

THE PROTESTANT IMPOSITION

A further extract from the splendid study by H J A Sire, *Phoenix from the Ashes : The Making, Unmaking and Restoration of Catholic Tradition*, (Kettering Ohio, Angelico Press) 2015, pages 57-63.

Catholicism, while it devised the sacred rites of kingship and the code of Christian chivalry, had also brought religion into the lives of the peasantry, attending their births, their marriages, their deathbeds, the rituals of the home and the field, giving them intimate, beloved shrines at the crossroads and at the well. It had filled the churches outside and in with simple images for the poor, drawing the humblest into structures of soaring grandeur, teaching them the popular lore of the mystery plays, sharing their lives in the vocation of the mendicant orders. Besides this, Catholicism had given women a strong role in the domestic rituals of religion, so that the maimed rites of Protestantism found in them the most recalcitrant obstacle. Women had their own dignity in the great convents, in the potent cults of the Virgin Mary and the female saint whose statues rose above so many altars. As became its foundation by the Author of life, Catholicism was a creed to which nothing human was alien, a cult in which man and woman, prince and peasant equally rejoiced. All this changed with the advent of Protestantism, the work of that most limited of breeds, the intellectuals, and the masculine intellectuals at that. The feminine was extirpated from religion ; and the poor, bowing before the royal arms in ransacked churches where the holy rood had stood, found themselves in the house of God subject to the same structures of human power that ruled them outside.

The exclusive nature of Protestantism was developed further in the following centuries. Its classic example was Britain, where the landowning class, by a revolution against a Catholic king in 1688, established an aristocratic regime which in the next century and a half devoted itself to expropriating the peasantry by parliamentary means. So well have Protestantism and liberalism imposed their oligarchic myths that this process is still represented in history books as the winning of its rights by the people. In Protestant Holland, the towns became “an oligarchy untainted by any suspicion of democracy.”¹ Geneva became famous for its social exclusiveness. The puritan commonwealth of Boston was the place, “Where the Lowells talk only to Cabots/And the Cabots talk only to God.”

The landed nobility did not lag behind the urban patricians. In northern Germany, Protestantism introduced a subordination of the peasantry even surpassing the British example, and the growing militarism of Prussia was based on a social system in which noble officers beat their regimented serfs with canes as they would have done on their estates. These habits disclose a quite different ethos from that of the Catholic countries, where the teaching of the monks and friars instilled the essential holiness of poverty. In papal Rome, hierarchy and splendour sat easily with a natural simplicity and human openness of the great prelates and nobles ; amid the silks of eighteenth-century Rome, the beggar Benoit Joseph Labre was recognised as a saint. In seventeenth-century Spain, the monarchy was hedged with ceremony and there was great attention to the rubrics of rank ; yet it was also a society in which a grandee would rein in his horse to let a village woman cross the street and doff his

1 Charles Wilson in Hugh Trevor-Roper (ed.) *The Golden Age of Europe* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 86

hat to his footman's wife ; here, as strangers noted, even the beggars behaved like lords. Such was the social and moral division that developed in Europe under the influences of Catholic and Protestant teaching.

The Intellectual Legacy of Protestantism

Of more direct harm today are the mistaken ideas that the Reformation has introduced into modern thinking. One of them is the widely held assumption that Protestantism constitutes a purer and even, quaintly enough, a more rational form of Christianity than Catholicism. This notion may be tested by a study of the Protestant origins. Seeking to reject ten, if not fifteen, centuries of Christian corruption, the Protestants showed themselves the prisoners of late mediaeval thinking. That is true in their liturgical changes, in which they professed a return to primitive practice. In fact their ideas, as scholars now see, were a development of late mediaeval theology, with its assertion of the words of institution as the essential element of the Mass, and the consequent identification of the Mass with the Last Supper. This fact makes no headway, however, against the superstition that Protestant worship represents a return to early Christianity. The misconception had its effect in the Catholic revolution of the 1960s, when it was supposed that restoring a primitive liturgy meant moving it in a Protestant direction.

As to rationality, Protestantism was not a formulation from first principles but a collection of anti-clerical doctrines aimed against the late-mediaeval priesthood. Where that principle failed them, the Reformers took the status quo of Latin Christianity as they found it. In their appeal to primitive teaching, there was an unresolved ambiguity as to whether they were referring to a purely scriptural Christianity, in opposition even to the episcopal hierarchy of the early Church, or whether church authority was accepted at least until the Council of Chalcedon (451). Calvin accepted the trinitarian definitions of the first four councils, while he repudiated the episcopal office which is the basis for their authority. The episcopal Protestant churches saved their consistency in that, but lost it in their view of the later councils. It is a logical position to accept the eight councils of the undivided Church as definitive (although to do so freezes Christian doctrine in the formulations of the ninth century), and some modern Anglicans have tried to erect a general Christianity on that foundation; but there is no principle by which one can accept the first four councils and reject the next four. The Protestants however could not recognise these because it would entail accepting the Second Council of Nicaea (787), with its restoration of sacred images and of monasticism, and the Fourth Council of Constantinople (867), which reunited the Church under the primacy of the Roman See. The alternative, that of rejecting all the councils together in the name of a purely scriptural doctrine, would leave the Church without its trinitarian dogmas. When the extreme Protestants embraced that conclusion, Lutherans and Calvinists recoiled at the consequences of their revolution, and Calvin sent Servetus to the stake in Geneva.

