

and rewards us for them. They too can be a ground of martyrdom. Hence St John the Baptist's death is commemorated in the Church, for he endured death not because faith was challenged but because adultery was reproved'.⁶

Christian Materialism

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One of the recurrent objections to Christianity, from the time when, as St John records, many disciples forsook our Lord because he said he would give us his flesh to eat, is that it is materialist, and the objectors wish the materialistic lumps could be strained out of the soup, which would then be a pure nourishment, suited to the most delicate digestion. Leaving aside for a moment the fact that Christianity is not a mass of facts from which we can pick what we like and reject the rest, but an organic whole, and that truth is bound to present some difficulties to human minds, it may be worth considering what revelation has to tell us about matter.

Obviously to material beings such as ourselves the subject is meaningful. The world confronts us as a reality: so does our own flesh. And in neither is the distinction between matter and spirit pressed to the point of division, for though at the extremities of creation there exist pure spirits on the one hand and mindless beings on the other, showing the distinction to be more than a logical trick, yet we have no knowledge of matter so unrelated to intelligence as to be completely formless. If it existed mind could not, so to speak, pick it up. There would be no means of communication.

We are not concerned here with the tendency of sense to sink itself in matter, or the reputed tendency of Christians to cold-shoulder it as if it were the gate to hell; still less with the over-intellectual disdain of it as no more than a step ladder in the library to enable one to reach the highest shelves. What do the scriptures tell us of the place and origin of matter?

⁶*ib.* 2a-2ae, 124, 5.

First—that it is good. Christian belief in divine creation rules out all attempt to assign to matter either an evil principle, or an inferiority that makes it of no account. ‘God’, says the writer of Genesis, ‘saw that it was good’. It could not be other than good since its efficient, formal, and final cause is good. But it is not simple; or perhaps we should say that the peak of material creation, the point where matter and spirit meet in a single unity, man, is not simple. There was always, so to speak, a danger, a possibility of split, because matter is naturally perishable, spirit naturally imperishable. In a sense of course all creation is a dangerous venture. Angels are all of a piece, and hence not subject to the peculiar risk involved in uniting in a single entity that which is naturally diverse, and which retains an inherent capacity for pulling or being pulled apart, but they have the necessity of knowing truth with such clarity that for them there can be no repentance. Animals are composed of less diverse elements but they share with all material beings the perils of corruption, from which man was originally exempt only by a divine gift that ensured wholeness and deathlessness; but the gift was not unconditional.

The very fact that it can be joined to spirit, or taken into spirit, so as to form body-soul beings suggests a high quality in matter, and one that is often understated; on the other hand it was through a sense temptation that man fell from God, though sense would have remained uncorrupted had mind refused the idea of equality with God. This directly affected soul rather than body, mind rather than matter, but in the chaos that followed when the gift of integrity was withdrawn, reason, which had refused to be subject to divine wisdom, found itself liable to be overthrown by sense, or emotion, or whatever else may be included under the notion of flesh. The quarrel thus begun remained acute, and the law served only to underline it, and keep spirit as it were in a state of suspense, winning occasional victories but never able to consolidate its gains. Yet matter had not been essentially affected. It was still ‘a good idea, and a good thing’, even though it had become to human beings an occasion of falling.

If this were the end of the story we should have to admit that the intention of the creator had been frustrated by those creatures to whom he gave the perilous gift of freedom, and with it a measure of responsibility for the ordering of the world. Such a thought however runs clean counter to all we know of God either by reason or revelation. It denies his transcendence, and virtually destroys the meaning of the word ‘God’. If he is any of the things revelation shows him to be then

creatures, even the most free, depend on him entirely. Indeed created freedom is realized most fully when rational beings most clearly understand, and most urgently will, their own dependence on their cause. This is the pre-requisite, as well as the fruit of charity.

It would seem, from the general picture of God in the scriptures (and what are sometimes called the 'crude Old Testament ideas' about him are crude only because incomplete), that such an intolerable offence as sin strikes at the very roots of creation, and demands a total blotting out, a new flood, before the dove can find a resting place on earth. Truth must be re-asserted, and what has been to some extent unmade be recreated. And this is what Israel was taught to expect, though the lesson went slowly; the class was not particularly bright, and not easily schooled in the things that make for peace. We are no better than our fathers. Do we not tend to make matter the scapegoat for spiritual sin, pressing still further the disunity within ourselves?

And yet Christianity might be said to depend on matter for its existence. God's recreation of the world begins with his taking a bodily nature, and he re-asserts the goodness of creation through the mystery of the Word made flesh. The trouble is we have heard this fact so often that we do not always listen to it attentively enough to be surprised and shocked by it; yet the fact itself is world shaking, and, as the angry Jews said to Paul and Silas at Thessalonica, it turns the world upside down—or right way up again.

