeply influenced by French writings. How far the Voltairean attitude towards the Church in the eighteenth century was justified it is difficult for us to realise in an age happily free from gross ecclesiastical abuses. As we know, Voltaire did not limit himself to attacking abuses. That the period in which Goethe grew up was one in which the Church had largely lost the allegiance of the intellectual world must regrettably be admitted. As for the Protestantism in which the poet was educated, it was a dull and formal affair from which the genuine enthusiasm of the Reformation had long since evaporated, and it was rent by internal dissensions. It could not but be wholly unsatisfying to Goethe's genius; and since the 'paganism' of his temperament and the prejudices of his youth prevented him from ever considering Catholicism seriously, he evolved a religion of his own out of the various elements he collected in the course of his reading and experience. In this he was typically modern.

'The Great Heathen' his shocked contemporaries called him; but his biographers have been at pains to point out that Goethe was by no means devoid of religious sentiments (no great poet could be that). He calls himself both a polytheist and a pantheist: perhaps the strongest single influence in his religious development was the philosophy of Spinoza. 'To have a positive religion is not necessary', he wrote; yet he thought it normally a good thing for a man to remain faithful to traditional religion. One is reminded of a curious passage in *Werther* in which that unhappy character says that he reverences religion, but that he for his part is not one of those to whom Christ referred when he used the words 'they whom the Father hath given to me.' In many places Goethe speaks with reverence of Christianity and its Founder. The Christian religion would endure, he said, for ever; 'since the Divine has once been embodied in it, it cannot be dissolved'. Is this an admission of belief in the Incarnation? Only in a very unorthodox sense: he

would have said the same of Buddhism or Mohammedanism. Elsewhere he claims the identity of his own 'natural religion' and Christianity: 'What was it that ensured to the Christian religion victory over all the others, whereby it has become (and deserves to be) mistress of the world, but the fact that it has adopted the truths of natural religion?' He himself, he once said, was the only true Christian left in the world.

In comparing the Catholic Church with Protestantism Goethe often spoke in favour of the former. His remarkable apology for the seven sacraments in the seventh book of his *Autobiography*, which shows a real understanding of Catholic doctrine and of the sacramental system of the Church as contrasted with the fragmentary and impoverished version of it retained by the Protestants (who, he says, have but one sacrament in which the faithful consciously participate) might have been written by a Catholic. And when in 1791 he stayed with Princess Gallitzin at Münster members of her circle asked one another if this guest, who talked of his Roman experiences and of matters Catholic with such warmth and understanding, were not really himself a son of the Church! (A prelate in the company, however, more shrewdly observed: 'He is a very unhappy man; he must live in a state of constant interior warfare'.) Like Dr Johnson, Goethe was able to see the Catholic point of view and to defend it in argument; but we are hardly justified in assuming, as his Jesuit biographer Fr A. Baumgartner seems to do, that he rejected the gift of faith.

If anyone should be tempted to claim Goethe as almost a Catholic there are numerous passages in his works and in his reported conversations which would dispel any such idea. Allusions to 'fornicating prelates' in the *Roman Elegies* we may dismiss as being in the tradition of medieval literature; the coarse blasphemies of some of the *Venetian Epigrams* (suppressed, the worst of them, during the poet's lifetime) are less easy to swallow. On his Italian journey—and I need hardly say that what drew him to Rome was not the tombs of the apostles but the monuments of pagan art—he was repelled rather than attracted by what he saw of the Church, her system and her ritual. In the 'Witch's Kitchen' scene of *Faust* there is an obvious parody of the ceremonies of High Mass. The scene is known to have been written at Rome. Goethe saw the Church as a mighty organisation indeed, but unscrupulous, hoodwinking the people for their own supposed good, with the Pope as 'the greatest play-actor of all'. (We may compare Carlyle's remarks on 'the old Pope of Rome' in *Past and Present*.) Incidentally, Goethe's account of his conversation with a papal officer in the carriage on the road to Perugia suggests why anyone outside the

Church might pardonably hold such a view. At least he had the fairness to admit that he *was* an outsider, and that to form a just idea of Catholicism one must see it from within. Goethe was a fervent admirer of Winckelmann, but he could not bring himself to follow the great art critic's example in entering the Church. Winckelmann, according to the bad fashion of those times, adopted clerical dress, although no priest. Supposing history had had to speak of 'the Abbé Goethe'!

