

THE ONE-EYED MAN

'PLAINLY I am an extreme revolutionary,' says Mr. H. G. Wells in his recent booklet on the Rights of Man. An extreme revolutionary, I suppose, is a person who turns things, other people and himself right round; and there can be no doubt that things, other people and ourselves do sometimes need to be turned right round. Penance and Conversion: to change your mind and change your direction. But the context shows that Mr. Wells is talking politics: 'I do not believe it possible to go on with the present way of living that prevails throughout the world, with the sovereign governments we have and the economic practices that prevail.' Such governments and practices are in a sense 'ways of living,' and nobody should be childish enough to blame Mr. Wells for attending so busily to the organisation of the world, for being a revolutionary in this department of ethics alone. And in any case the department involves the whole. Mr. Wells wants to change our minds at the root, and not merely our methods of government. This is implied by the sweeping completeness of his desire and vision of World-Reform; at least he thinks they are sweepingly complete, and that is the point here. Less egotistic than Hitler, Mr. Wells is just as certain that his view is not only right but complete. But the completeness is negative, and that is the best that can be said for it. His horizontal view of the world cannot be accused of distorting the depths, for it simply disregards them. They cannot be distorted, for they are not even included. This raises a number of questions about the distinguished author himself, and about his proposals for World-Reform.

The truth is that, judged by his writings, Mr. Wells appears profoundly indifferent to God. I am not speaking here of indifference to religion in general. To the question whether religion or the belief in God is of practical value or not he is not at all indifferent. But I speak here of an indifference to the question whether God really

IS. The whole business of religion is seen by Mr. Wells from a particular angle—as it were from the side and with one eye shut. When you shut one eye things appear flat like a pattern on a wall. So, to this practical atheist, the religious question appears flat, dead, in a sense secondary and derived. It is not a real question for him, and he cannot admit that it might be a real question for any man. He sees it abstracted from its proper context and condition, he sees it not in relation to reality, but to possibilities of change and reform of reality. It is secondary to the first question which, for him, is always not *What are we?* but *What shall we do?* And it is secondary not as a logical sequence, as one question leads to another, but simply as one of those facts which World-Changers must take into account. The question is seen as a fact and only as a fact; it is not seen as a *question* at all; and therefore the question is never put. In short, Mr. Wells is the slave of History. The historian, as such, does not bother about the existence of God, but only about the question of God considered as a fact and a factor in History. But Mr. Wells is more than a mere slave of Clio, or rather he is a very special kind of slave. He knows her affairs and can lead her where he will. She is an old lady after all, and he a practical man of the world; she has handed over the cheque books to him and he knows what to do with her account. He knows how to make it work. Like every question save the first one of all (*What shall we do?*), the religious question is just a thing to be used. He sees it as an historian, sideways and with one eye shut, and he thinks, as a Social Reformer, that he can lay hands on it and use it in the fight for Progress. But the only way to treat questions is to answer them, and you cannot answer a question if you never put it. Reality is no pattern on a wall, and the one-eyed man, grasping at the pattern, takes hold of nothing but air.

However, I am not here concerned with the use Mr. Wells would make of religion, the way, that is, he would turn all this misplaced anxiety about God, all this wasted energy, into socially useful channels. I am concerned rather with the way he envisages the question at all. The

matter is important, for it seems that he carries to its clear extreme (having, so far as he goes, a clear mind) a tendency more or less obscurely latent in the minds of thousands. If Christianity be thought of merely as a way of being extra good (which is exactly how multitudes of people regard it) then it does not matter much whether you continue to call it Christianity. Christ, in this view, has taught us on the whole a very good way of life, and He has left us His example. But we can see for ourselves, by this time, whatever goodness there is in His teaching, we have made it our own, we do not need to sit at His feet. We are grown up now (a favourite thought of Wells'). And as for His example—well, you do not call an ethical doctrine by a man's name simply because he practices it; unless it is so peculiar that nobody else may be expected to do so. Hence one can understand and see the consistency of Mr. Wells' thought when he calls the question whether his Declaration of the Rights of Man 'embodies the spirit of Christianity or owes anything to Christianity' simply 'a side issue.' A side issue indeed; that is a most significant phrase. 'And also,' he continues generously, 'if it is claimed that this embodies the spirit of Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Bahism or any other -ism I do not mind. Whoever accepts the Declaration is my ally and my fellow-citizen.'

We must not be less generous. There is in these remarks a real width of view, a view of humanity as a whole, of Man with his universal needs and rights. This has always been the strength of Mr. Wells that he thinks in terms of Mankind. To this he has stuck with admirable persistence, and it is the secret of his very wide, though largely hidden influence. But his weakness? That is not so easy to define. Yet we must try to define it, for it is the weakness of a great part of the anti-Catholic thinking of our time.

Let us go back a little. The first and dominant question for Mr. Wells is *What shall we do?* The question about God is not a real question for him, it is simply one of the factors of which the social reformer must take account. Christianity is therefore a side issue; unless it is the same as Wells-ism, in which case why call it Christi-

anity? So much is clear. But *why* does he think like this? The answer lies in his manner of envisaging Reality; and he envisages it in two ways. As an historian he sees it essentially *en voyage*, as in passage to the Future, as having no significance in itself, as having all its significance in something that is to come, in the shape of things to come; and that shape is in the mind only and what is in the mind only is a universal, an abstraction. Secondly Mr. Wells sees Reality as an Engineer. It is something to be exploited, to be changed into something different. It is material to be worked on, matter for use. It is to become something else, which, again, is only in the mind as yet. It is for Man indeed, but not for him precisely *as it is at present*. For the lover of God trees, stones and stars are good enough as they actually are. They are the spring-board from which he leaps to God. They are, in a sense, perfect. They will do. They are not for 'Man,' they are for me and you, bread for the body, spring-board for the mind. But for Mr. Wells the world is no spring-board. It exists to be changed, and the change is not a spiritual transformation to the end that, being known, it may reflect to men the glory of God, but rather it is a mere material destruction and re-arrangement. The point is that this material change is always to something other than what it actually is. Its term, at present, is in idea in the mind of the engineer, an abstraction presented to his practical intelligence. Reality thus envisaged is seen in the abstract, whereas by the lover of God it is seen in its Cause; and there is a world of difference between these two points of view. I am reminded of a penetrating remark of Claudel: speaking of his unbelieving youth he writes: 'La forte idée de l'individuel et du concret était obscurcie en moi.' Perpetually to envisage things in the abstract is the fundamental weakness of Mr. Wells. It renders him incapable of even putting the question whether God *is*. It destroys wonder and love and laughter; for the one-eyed man can hardly see and certainly cannot wink.

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