If the early Church is authoritative, however, it gives no room for the Protestant reduction of the pope to mere "bishop of Rome", for the first three centuries accorded a special authority to the two Petrine sees of Rome and Antioch (the jurisdiction of Alexandria being set up on the same model in 325). Monasticism and a zealous devotion to the Mother of God are equally vouched for by the period

before the Council of Chalcedon. Besides such tests from antiquity, the Reformers fell at a hurdle which the simplest knowledge of doctrinal history would have cleared. The *Filioque* doctrine, which all the Protestant churches retain in the Creed, is not defined by the first four councils, or indeed the first eight. It derives its dogmatic status from its incorporation into the Creed by papal authority in the eleventh century; in other words it stands or falls by papal infallibility. This bone of contention between the Western and Eastern churches had been fought over as recently as 1439 in the Council of Florence, but the Reformers' short historical view enabled them to accept the Nicene Creed as revised by the Roman Antichrist.

Just as unconsidered historically was the appeal to scripture. The Protestants took for granted the process of canonisation that occupied the first four centuries, and assumed that the twenty-seven recognised books of the New Testament could be taken as the exclusive witness of the first Christians, regardless of the Church that instituted it.² Yet if the Church of the early centuries has no authority, the canon of the New Testament has none either. That applies particularly to the Gospels of Mark and Luke, which, lacking apostolic authority in themselves, are canonical only because the Church has defined them as inspired. In the longer term, the Protestants' use of the Bible as a stick to beat the Catholic Church with rebounded against them in the nineteenth century when their own scholars turned a corrosive study on it, in its presumed status as an absolute authority, and robbed Protestantism of its essential foundation.

Aside from such practical false steps, the theory of Protestantism is riddled with illogicalities. The principle that scripture contains all doctrine necessary to salvation fails its own test, since no such statement is found in the Bible. The Protestants insisted on the literal truth of scripture but attacked the Catholic Church for interpreting literally the words "This is My Body" and "He that eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood, hath everlasting life". The rapid division of Protestantism into divergent sects reflects the lack of a cogent basis for its doctrine. The only principle of unity that could be found was a political one, as national churches were set up that demanded conformity from their subjects while they struggled to find any coherent basis for their own teaching. What definition of religious authority could be more contingent than the *Act of Supremacy*, grounding it in scripture, in the first four councils of the Church and in "the high court of parliament with the assent of the clergy in their Convocation" ?

It is not surprising that the religious system so built has survived only by abandoning central parts of its doctrine. Modern Protestants, blushing at predestination, lean rather to a Pelagian doctrine asserting the capacity of man to gain blessedness by his own efforts, they shudder at the implication that only a few are destined for heaven, and the preferred suggestion is that everybody will be saved. The sixteenth-century rejection of purgatory and insistence on hell has given way to a repudiation of hell and a readiness to accept something like purgatory. The Royal Supremacy and the state churches of Geneva or Massachusetts yield to an insistence that the state has no right to concern itself in religious matters. The Divine Right of Kings, taught by Protestant preachers to exalt the heads of their national churches, is replaced by republicanism, pioneered by that prime political creation of

² The complete canon was first promulgated by the patriarchate of Alexandria in 367, when agreement on the subject was reached with the see of Rome.

Protestantism, the United States of America. The churches that denounced Catholicism for innovating upon scripture now adopt a female ministry without scriptural warrant. The rejection of Catholic ceremony and espousal of simple, bare, worship leads to modern Protestant practice with its gaudy robes, its theatrical prayer meetings and its emotional rituals. In Protestantism, the development of doctrine takes the form of its retraction.

In these inconsistencies, Protestantism at least pays its debt to Luther, who was not the most reposeful personality ever to have sought refuge in the religious life. Luther recalled that he was moved to become a monk by “the terror and agony of sudden death”. He had the further misfortune to conduct his studies in the University of Erfurt, which was a bastion of Nominalist teaching. That school rejected the rationality of the Thomist tradition, teaching that human ideas have no real relation to things but are merely labels of symbols for what the mind perceives. The Nominalist teaching, with its contraposition of faith and reason, is reflected in Luther's pronouncement (made before he broke with the Church) that “there are many things in the Catholic faith which manifestly appear contrary to reason and whose opposites are in accord with reason”. Because of that persuasion, Luther found himself staring into an abyss of unbelief, in which he would be left at the mercy of his fears. He resolved the dilemma by deciding that the crucial element in reconciling an individual to God was a spontaneous act of faith, in return for which God granted justification. “*Crede et pecca fortiter*”, was Luther's relieved injunction to his followers. We may trace from this doctrine the modern misconception of faith as an essentially irrational position, a sacrifice of the reason to religious duty, as if there were some virtue in the suspension of the proper faculties of the intellect for God's sake.

