

Christian Materialism Reconsidered: An Exchange

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by S. A. Grave and Giles Hibbert, O.P.

We have become used since the Renewal began to seeing the Church slashed at by those who belong to it and might easily take the remark at the end of Father Hibbert's article, 'Christian Materialism' (*New Blackfriars*, May, 1969), to be only a further, though notable, instance. There is something Christians will be hindered from doing, the article ends by saying, 'until the Christian Church has put its house into better order and made it look less like what Christ himself referred to as "a den of thieves"'. What is it that cannot be effectively done at present? Christianity has just been stated to be 'radically a materialist humanism' and also 'something more'. 'For Christians it is essential to nurture, cultivate and explore their "more", so that they may be able to offer something in their own right to the world' (p. 431). It is this nurturing, cultivating and exploration that cannot be effectively done while the Church is like a den of thieves. It might reasonably be taken to be part of what Father Hibbert is implying, that the propagation of some such version of Christianity as his is hindered while the Church is like this.

At the risk of appearing as one of the wicked, I am drawing attention to the meaning of Father Hibbert's materialism. I shall also mention again, but not ambitiously explore, his something more. The following passage shows us plainly the meaning of the materialism but the other thing darkly.

'It is the Christian claim—and of course it is up to the Christian to give the practical proof—that the Church, if by that we mean that society of men actually leading a life in which the *patterns of human concern* which originate from and depend upon Christ are present as constituting its reality, has similar qualities to those possessed by a profound work of art, and is thus open to a similar type of analysis. This analysis, at once materialistic and dialectical, should be able to show—if the claim is true—that this especial human situation, the Church, has a richness, a "further dimensionality", which is in fact precisely what we should have been using the word God for all along.

'This "further-dimensionality" is the Spirit in the Church. As we have seen earlier, Christ's claim is that the Kingdom of God is now, through him, amongst us. This is no static situation—something given for the sake of being copied. It looks forward in hope, not however to something outside itself but to its own fulfilment. And thus this *spiritual element* embodies what is meant by God, and by heaven, etc. But nevertheless no dualism has been

reintroduced here, for what we are talking about it still essentially materialist (p. 430).

'This *spiritual element* embodies what is meant by God, and by heaven, etc.' Why should it be permissible for the sacred doctrines of a religion to be submitted by one of its priests to a reckless subjectivity of interpretation that no teacher would tolerate in an undergraduate essay? Instead of this question, let us ask what Father Hibbert's interpretation is. God, heaven, and etc.: what they all 'mean', he says, is 'embodied' in a 'spiritual element', which he also calls 'a further-dimensionality'. We are looking at the 'more' that Christianity has to offer. What it is is not made clear. But what it is not is. It is not anything except some aspect of a material reality. No dualism has been let in; what is being talked about is essentially materialist. As Father Hibbert goes on to say of the spiritual quality of a work of art to which he likens the presence of God in the Church, 'no one but a fool would suggest that this "spiritual quality" is something in a different sphere of reality to the work itself'.

One of Father Hibbert's concerns was with the question, 'how far it would be possible for a Marxist to believe in God . . . without betraying his materialist philosophy'. There is no doubt that in the passage we have been considering something is offered as God that a Marxist could in some sort of way accept (not *believe* in, I think) without betraying his materialism and its essential atheism. No doubt, either, that whatever public response policy dictated, he would treat the offer with the derision or indifference all reduced Christianity gets from ordinary unbelievers. (A ghettoed mentality prevents the reducers from noticing that the only people who listen to them are Christians who still believe.)

'No dualism has been reintroduced here, for what we are talking about is still essentially materialist.' That Father Hibbert's article puts forward an atheistic interpretation of Christianity is not something that has to be figured out, read between the lines. One has only to read what is written, understanding the words as they would be understood by anyone familiar with their use. The article, consequently, has an importance out of proportion to its merits. Written by a Dominican priest, published in an official journal of the Dominican Order, with no editorial detachment from it as though what it was saying was perfectly permissible, unless it is repudiated, we shall be seeing it cited as evidence, I think, that the Church has become latitudinarian enough to allow not something so relatively harmless as unbelieving priests, but priests who teach that belief in God needs to be discarded and only some of its words kept.

