

CONRAD NOEL'S LIFE OF CHRIST

THE noble quality of the sentiments of this book¹ will account for its having received on the whole a far more indulgent treatment by the reviewers—even by those writing on behalf of the Churches—than it properly deserves. There might be a strong temptation to follow this general lead, if it were any less easy than it is, while attacking the book, to maintain entire respect for the author. The doctrine is completely untrue to the principles of the Anglo-Catholic Creed which the author professes. It is in fact but a travesty of Christian doctrine. But this clearly is a mischance that has come about through an undisciplined cavalry charge by the Left wing of the author's mind. A reviewer can take his stand comfortably between the author and his book.

Christ as portrayed in these pages shows Himself to be first and foremost a socio-political revolutionary. An order of social well-being, of justice and plenty achieved for all men, does not appear to Him as an effect that should naturally follow upon and be as the fulfilment and expression of the spiritual life He brings to men, but rather as an essential constitutive means for the formation of a state of "salvation." That is to say, it is only by a successfully achieved reordering of social conditions that the salvation He offers can become a "saving" thing at all. If He is to be called our Saviour (in any sense that He Himself would approve) it can only be through a salvation which in fact delivers our bodies in this world from the evils of injustice and poverty and the rest.

It is not a heavenly happiness that he envisages immediately for us—not any such happiness as might be based on a supernatural union with God and the hope of the consummation of that union. The happiness he intends for us is in another category from that. It has a different axis. Thus there is no reference to be found to the kingdom of the

¹ The Life of Jesus, by Conrad Noel. London. J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd. (12/6.)

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next world in Christ's "parables of the kingdom"—one exception being made, however, for the parable of Dives and Lazarus, which provides "about the only" instance of "allusion" by Him to the next life. The kingdom referred to in the parables is the commonwealth of the New World Order, the happy society of the Good Time Coming, of that Golden Age of this world which we to-day still look for. It is into this kingdom that His disciples were exhorted to qualify themselves to enter, and it is the threat of exclusion from this kingdom that forms the constant sanction He pronounces against all Fascist-sinners. To set your treasure in heaven comes to mean, to look ahead and contrive that when the commonwealth of the Good Time Coming be realized and all Capitalist and Fascist tyrants eliminated, you may not find yourself forced as a reactionary into the hall of exile. It becomes clear then what, for example, will be the sound interpretation of a parable like that of The Unjust Steward. The meaning, the moral, will be this: "That you should make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of injustice, that when ye fail (or it fails) they (the workers to whom you have been generous) may accept you in the coming kingdom as one of themselves." And again, with the parable of the great assizes at which the wicked are condemned to hell and the just invited to enter the kingdom, it will readily be understood that this represents a judgment that takes place not in heaven but "at every crisis of world history," by virtue of which those nations (for it will be question of a corporate judgment) found to have performed the social duties of feeding the hungry, freeing the oppressed, etc., will enter more or less into the state of salvation that is the Good Time of the Golden Age. So of Russia at the present time, so of the France of the days of the destruction of the ancient régime.

The author's conclusion that it was no other-worldly heaven that Christ preached and set Himself to found for us, becomes irresistible if one accepts his intimation of the truth of the hypothesis of a final universal salvation. If the hell of the next life is finally to be abolished, and the heavenly

heaven to be laid open to all, clearly the only hell man need seriously fear is the hell on earth that is brought about by those who kill our bodies, and the only heaven he need be concerned about securing is the heaven that shall consist in the noble Good Time to be set up here below. But all the emphasis is placed on the higher viewpoint that recognizes this present world of our's as being divinely charged from its creation with the potential capacities to become a first-rate heaven of its own for the enjoyment of the children of men. The only legitimate New Heaven and New Earth for our present aspirations is this good world of our's as redeemable from its present artificial collapse by a revolutionary movement that shall transform it into a land flowing with milk and honey for the workers, make of it a Christian-Communist paradise. "Christian," for it is from Christ that the cause will have received its original impulse, and—in some way that it would be esoteric and somewhat pietistic to dwell on—His spirit moreover will have been at work actively furthering the final triumphant movement *from above*.

