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T. R. Glover

Excerpt

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I

INTRODUCTION

The proper task and the nature of history men have long debated. In the opening chapters of Thucydides the matter is briefly discussed, with oblique but severe criticism of the greatest historian the world had yet seen. The various books of the great work of Polybius are full of digressions upon the ideal of the historian, and, alas! on the declensions from it that later Greek writers displayed. A few words from the prelude to his first book may form as good an introduction to the task before ourselves as any other. If his predecessors, he begins, had omitted the praise of history, as a discipline for life, he might well undertake the eulogy; but they had been guilty of no such neglect. The very element of unexpectedness—of paradox (to use his own word)—in the events he has to narrate should be enough to incite old and young to read. “Can anyone be so worthless and indolent as not to wish to know by what means and under what polity the Romans in less than fifty-three years have succeeded in subjecting nearly the whole inhabited world to their sole government—a thing unique in history?”¹

So writes Polybius in his first chapter, and he can never get away from his central view that there is reason in history. “The progress of the Romans was

¹ Polybius i, 1.

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not due to chance or automatic, as some among the Greeks choose to think.”¹ The superiority of the legion to the phalanx was not accidental;² the Spanish sword³ was better than the Gallic sword,⁴ and Rome’s choice of it was not accident. Indeed Chance leaned the other way; Fortune, he says,⁵ strove to save the Greeks, but the folly of their leaders trampled her gifts underfoot. His readers find his promise fairly fulfilled and can realize and understand how and why Rome conquered the world.

Professor J. B. Bury has urged that history is a science; the object at least of every science, however its methods may differ from those of other sciences, is to learn, to interpret and to explain. The historian cannot like the lawyer cross-examine his witnesses, nor like the man of science use test-tube and re-agent, but his purpose is the same. Like the Greek of old he wishes to know and he wishes to understand. In history as in science there is no democracy among facts; all, it is true, have the same right to be understood, but some facts are of vastly more significance than others. The scholar, for whom all facts are of significance and all of equal significance, never understands anything, though Nature is kind to him and conceals from him that there is anything to understand. Conversely, I have heard genius described as the instinct for the fact with meaning, for the real factor; and it is this that every true historian and every real man of science will seek.

¹ Polybius i, 63.² Polybius xviii, 26–31.³ Polybius vi, 23; xv, 15.⁴ Polybius ii, 30, 33.⁵ Polybius xl, 5. Strachan Davidson, in *Hellenica*, 393.

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Is it possible to adapt with any profit the question of Polybius and to ask who is so worthless or so indolent as not to care to know how and why Christ captured the world? Or is the bitter sentence of Tertullian still true—that here for once curiosity itself is torpid? Yet I think no section, and no phase, of history can be so significant. If they were moral causes that gave Rome the mastery of the world, a real sense of fact that taught her to develop the legion and to pick the Spanish sword, a real instinct for the factors that counted in a political situation, is it likely to be pure accident that Christ is a more familiar name than Serapis or Mithras? What was it in Christ or in Christianity that beat down Venus and Jupiter, Isis and Osiris, Cybele and Mithras? What is it in Christ and Christianity that is conquering the faiths of a more distant Orient? The two questions are one. Did the Christian faith, or does it yet, win the world because it was or is so like the other religions of the ancient and the modern world, or because it is so different from them?

In the chapters that follow we turn to the ancient world, in which Christianity rose and fought its first battles and won its first victories; but we must not forget the closely parallel story of India, which will enable us, if we take the trouble, to check and to control the results we obtain from the earlier story. The parallel between the Indian Empire and the Roman is amazingly close—tradition, idolatry, ritual, the sense of sin, philosophy, want of nerve, high aspirations, all in fresh and disconcerting contact with a religion of power. But let us look at the ancient

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world, and, first of all, consider one or two theses about earlier Christianity of which of late we have all heard a good deal.