This God who became man, under the real conditions of human nature but without its sin, by an act of unfathomable love deliberately shouldered man's burden. Being 'made sin' he went down, as it were, below the roots of disorder and corruption, to bring up out of the darkness not only a new nature but a universe restored, re-born to a new innocence.

The resurrection is the beginning, and the essential impulse, of that final and total restoration of all things that St Paul tells us to look for in the life of the world to come. It is the full reversal of Adam's disobedience, and as his fall brought all material being into the web of sin, so the obedience of Christ, and God's acceptance of his sacrifice manifested in his risen and glorified humanity, actually or potentially frees matter as well as spirit from every taint, and opens the way to a new integrity, a re-established harmony between soul and body; and again the gift is conditional.

To live with Christ we must first die with him, and because our death and resurrection is to inaugurate a new era in the history of

creation it is brought about not simply by his spirit acting on our spirits but through the medium of very humble, ordinary, material things. The world of the sacraments is the resurrected world where enmity between matter and spirit is ended, where harmony reigns between thought and thing, and signs no longer deceive or lead astray.

Sacraments were not in themselves a new concept. The idea of sacrifice is as old as man himself, and within its context the idea of feeding on the victim, or being sprinkled with its blood, or being surrendered to God and restored to life by him; of being able to eat holy food because life is restored, and of needing food to sustain the God-given life. Melchisedech is taken by New Testament writers to represent Christ, yet he was a priest before the law was given, and before the covenant was established with Abraham. What is new in Christian sacraments is that the signs not only point to a reality beyond themselves but make it effectually ours.

This is a tremendous claim. It is a use of matter so startling, and so far beyond human right or power; expressing so great, and so interior an authority over things whose inmost being is never entirely open to human minds, however natural science may be able to explore them, that we have not only a right but a duty to hesitate before accepting such an assertion. We are not using our intelligence properly unless we are staggered by these signs, and especially by the claim that they initiate and support life in God. Unless Christ speaks with the full authority of the creator, the Christian signs are no more than waves in the steady stream of symbols that has flowed through the world since time began. Only if he is the Word by whom all things are made can he command their recreation. Only the creator can change the substance of bread into the substance of body, and perhaps only the fact of the incarnation, with its deep and penetrating effect on the whole of creation, could make a material thing able to be the vehicle of so great a mystery. We could say with Fortunatus that in Christ's act of dying on the cross, which is the source of sacramental power, 'earth, and stars, and sky, and ocean' received perfect cleansing to prepare them for such new use, as if the fullness of God's forgiveness overflowed into everything.

Between this materialism directly consequent upon worshipping an incarnate God, who saves us by a whole series of physical-moral acts, and achieves in his resurrection not only glory for his manhood, but the ability to bring all who believe him in to the same glory in their due degree, and the harsh unhappy materialism so prevalent today, there is irreconcilable contrariety.

The Christian view of matter, and indeed the only truly human view of it, is a loving view, a tenderness for things because they too are creatures of God, and by means of them he leads us to himself. To be dead to beauty is to disdain its creator; destroying things that are beautiful is always, in itself, a bad kind of act, or at least a kind of act that is in danger of brutalizing the doer, even if it has to be done.

'Stop!', cries the objector, 'This may be true of a few saints, such as Francis, but what about all the beautiful women who not only despised but actually destroyed their beauty? What about the savage penances of some of the desert Fathers? What about ---'. But happily he is short of breath.

Well, what about them? Lovers see beauty only in what they love, or in something resembling the beloved. God himself takes pleasure only in what resembles his Christ, or himself. The saints are artists in Christian living, and like all artists they are ruthless, but never barbarous. They may make mistakes (do they not love unto folly?) but they do not destroy for the pleasure of destruction. On the contrary even the most ascetic man or woman is often found to have created some peculiarly beautiful object; a poem, a prayer, perhaps an order which has in it a quality not unlike the formal perfection of a Bach composition. Matter is used far more lovingly by them than by the modern (or ancient) pagan who takes it to be an end in itself, or a pleasure-giving instrument, to be thrown aside like an empty packet as soon as its contents have been smoked or swallowed. Strip the wood of blue-bells, and then throw them away; litter the grass with paper, 'what's it matter?'

Such use of material things blinds human beings to the sacramental nature of the world, and makes it hard indeed to understand that the incarnation is not an extraneous action but a movement by which God locks the material creation to himself. It must bear for a time the stigma and the ugliness of crucifixion—the tortured beast, the crushed flower, the disdainful pleasure-seeking of the modern manichee; but the sacraments, the extension of the incarnation until Christ returns, are the earnest of its resurrection, the tokens of salvation so complete that the least creature finds a part in it. The prophets prayed to Christ as the desire of all nations, the hope of the world. But we have seen this hope partly fulfilled; we cannot doubt, though the knowledge is too great for us, that the sacraments are the foretaste of a new heaven and a new earth, for the former things, the reign of destruction, is passed away, and the reign of the risen Christ is begun.