Christ failed to achieve this end in His own life-time only because His hands were tied: the time was not ripe for the use of the necessary violence. If He had resorted to violent action, His followers would have abused their triumph, and some new form of tyranny would have replaced the old. Deprived of the support of the necessary legions He inevitably failed. But He had shown the way, He had revived the hopes of men in the practicability of the earthly heaven, He had formulated as no one had ever done before the divine sanctions that underlie such a hope and can spur us on to strive for its realization.

Supposing the above to be, what it is meant to be, a roughly accurate rendering of the central meaning of the book, it might seem that formal criticism were scarcely needed. The system presents itself clearly enough as an amalgam of Fertility Culture with a de-spiritualized Old Testament Messianic moralism. Nevertheless it may be of some use to try to discover through what doctrinal inadvertences it was made possible for a Christian mind to become

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involved in this welter. But there is need first of one justificatory explanation. It has to be admitted that it was not the purpose of the author to expound the full doctrinal significance of the life of Christ as apprehended by Christian faith and theology. "I have tried," he says, "to see his life and teaching from the angle of those who actually came across him for the first time and were drawn within the orbit of his influence. Theological deductions as to his nature and his relations to the Godhead are of a later date." That being so nevertheless the fact remains that what would pass very well as an account of such misconceived impressions of the teaching of Christ as might well have formed in the mind of some casual listener in the crowd, or even possibly of some disciple at an early stage of formation, comes to be vigorously recommended here as though it were an authentic rudimentary introduction to the mind of Christ.

The cornerstone of the system seems to be a rather barbarous misapprehension of Christian Grace as being a force whose feminine rôle it is essentially to foster the latent powers of nature; to redeem that brute, and to become a radiant partner in its restored life and happiness. Which is nothing but a well-known old-fashioned Protestant heresy revived—the missing of the truth that it is for nature to be caught up into the life-of-grace, to take on a new and other life from above, from beyond itself. From this demeaning of Grace to Nature—from this misrepresenting of Grace as denoting characteristically a process of redemption back to a "primal" freedom that belongs to us according to the terms of creation, or a process of recapturing the values that are latent in our world; from this to a demeaning of Christianity to Communism, which is the unconscious achievement of this book, the way was perfectly straight and smooth.

How completely the author brings Grace to heel may be judged from the treatment it receives in the only passage in which it is dealt with explicitly:

"This word 'grace' runs like a golden thread through all their writings, occurring some two hundred times in the New Testament alone. It signifies beauty, charm, naturalness, and reminds us

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of that ease and gracefulness of the trained athlete . . . In reading of these first communities of Jesus, we are reminded of Bernard Shaw's picture of Siegfried as a type of the healthy man rejoicing in his impulses . . . Many prophets have mourned to the people, . . . but there seemed to have arisen One who had lured men with his shepherd's pipes and they had begun to dance . . . Among modern poets Walt Whitman has recaptured this Christian rapture, and sings 'I give nothing as duties . . . ' "

The passage does not stop there. From G. B. Shaw, Havelock Ellis and Walt Whitman it then takes you back to the early Christian martyrs who also were possessed by this spirit of "triumphant gaiety." They too could shout for joy; for they too had their eyes set on a world that was brimming over with the grandest possibilities of a Good Time Coming. For make no mistake, the particular heaven on which *they* were intent was the heaven that seemed to them to promise to break out at any moment upon this good earth of ours, to which the lions belonged who were about to devour them. They were no pietists.

Granted the success of the Promethean enterprise of severing Grace from its heavenly relationships, it becomes possible immediately to have a heaven of our own that shall be a perfect little detached and self-contained replica of the heaven above. Grace will set to work to fill up the measure of this world's capacity for well-being, and will no longer go streaming away into the sea of everlasting life. Then the centre of Christian happiness will no longer lie in a movement, a gravitation towards the vision of God. Separate upstairs and downstairs heavens will have been contrived, and between them such a gulf fixed that it will at once be seen to be enervating and anti-patriotic behaviour for the downstairs inhabitants even to allow their minds to dwell on the heaven that is above.