Let us begin with the picture of Christ given to us by certain modern students of Apocalyptic writings. Without excessive attention to such questions as more literary critics ask about the sources and construction of the Gospels, they point to parallel passages; they compare the Apocalyptic chapter, the reply to Caiaphas, the account of the Last Judgment, with what they find in Enoch and the rest. They waste little time on the minds of the disciples and their successors; they take these passages as literal and authentic renderings of the mind of the Master; and they draw him anew for us. We are given an amiable figure indeed, gentle, kindly, and full of moral virtues, but hardly of what you could call the intellectual virtues; his head is full of contemporary fancies, of symbols which he mistakes for reality. The critic of Moses and of the Pharisees becomes the victim of the Apocalypticist. He can see his way through Moses' law; he can get at the gist of the marriage and divorce issue, and transcend the food taboos of Jewish traditionalism; but the clouds of heaven are too much for him. He can read God's working in the world and see God's hand in His care for the birds and the colours given to the flower; but when it comes to moral issues he must jog the elbow of God and try to hurry Him. He goes to Jerusalem to be crucified in order to hasten God's plans, in order that without delay God may send him back in triumph on the clouds. And so forth.

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To all this, various lines may be taken in reply. One I have suggested already—a closer testing of sources and transmission. Plato used the language, the phrase of the Orphics, and quite clearly hated their ideas of religion and righteousness. If Jesus used the phrase of the Apocalyptist, must he, unlike Plato, have been the innocent victim of the phrase-maker's thought? That is, if he used it at all. Is it not as possible that the disciple missed the thread, lost the point, re-cast, re-modelled and re-translated what he heard, as men have been known to do in later days after a lecture, a sermon, a conversation? Can we suppose any interior harmony in the mind of Jesus? any capacity for comparing one idea with another? Is he in short the sort of person who took to Apocalyptic? Does the style of the Sermon on the Mount, of the parables of the various Sowers, of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan—the style of the controversialist who silenced scribe and Sadducee—of the Master who found his own followers slow in understanding—suggest the manner of any man who ever wrote an Apocalypse? The contrast is that between daylight and nightmare. But we may here take other ground.

If Jesus was another Apocalyptic dreamer, what had he to offer a wide-awake, anxious and disillusioned world that the other Apocalyptic dreamers did not offer it? For it is plain that the world was not interested in Apocalypses at all; there were too many of them altogether, and the world of Horace and Tacitus, of Dio Chrysostom and Dio Cassius, had great traditions of intellectual daylight, which, it is plain, the

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early Christians did not ask them to forsake. If Christ had an essentially Apocalyptic mind, it is plain that his early followers did not share it. It was precisely the non-Apocalyptic features of Christ's thinking that appealed to the world. As Mr R. T. Herford has well said, the Apocalyptists used the language of hope, but their thoughts were of despair. There is no despair in Christ's mind, and no sense of hurry, no nervous jogging of the Father's elbow. Whatever the first Jewish followers handed on of Apocalyptic to their converts, it was to more real things that those converts responded. Long before the whole world was won, the Last Things and the Second Advent had a secondary place; they had become pictures of a final victory; they were not munitions of war. It was other things that conquered the world for the Galilaean.

St Paul in his turn has been re-modelled into a thorough-going Sacramentarian and his Gospel into something in essence very like a Mystery religion, with "Jesus the centre of a cult offering private salvation".¹ The reconstruction depends on two assumptions—one, that we really know the dates of the documents on which we depend for knowledge of the Mystery cults, and the other, that St Paul, Jew as he was, looked wistfully over the fence (as it has been put), freely re-modelled the Christian tradition, and carried his predecessors and their friends with him. But once again the epistles, if read with any sense of proportion and perspective, do not suggest the Mystery documents. Paul's mind, as Professor

¹ K. Lake, *Landmarks*, p. 70.

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Gilbert Murray himself puts it,¹ “for all its vehement mysticism, has something of that clean antiseptic quality that makes such early Christian works as the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix and the Epistle to Diognetus so infinitely refreshing. He is certainly one of the great figures in Greek literature”. Probably no one, who knew the difference between one book and another, would call the writers of the Mystery books great figures, antiseptic or refreshing.² On the other hand the question is raised and admirably discussed by Mr Edwyn Bevan, whether Christianity and Gnosticism fitted to Jesus of Nazareth the conception of a Redeemer older than Christianity, which had originally nothing to do with him; or whether the Gnostics, with Jesus before them, introduced a Redeemer into a scheme which originally had none. He concludes that the figure of a personal Redeemer was not an original part of Hellenistic theology, and that no real parallel in current paganism has been discovered to the belief in the Divine One taking on him for love of men the form of a servant. He adds that there is no Redeemer in the Hermetic literature or in the system of Posidonius.³ Even the word “Saviour” comes late and slowly into the New Testament and Christian speech.