That view is opposed to the understanding held from the earliest centuries. In primitive Christianity, faith in Christ was the distinguishing mark that set it apart from Judaism; but the Christians held that the divinity of Christ was amply proved by his miracles and his fulfilment of the prophecies. St Irenaeus of Lyons wrote: “Faith is produced by the truth; for faith rests on things that truly are.”³ In this, the second-century bishop had a better grasp of philosophy than the sixteenth-century monk. The Church holds that faith is the submission of the intellect to what is in itself conformable to reason. Nowadays Christian thinkers, following Luther's false lead, argue that if the truths of religion could be proved there would be no virtue in the act of faith. That is not so. There is a great deal of virtue in intellectual integrity, and in the commitment of the will to what one knows to be true. To be faithful is to be *true*. If one were to seek an illustration of the virtue of faith one could find none better than the evasions of current-day Modernists, with their smothering of the reality of Christian truth by wrapping it in jargon, their espousal of the biblical criticism that turns the witness of the apostles into an ecclesiastical construct, and their disdain for popular devotion and traditional practices. Against these, the faithful Christian not merely holds his belief to be well grounded but asserts it with honesty, with conviction, and without weasel words. That is the blessedness of faith, without which the grace of Christ finds a poor ground in human souls.

The effect of Luther's teaching is to turn faith into a personal gesture, and that is the only understanding of it to which liberal humanists are willing to attach any value. Submission to the truth

3 Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Teaching*, Chap. 3

of God is converted into an egocentric affirmation. In a much-quoted passage in his play *A Man for All Seasons*, Robert Bolt represents St Thomas More as saying, regarding the Catholic doctrine he held to: "What matters to me is not whether it's true or not, but that I *believe* it to be true, or rather not that I believe it, but that I believe it." This, of course, falsifies More's position, in which he held himself obliged to be at one with "the general council of Christendom". Bolt's subjective version fits with the daft conception of religion which the liberals are naturally keen to promote, but whose logical consequences in faith and morality hardly need to be developed ("What matters to me is not whether cannibalism is right or not, but that I was to practise it, or rather not that I *want* to, that that I want to").

Once the concept of faith is thus subjectivised, the corollary is to deny it the right to social expression. The Christian is expected to recognise his belief as a personal whim, with no connection to objective reality, and Christians in fact accept that imposition. That is not what Christ meant by faith; what he meant by it was absolute conviction, the faith that moves mountains, and that is precisely the position in religious matters that the humanists will not tolerate. The virtue that Our Lord teaches as the prime duty of his followers is thus emptied of meaning by an irrational interpretation.

Having won this philosophical battle with the word "faith", the humanists exploit it to promote their subjective concept. The term "faith" is used to denote an attitude—whether held by Christians, Jews, Moslems, or others—which is accorded respect but is understood as irrational, in contrast to the assumed rationality of irreligion. As widely used, "faith" is a euphemism for superstition, an acceptance of notions that cannot be proved and that the objective mind would reject. Thus, the legacy of the Reformation, with its attack on the supposed superstitions of Catholic faith, is the transference of the whole of religious belief to the realm of superstition.

One final comment may be made on the Reformation: it is an example of the fact that no heresy has ever found Catholicism too narrow a dispensation and sought to enrich it; the efforts of heretics have always been directed at taking away, at cutting down, at impoverishing. There will always be those for whom the all-encompassing embrace of the Church, its satisfaction of every human need and longing, its catholicity in the fullest sense, is too much for their narrow understandings; and these will think that to take away the life of the sacraments and the richness of worship is to cleanse the religious life. To these, Protestantism appears as a purified religion, and through their conviction the same purification was wreaked on the Catholic Church four centuries after Luther and Calvin had done their work.

We may close this account of the failings of Protestantism by asking, humanly speaking, how could it be otherwise? A movement that sets out to overhaul the content of Christianity cannot fail to display such defects, and we have seen them repeated in the movement that ruined the Catholic Church in the 1960s. Such a hubristic purpose will inevitably be marked by illogicalities, by incompleteness, by immersion in the prejudices of its time, by the acceptance of imperfect scholarship, and by the essential shallowness that comes from following the lead of intellectuals. There is only one way to escape from such human errors, and that is to be guided by tradition, which is the divine gift

of truth deposited with the Church. Invoking that gift against the shallowness of human devisings, Christ told his apostles: "Take no thought how or what to speak: for it shall be given to you in that hour what to speak. For it is not you that speak, but the Spirit of your Father that speaketh in you" ; and as a pledge that the guidance of God would not be subject to the vicissitudes of human ages: "Behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world" (*Matt.* 10: 19-20 ; 28: 20)