The prophet Osee, proclaiming that it was not sacrifice but mercy that was wanted, could be trusted to keep his theological balance and not to forget that what his exaggerated oratorical language really meant was that sacrifice without mercy was in vain. But one seems to be able to detect our present author being subverted by his own oratorical methods. "Away with your hankering after

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the heavenly Jerusalem, and let us have a little justice and mercy practised in the world where we are living” or some such expression might fit in very well as a movement in a Christian harangue, but it is disastrous that it should be allowed to congeal into a theological maxim. That is the treachery the author seems to allow his own rhetoric to practise against him. He reacts against a false other-worldliness only to establish another in its place. And this corrupt form of Christianity which gives him his chief theme for counter-exposition, is it nearly so common as he supposes, or is he not perhaps too readily assuming its prevalence out of sympathy with Communist slogans? It might reasonably be maintained that the number of those who are given to covering over their social misdemeanours with excuses drawn from false other-worldly religious principles are negligibly small. At any rate what is certain is that the Christian way of exhorting false Christians to behave like true Christians is not to preach abstinence from supernaturalism, not to drag them away from their prayers but to exhort them to pray better, and to think more intently than they *have* done about the mysteries of the hidden life of Grace. But for that it is necessary to recognise that Christian other-worldliness does not mean a playing truant from this world, because this world and the next world have been married for us. It is necessary to see that Christian other-worldlymindedness means a supernatural sharing in the mind of God, Who knows and loves only Himself, but in so doing can know and love His creatures in and unto Himself.

And the author appears to have missed the meaning of Christian love no less fundamentally—which at least was consistent in him. Consider the following passage:

“In fact any nation that has done such thing” (performed the corporal works of mercy, that is) “has accepted the Christ, and any nation neglecting such social duties has rejected him. It is remarkable that this is precisely the opposite to the teaching of certain evangelists of our day, who seem to assert that your first and sole duty is consciously to surrender to Jesus, and that, as a consequence of that surrender, you may individually come to love the poor and do good to them. But this ‘secondary’ love of your neighbour will then be a ‘command performance,’ and not flow

instinctively from your relation with him. All this is bad psychology."

If this means what it seems to mean, and what the whole tenour of the book suggests that it does, then it would take the very heart out of the Christian religion. It is the hope of an instructed Christian that by means of God's grace he may be drawn into a love-communion with God, such as shall give him possession of God as that which he loves, and at the same time necessarily as the principle by which he shall love. He will love God and he will love like and with God. If this is an impossibility, the Christian meaning of Charity is only a fiction. But it is strange that it should seem so psychologically obvious to the author that to love one's neighbour in God is not to love him genuinely, but only to make him an excuse or an occasion for performing a ritual of a sham love affair with God. For what does seem an obvious law of psychology is that when one man loves another he is being drawn by and reaches out to something greater than—although not apart from, but for the moment represented in—the friend or neighbour who is the immediate object of his love. No man can love anything except as enfolding it within whatever may be his supreme love. The men of the Soviet Republic whose social virtues excite the admiration of our author can be supposed to treat one another kindly only because they are in love with justice and goodness. Make them to be still more in love with justice and goodness and their benevolence will but have grown greater. But suppose it were possible that they should fall in love with a Being Who *is* Justice and Who *is* Goodness? Or with one Who *is* Love?

It would be tiresome to comment on the unreadiness the author has shown to "obtrude" upon us even a hint of the Gospel teachings concerning the divinity of Christ, or the Mystical Body, or concerning sacramental grace, and so on. Quite enough has already been said to present what may be the false impression that the Christianity which appears in this book is a thing in rags, and starved and tortured, as though conformed to the image of that physical wretchedness among us that has moved the author to his noble anger and pity.

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