But there is another question here. If the Mystery cults held the place in modern times assigned to them in the old religion of the Mediterranean world, why

¹ Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, p. 199.

² See the vigorous page of Dean Inge, in *The Legacy of Greece*, p. 52: “Paul’s antipathy to ritual in every shape is stamped upon all his writings”.

³ Edwyn Bevan, *Hellenism and Christianity*, Essay V on the Gnostic Redeemer, pp. 95, 106.

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did the Christian apologists in the main let them alone? And, a more serious problem, how did the new cult make its way among them with its miserable start? That Jesus was shamefully crucified was trumpeted everywhere by the opponents in taunt and caricature; that he rose from the dead was the statement of the struggling sect. Why, if he were what was claimed, did he not spontaneously vanish from the cross in the sight of all men, asked Celsus.¹ For a Mystery religion the start was a bad one. How such things were started, we can read in Lucian's account of the impostor Alexander. Once again, a comparison of Paul's epistles to the Corinthians with the last book of Apuleius' *Golden Ass* will suggest other handicaps. The Christian did not "drink out of a cymbal and eat out of a tambourine". Paul and Pliny between them sketch something far more like a village chapel—all the procedure simple and commonplace, and unimpressive every way apart from the story of Jesus. The village chapel of course is modelled on Paul's epistles, and the successors of the Mystery religions must be sought elsewhere, and they, too, are easily found. As a Mystery religion Christianity made a bad start, and, even if it be allowed that as a Mystery religion it eclipsed the rest, early Christian literature emphasizes quite other things than the adherents of the cults proclaimed and practised. It seems reasonable to conclude that in the two crucial centuries the Christian religion made its war on another line of appeal, and that it had a richer and stronger content than the Mystery religions.

¹ Celsus *ap.* Origen, *c. Celsum*, ii, 68.

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The miracles of Jesus used to play a great part in apologetic, but the educated world of the early Roman Empire had as solid a contempt for miracle as the rationalists of the opening days of the modern scientific movement. Ordinary quacks, according to Celsus, could be seen in the streets doing greater miracles than those of Jesus, “driving devils out of men and blowing away diseases, calling up the souls of heroes and displaying sumptuous banquets, with sweetmeats and dainties that are not there”—are they also to be called “Sons of God”?¹ Tertullian admits the inadequacy of proof from miracles apart from the fulfilment of prophecy, and quite readily concedes the skill of the conjurers in the streets.

The argument from the fulfilment of prophecy appealed only to those who knew the Old Testament and were content to set on it the valuation of the early Christians and to accept their canons of interpretation. But the Jews were at hand to prove that Isaiah never prophesied in Hebrew that a *virgin* should bear a son; and pagans, quite familiar with the allegoric method, said the Christian allegories were more disgraceful and absurd than the myths they allegorized, that they made riddles of what was perfectly plain in Moses, and that the Christians cheated their own critical faculty.² The allegoric method with its types may have some value for those who accept it, but it is hard to deny here that pagan criticism was justified.

Yet Christianity did capture the ancient world. Wilamowitz says it did so because, of the religions in competition, it most successfully Hellenized itself. The

¹ Celsus, *ib.* i, 68.² So says Celsus.

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phrase by itself is not very clear; but if I may put on it my own interpretation of the word Hellenism, I think it gives us a real clue. What was Hellenism? Surely the progressive development of the mind to Athenian standards. If we may turn the Greek word into something more like ordinary English, Christianity triumphed because it squared best with the world's best intelligence, because essentially it liberated the human mind and gave it a chance to develop to the full range of God's conception for it. We can admit that; and we can add that the Christian learnt somehow to be quicker in recognizing new facts than the ordinary Hellenist was, and that he found some signal factors in life that his neighbours and his ancestors had missed. That is my thesis in these pages and it can be summed up very largely in a phrase of St Paul's—where the spirit of the Lord, i.e. of Jesus, is, there is liberty. This is not to assert that early Christians, or even modern Christians, achieved all the freedom to which they are entitled, or that they did not, and do not, lose the habit of freedom of mind, that they do not get frightened and compromise between God's future and their own past. But I propose to maintain that Jesus came to the world as a liberating force, at once in virtue of the factors he was to teach men to recognize and of the personality that he was. We shall have to deal more particularly with various phases of the human mind and the life it worked out for itself in that age, and with the reaction of Jesus upon each phase in turn.

But first let us recall the larger outlines of that world. In a few pages not even a modern traveller