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J.B. Bury

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

CHRISTIANITY AND PAGANISM

IN the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. a great change came over the face of Europe; the political order of things was broken up. This movement ushered in the Middle Ages, and it presents a noteworthy parallel to that other great European movement which ushered out the Middle Ages, the movement of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by which the spiritual order of things was broken up. The atmosphere of the age in which the Empire of Rome was dismembered was the christian religion; the atmosphere of the age in which the Church of Rome was ruptured was the Renaissance of culture. The formation of independent Teutonic kingdoms in the earlier period corresponds to the Reformation in the later; in both cases the German spirit produced a mighty revolution, and in both cases the result was a compromise or division between the old and the new. The Roman Empire lived on in south-eastern Europe, even as the Catholic Church lived on, confined to a limited extent of territory; and there was a remarkable revival of strength, or reaction, in the fifth and sixth centuries at Constantinople, which, following out the parallel, we may compare to the Counter-reformation. And this analogy is not a mere superficial or fanciful resemblance; the same historical principle is involved. Christianity and the Renaissance performed the same functions; each meant the transformation of the spirit of the European world, and such a transformation was a necessary precursor of the disintegration of European unity, whether political or ecclesiastical. In the strength of ancient ideas lay the strength of the Roman

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Empire; Christianity was the solvent of these ideas, and so dissolved also the political unity of Europe. In the strength of medieval ideas lay the strength of the Roman Church; the spirit of the Renaissance was the solvent of medieval ideas, and therefore it dissolved the ecclesiastical unity of western and northern Europe.

For the philosopher who looks upon the march of ideas over the heads of men the view of history is calm, unlike that of the troubled waters of events below, in which the mystic procession is often but dimly discerned. For him the spirit of old paganism departs before the approach of Christianity as quietly as the sun sinks before the sweeping train of night; and the dark glimmerings of the medieval world yield to the approach of the modern spirit as the stars "touched to death by diviner eyes" pass away before the rising sun. But to the historian who investigates the details of the process a spectacle is presented of contrast, struggle, and confusion; and its contemplation has a peculiar pleasure. For both the great periods, of which we have been speaking, were long seasons of twilight—the evening twilight and the morning twilight,—during which light and darkness mingled, and thus each period may be viewed in two aspects, as the end of an old, or as the beginning of a new, world. Now this doublesidedness produces a variety of contrasts, which lends to the study of such a period a peculiar interest, or we might say an aesthetic pleasure. We see a number of heterogeneous elements struggling to adjust themselves into a new order—ingredients of divers perfumes and colours turning swiftly round and blending in the cup of the disturbed spirit. The grand contrast of the old and the new in the fourth and fifth centuries stands out vividly; old and new nations as well as old and new religions are brought face to face. We see civilised Greeks and Romans, semi-civilised or wholly civilised Germans, Germans uncivilised but possessing potentialities for civilisation, Huns and Alans totally beyond the pale, moving to and fro in contact with one another. In the lives of individuals too we see the multiplicity of colours curiously reflected. St. Helena, the mother of an Emperor, makes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, since Hadrian's time usually called Aelia Capitolina, and finds the relics of the true cross with a

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thrill of overpowering delight, something like the delight that was felt by Renaissance scholars when an old Roman corpse was disinterred. Or we see Julian, a pagan philosopher, a noble man and an enlightened Emperor, trying to dislodge Christianity from the position it had won, and yet unable to avoid borrowing hints from it for his own system; just as in the writings of his friend, the anti-christian professor Libanius, we occasionally find an unconscious echo of the new religion. While the pagan Neoplatonist Hypatia is lecturing in the Museum at Alexandria, her semi-pagan pupil Synesius is a bishop at Cyrene. At Athens, now a fossilised provincial town, but still the headquarters of learning, paganism has its last stronghold; and even from this camp of heathenism the most christian Emperor, Theodosius II, obtains the daughter of a philosopher as his consort, and she, after her conversion to Christianity, writes religious poems composed of scraps of Homeric lines. St. Augustine, the poet Sidonius Apollinaris, and the poet Nonnus were, like Synesius, remarkable examples of persons who, born and reared pagans, turned in later life to the new faith; and the writings of these men illustrate the contrasts of the age.

The christian Church itself, it may be added, was full of contrasts just then; for the christian doctrine had not yet sunk, or risen, to the monotony of a formula. There were still many open questions, even for orthodox Athanasians; there was still room for the play of individuality. It has been noticed how heterogeneous in spirit were the writings of the Greek Church; we have "the zealous dogmatism of Epiphanius, the poetic speculation of Synesius, the philosophy of religion of Aeneas of Gaza and Nemesius, the sobriety of Theodoret, the mysticism of Pseudodionysios." Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus had been fellow-students of the pagan Julian at Athens; Chrysostom was a pupil of Libanius.