A thorough Hellenist, Goethe despised all art that was not classical in inspiration, even though in his later years he was led by the eloquence and sincerity of his Catholic friend Sulpiz Boisseree to appreciate more justly the creations of the Middle Ages. Of the aesthetic appeal of Catholicism he was quite aware. The religious paintings of the Renaissance claimed his attention in Italy: he could be profoundly moved by a St Cecilia or a Madonna by Raphael. But certain aspects of religious art repelled him: martyrs and ecstasies seemed to him 'criminals and madmen'. The Cross itself (for he viewed it with the eyes of an ancient Roman) was 'the symbol of the convicted criminal'. Of the painter Martin Schön he observed: 'If only the wretch had stuck to the Three Kings instead of the detestable Passion!' And, referring to the famous legend of Cologne: '11,000 pretty girls, that's a subject on which the artist can let himself go!' There were too many bishops and monks in religious pictures.

That a Catholic poet enjoys many advantages over a non-Catholic Goethe was ready to admit in his remarks on Manzoni: 'A poet born and brought up a Catholic is in a position to make a vastly more effective use of the beliefs and practices of his Church than an outsider'. But with those German Romantics who through enthusiasm for the Middle Ages were led to seek admission to the Church he had little sympathy. Friedrich Schlegel's conversion particularly irritated him: 'Never', said Goethe, 'has so remarkable a case occurred: that in the full noonday of Reason . . . a distinguished man of the highest talents should be so misguided as to dress up and play the bogey-man'. May one suggest that Goethe's protests were so vehement precisely because he himself was not immune to the attractive power of Catholicism? He expressed mistrust of Schelling's mystical tendencies, which, he said, were trying to reintroduce under another form 'the old outworn thing' (*das alte überwundene Zeug*), which it was the Reformation's greatest merit to have swept away.

On occasion Goethe showed himself decidedly on the Protestant side, as for example at the time of the tercentenary celebrations

of the Reformation. To Luther, he said to Eckermann shortly before his death, Germany owed an incalculable debt, inasmuch as he had freed it from the fetters of spiritual narrowness (Borniertheit) and restored Christianity to its primitive purity. More interesting to us are his remarks on Catholic Emancipation, which he referred to as the 'Emancipation of the Irish', as though unaware of the existence of English and Scottish Catholics. He deplored the way in which the unfortunate Protestants in Ireland were oppressed and cheated by the Catholic majority. 'Catholics cannot agree among themselves, yet they always band together against a Protestant.' He foresaw the possibility of a struggle for power in the United Kingdom between Catholics and Protestants in which the former, if victorious, would inaugurate a ruthless persecution of their opponents! We can hardly blame a German for not understanding the Irish question; besides, Goethe's information was no doubt derived from newspapers unfriendly to the Catholic cause. The justification for the Emancipation Act he saw in the fact that 'with Catholics all precautionary measures are useless. The Papal See has interests which we do not suspect and possesses the means of secretly furthering them.' We may take this remark as an unwitting compliment. In view of Goethe's known connection with the Freemasons, his idea of the Church as a secret and sinister power is interesting.

If space permitted much might be said about the so-called Catholicism of the end of *Faust*, second part. Throughout both parts Goethe made use of the Catholic elements which his material presented to him—the Requiem in the cathedral, the *Mater Dolorosa* scene and so on. But, as in the case of the poet's interest in religious art, the 'Catholicism' of *Faust* is purely aesthetic. He chose a pseudo-medieval setting for the conclusion of *Faust* because neither the Protestantism in which he was brought up nor the Hellenism of his adoption offered anything suitable for the occasion. The sharply defined figures of Christian tradition were necessary, he explained, to give form to his poetic intentions. Having rejected the doctrines of redemption and repentance on which the original Faust-legend was based, Goethe had considerable difficulty in finding a satisfactory ending for the work: indeed, without outside pressure he would probably never have completed it. As it is, the Christian reader cannot help raising an eyebrow at the way in which Faust, who has broken almost every one of the Ten Commandments in turn, is finally borne up to Heaven by angels. Even Bielschowsky, one of Goethe's greatest admirers, complains of the absence of moral endeavour in *Faust*, and concludes that the act of grace whereby Faust is received into bliss is *mittelalterlich-kirchlich* not *modern-sittlich*, i.e. in accordance with medieval ecclesiastical

notions rather than with those of 'modern morality', whatever we are to understand by that!