A naïve atheist would be content with the opinion that the notion of God can be analysed like the spiritual quality of a painting. A sophisticated atheist would give a subtler analysis. But not even the most naïve atheist could agree that a human institution can be analysed like the spiritual quality of a painting. Paintings do not

possess consciousness and our consciousness of them presupposes their material existence. But it is different with human institutions: what they are, what form they take, is largely determined by the consciousness of those who make them up. So expectedly, Father Hibbert's article will point out a difference between a painting and the Church.

There would seem to be one point only in which the analogy between a work of art and the Christian Church seriously breaks down. The spirit incarnate in a work of art not only exists in and through its materiality but is also dependent upon that materiality for its existence (though is this absolutely true in the case of music?). In the case of the Church, however, it is radically a part of the self-understanding of that body, and therefore of its reality, that the dependence is the other way round. This difference may well, however, interconnect with the way in which Christians believe that the Church's founder, its present reality, and its future are in a very profound sense all one and the same—which again makes it different from the work of art (p. 431).

Determined not to have his message lost, uneasy that what he could expect to be read as sociological fact about the analysis of human institutions might be misunderstood or misconstrued as permitting the reintroduction of a transcendent God, Father Hibbert adds this sentence:

These differences do not bring with them, however, any danger of a return to dualism and religion as long as the principles for the interpretation of Christianity, which we have outlined, are faithfully observed.

Of course Father Hibbert does not want us to give up what he calls 'God talk'. On the contrary, he wants Marxists to join in it as well. He even wants us to be orthodox, for he wants the interpretation of Christianity 'which we have outlined' 'faithfully observed'. All he is anxious about is that the 'God talk' should not refer to anything outside the material world.

At the very least the article leaves the strongest impression that it is advocating a form of Christianity from which God has gone. At the very least, therefore, the editor might have been expected to warn readers that it was wide open to misconception. Perhaps he felt that he could not in honesty do this. Instead he has a note introducing it as a 'prolegomenon designed to remove certain misconceptions. . . '.

Not disowned, this article lets it be thought that the Dominicans in England do not care what is passed off as Christian so long as it looks radical.

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It is sad to see Professor Grave quoting those very passages in which I show that I am not preaching atheism precisely to prove his assumption that this is my purpose. This seems to have been possible

for him through his either taking them not fully within their context or through prejudging them and then applying them to something said in a different context. This cannot be demonstrated in the space available; I would simply ask anyone who is worried by them to re-read the article and see how these passages do in fact fit into the whole. They can rest assured that, although new ways of talking about God and making his presence to us a reality are being explored, and are thus tentative and open to criticism with regard to their efficacy, nevertheless no reductionism is involved, nor is the Church being gratuitously insulted or its Gospel subjectively interpreted.

Although he uses it as an argument to damn me with, Professor Grave is however right when he says that all I am 'anxious about is that "God talk" should not refer to anything *outside* the *material* world' (p. 000). These words are, however, critical and several points should be made. With regard to the word *material*, my article carefully distinguishes between different varieties of materialism, from the crude—which is clearly atheistic—to the subtle and dialectical which by no means excludes a spiritual dimension. With regard to *outside*, I would have preferred to words *over against*, for my whole article was equally anxious to show that Christian 'God talk', whilst being within a material context, must refer to the way in which our material world has, in Christ, a reference beyond itself. I even stress the way in which the material world is ultimately to be seen as dependent on this 'beyond' and not the other way round—another point which is strangely used against me! The whole point about rejecting *outside* or *over against* is to avoid falling into the neo-platonist or cartesian dualism which so readily affects and distorts our appreciation of the Gospel.

To recapitulate, what I have been aiming to do is to take seriously what Christ said to Philip when he said: 'Show us the Father.' Christ's reply was: 'He who sees me sees the Father' (John 14, 9)—a concept present in much of the New Testament. The point is that whatever else must be said about God, he *is* for us, can be *met* by us, and can only be *talked about* by us, within the living context of Christ's physical material reality as a man and the physical material relationship he had, and still within the Church has, to men. This is what the doctrine of the Incarnation indicates if we are prepared to take it seriously; in so far as we fail to, we will only present the atonement as a farce, though a tragic one, and the resurrection as a conjuring trick—by which I do *not* mean to say (it would seem necessary to spell it out) that the atonement *is* a farce or the resurrection a conjuring trick.

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