

TWO CHRISTIAN OUTLOOKS

THE EDITOR

IN modern Catholic writing we may detect two outlooks which seem at first sight to be fundamentally opposed. The first is that of the Christian humanist who, following St Thomas Aquinas, bases his conception of life on the essential goodness of nature. Not only does he stand firmly by the natural law in opposition to some of the theories of the Reformers, but he regards human nature with all its powers, physical as well as spiritual, as God-made and therefore good and as tending in one way or another towards a good end. Man is a single unit, soul informing body, and these two elements in his make-up have powers—the mind and will, the sense and the emotions, which interact in a single human life. And all this was created by God. Man, therefore, as a whole is perfectible by what is known as ‘culture’ as well as by grace. His human knowledge, his feeling and physical experiences, his natural affections and his psychological reactions all play their part together with grace, charity and faith in building him up to full stature as a creature destined for true completion in heaven only after the resurrection of the body.

On the other hand there are Christian writers who point to the constant tradition shown strikingly in the doctrine of St Paul and exemplified in the lives of innumerable saints to the effect that we should turn our eyes away from this present life, led always in a valley of tears, towards the blessedness of heaven which is beyond the reach not only of all the senses but of human knowledge and love as well. The things of sense, emotions, feelings, affections, are full of allurements which are constantly drawing us away from God. The beauties of nature as well as the triumphs of human intelligence inevitably ensnare us in the traps of pride or sensuality. In order to lead a good Christian life we must cut away all that is not God himself, concentrate on the life of the soul and be prepared to enter heaven without an eye or without a foot, humanly incapacitated but spiritually and supernaturally safe in the love of God. Those who adopt this penitential outlook accuse the Christian humanist of ‘naturalism’ or ‘humanitarianism’. In other words they say he is man-centred

rather than God-centred in his view of life; he is attempting to gain the whole world and suffering the loss of his own soul which is *the* essential feature of Christian life.

There is, of course, truth in both these outlooks. It might be said perhaps that the former is theoretically true but that the latter is the practical and workable view which takes into account the actual state of affairs. But this would be a dangerous generalization; for the humanist holds to certain fundamental principles which run right through the Christian life. The real opposite to his teaching is that of the Manichee who believes that all the physical side of human life is evil and that human perfection lies in some sort of destruction of everything but the soul. It is only on the humanists' ground that we can understand such essential features of Christian life as the liturgy or the sacraments, or for that matter the Incarnation itself, since the Word of God came to sanctify the whole man by taking flesh. Our Lord wept and became righteously indignant, he showed sympathy and a special affection for St John and St Mary Magdalen, and finally he rose again with a glorified body, sitting at meals with his Apostles not because he was hungry but because it was a good thing for members of his society to eat together.

There is of course a hierarchy in the good things of human existence. They are not all equally good or beneficial. The first things must be kept first so that the less important must be kept in their place or even jettisoned if the primary perfection of the soul is in any jeopardy. But man's perfect completion consists not merely in bringing his soul alone to sanctity, but in an integrity of his whole nature, with all its parts, so diverse and often so divergent, knit together in unity within the life of God. All things were created in the Word, and within the Word made flesh, risen in glory, is to be found the fulness of man.

But there is of course another element, a factual one, that gives the ascetic and penitential Christian a claim to be more practical and realistic, and that is the fact of original sin. The effect of original sin was to disintegrate man and to disturb the balance of the hierarchy of good things in his nature. As he is composed of so many parts each made to attain its own proper good, disintegrated man very easily places the lesser good before the higher. He finds himself torn into pieces as he is dragged in so many apparently different points of the compass at once.

The good that he would he does not, and the evil that he would not that he does. His inclinations have lost the balance of power so that the lower are often the more powerful. Above all the human will has been weakened and can so easily be deflected towards the more superficially attractive at the expense of the essential, more hidden and more difficult good of the soul. Moreover, through this first fault man has involved himself in a universal upheaval and malaise in which he is easily confounded and led astray. The whole world, the whole of creation is groaning and travailing, its hierarchy upset, and despite its true beauty and perfection providing that 'vale of tears', through which the Christian has to walk.

The extent of this disintegration can only be measured by the act which initiated the re-forming of what had been shattered, namely the Crucifixion, the act of redemption. Integrity is the ideal but it can only be reached through the destruction of the life of the very Son of God in the most bitter of agonies. And any human being who wishes to reach his perfection must also die with Christ, be scourged and crucified with him. His life was the most precious, the fullest, of all human lives and that had to be lost in order that the new, re-integrated life might restore perfection to mankind. The lives of lesser men, with infinitely less intelligence and will and sensitivity must undergo the same process if they are to find their completion. The Christian humanist may be fascinated by the wonder of the Resurrection but he must meet the Christian ascetic on Calvary if he is to attain his ideal.

In these two outlooks we are presented with a very real problem if we wish to lead a fully Christian life. If I am setting out to follow Christ I am faced constantly by decisions arising from these views. Am I to read the innumerable attractive books, imaginative or otherwise, which are not specifically concerned with my calling to heaven? They are good, but there is so much I could study and meditate concerning the mysteries of the faith that even if I kept at it every moment of my life I should never be satisfied or sufficiently imbued with the truth. Should I spend time on good music and good films, should I glide down the Thames in a punt for a week of my holiday? Or would it not be better to save up all those precious hours for retreats and days of recollection? Perhaps the problem is not posed as baldly

as that, but it is nearly always present in some form. The Christian humanist will be inclined to stress not only the need for recreation but also the benefit for the personality of a broadened intelligence, a more discerning spirit, a critical judgment, all of which are encouraged by the arts, the humanities and the human sciences. The ascetic will be inclined to regard all such pursuits as unimportant and a waste of time, and often as occasions of sin, in that they distract from the habitual presence of the Trinity within the soul and encourage the Christian to tarry by the wayside. The humanist will find powerful help and solace in human love; the ascetic will attempt to cut out any sort of 'particular friendship'. The humanist will set out to find God in the wind and in the willow tree; the ascetic will avert his face from the gentle breeze and keep his eyes on the ground lest the things of sense should allure him away from the divine Beloved.

But both men have to meet in the Paschal Mystery which combines the complete self-denial of the Cross with the perfection of human life in the Resurrection. The humanist must be ready to set aside all the wonders of God's creation for God himself, and the ascetic must be made aware of the glory of what God has made. The humanist must be ready to accept the truth of the vast penitential literature which deals with God and the soul alone, while his seeming opponent must begin to appreciate the sanctification of all 'humanities' in the splendour of the liturgy and the beauty and integrity of Christ's human flesh and spirit.

Both views are therefore necessary to balance each other in the Christian life; but at Easter they must be wed together in the single mystery of Redemption, the Pasch which combines death with life, and offers man the only way of wholeness and holiness which, like body and soul in man, unites two essential elements in one reality.