In trying to define Goethe's attitude towards the Church, we find ourselves dealing with a Proteus-like being who eludes all efforts at capture. Exasperated, Fr Baumgartner maliciously remarks: 'In religion, as in his relations with the opposite sex, Goethe loved change'. But are not the contradictions in his attitude but an aspect of the 'polarity' which we associate with Goethe? He could readily understand and formulate the arguments both for and against the Church without ever being inclined to seek a more intimate acquaintance with her. His position is after all not so uncommon among educated non-Catholics. That many of his utterances and writings were highly offensive to our religion cannot be denied. Goethe's reputation in this connection has perhaps suffered through the activities of a host of Boswells who surrounded his latter years and through his own reluctance to destroy correspondence. There is abundant evidence to show that he was the last person willingly to offend the religious feelings of others. Like Macaulay he no doubt regarded the Church as 'a work of human policy', and Catholicism as a corruption of primitive Christianity. His Protestant prejudices never wholly forsook him and his liturgical tastes were decidedly Low Church. Papal ceremonies seem to have bored him; but he respected sincerity and could recognise sanctity when he came across it. Thus he was led to write an enthusiastic essay on St Philip Neri.

In his relations with Catholics Goethe was ever courteous and understanding, whether in Rome or Sicily, Münster or Bohemia. In Carlsbad he even listened to sermons, and was delighted to find in them 'keine Spur von Mönchtum und Pfäfferei' ('no trace of monkery or priests' tricks')! Did he not once contribute towards the erection of an altarpiece in the chapel of St Roch at Bingen? Crossing from Messina to Naples he calmed a panic-stricken crowd of passengers in imminent danger of shipwreck by a moving address in which he recalled Christ's stilling of the tempest and exhorted them to pray to the Mother of God that she might intercede with her Son on their behalf; nor was this mere acting on Goethe's part for he tells us that he himself took comfort in the ideas he suggested to his audience.

Yet when all is said Goethe was and remains the Great Heathen. But if in his passionate love of pagan antiquity he often seemed to echo with regret the *Vicisti Galilaeae* of Julian, he was not blind to the part that the Church had played in civilising the nations of Europe nor to that which a reunited Christendom would play in

the future. (For every poet is also a prophet, and Goethe more than most.) As the European *par excellence* whose ideal of a world community of the spirit was not after all so far removed from the Church's own aim, he may well serve as an example to some Catholics who have found their religion not incompatible with narrow nationalism. There is so much good in Goethe, as there was in the pagan writers of old. The Church knew how to assimilate all that was best in their work, and she will, we may be sure, do no less in the case of the greatest of modern pagans. Goethe was catholic, if not Catholic: let us try to be both. 'Every good and every perfect gift is from above' and few men have been more richly endowed by their Creator than he whose bicentenary we celebrate this year.

'*Der Grosse Heide*' others called him; for himself he chose a pleasanter designation. '*Das Grosse Kind*', he called himself once; and when we think of his impulsiveness, his unflinching interest in everything, his unquenchable optimism, he was a child indeed. May we not say of Goethe, as was said of a lesser man, La Fontaine: 'Dieu n'aura pas le courage de le damner'?

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OBITER

Wort und Wahrheit, the Austrian review, commands a most distinguished list of contributors, including von Balthasar, Gotthard Montessi, Karl Rahner and the biologist Tans Andre, who is now teaching the Dominicans at Walberberg after having had to flee from the East. These are but a few of the people who make this monthly one of the most stimulating guides to contemporary European thought and culture.

'Now that he is able to survey these events in the light of the past five years the reader can scarcely fail to be disturbed by the author's self-righteousness, his readiness to pass judgment on other people seems to have blinded him to the fact that no one has a right to pretend that his own hands are clean. Nor can moralising and irony be accepted as answers to the questions posed by these events.' (Paul Viator, reviewing *The last days of Hitler* in *Wort und Wahrheit*, June.)

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THE DOMINICAN PUBLICATION, *Die Neue Ordnung*, as one would expect from the Dominican connections with the workers' movement in the Cologne area, is attempting to solve social problems, to evaluate the dangers and opportunities of collectivism and the true