Thus the general impression we receive is one of contrast, and it is in the battle of conflicting elements that the keenness and quickness of life consist. But the conflict was carried on, and the quick life breathed in a gray, often murky, atmosphere, different from the brightness that lit up those other conflicts in Athens during the fifth century B.C., and in Italy during the fifteenth century A.D. There

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was a general feeling of misfortune ; the world-sadness pressed on the souls of all ; and books were written to account for the woes that had come upon the human race. Nature too seemed to have prepared a dark background for the enactment of the miseries involved in the break-up of society and the incursions of the barbarians ; plagues and earthquakes seemed to be signs of the times—like the tempest in *King Lear*, a suitable setting for the tragedy. The pagans of course were fain to attribute the misfortunes of the time to the new religion, and the “pale cast” of the spirit to the victory of the “pale Galilean.” But in history what men superficially connect as cause and effect are really both effects of some deeper cause. The world had grown gray independently of Christianity, and if it had not grown gray, Christianity would hardly have been possible—would not have had much meaning ; it met the need of the world at the time.

For there are two ways in which we may intuit the world and avoid quarrelling with life. We can regard our experience as *destiny*—fortune and misfortune as alike determined for us by conditions beyond our control. It was in this objective way that the old Greeks regarded their experience, and in this way they were content ; for it never occurred to them to exalt subjective wishes of their own in opposition to the course of destiny, and grieve because such wishes remained unachievable.

Otherwise we may feel our own subjective aims more keenly, and be unable to see them sacrificed without experiencing sorrow or even despair. In this case we shall need something in their stead to make us contented with life, we shall require a *consolation*. If circumstances render a man’s life joyless and hopeless, it becomes endurable for him through the belief that another existence awaits him ; the world is thereby rendered less unintelligible, or there is a hope of understanding it in due time ; the heavy and weary weight seems less weary and heavy to bear ; his belief is a consolation. The old Greeks needed no repentance and no consolation. The centuries from Alexander the Great to Marcus Aurelius were the time in which the thorns were penetrating. The ancient Greek spirit could indeed exclaim, “Oh, how full of briars is the working-day world !” but they

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were only burs thrown upon it in holiday foolery, burs upon the coat that could be shaken off. The spirit of the later ages said, "These burs are in my heart." When Anaxagoras was informed that his son had died, he said, "I never supposed him to be immortal"; but a christian hermit, on receiving similar news in regard to his father, rebuked the messenger, "Blaspheme not, my father is immortal." The christian had a compensation for death which the heathen did not require.

Christianity provided the needed consolation.¹ But we must apprehend clearly the fact that the need had at one time not existed, and also the fact that it had come into existence in the regular course of the spiritual development of man. We are hereby reminded that if in one respect Christianity forms a new start in history, from another aspect it stands in close historical connection with the old Greek and Roman worlds; its philosophical doctrines are the logical end of the ancient Greek philosophy and the direct continuation of Stoicism and Epicureanism.

We may then first consider the connection of the new religion with the past, and its points of resemblance and contrast with the last form of pagan philosophy; and then, in another chapter, glance at the new departure made by Christianity and its most obvious influences on society.

The post-Aristotelian individualistic philosophies of Zeno, Epicurus, and the Sceptics were all characterised by the same motive. Their object was, not to understand the universe, but to secure for the individual the *summum bonum*; the end of philosophy was personal, no longer objective. It is from a similar cause that *philosopher* and *philosophical* in colloquial English are used in a degraded sense; we talk of "bearing pain like a philosopher."² We may contrast the apathy of Zeno, the freedom from affections which make us dependent on external things, with the metriopathy of Aristotle, who therein reflected the general spirit of the ancient Greeks. Epicurus placed the highest good in a deep haven of rest, where no waves wash and no sound is heard; his ideal too was

¹ The word *παραψυχή* had for the ancient Greeks nothing of the emotional import which Greek Christians placed in the word *παράκλητος*.

² We find *φιλοσοφῶ* used in this sense in Theophylactus Simocatta; e.g. viii. 11, 3, τὸ *δυστύχημα*. It has also another sense in the same author, *operam dare*.

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mainly negative, freedom from bodily pain and mental trouble. These philosophies were over against the world rather than above it; the note of them was dissatisfaction with life and estrangement from the world.

This spirit, which set in as old Greek life was falling asunder, increased and became universal under the cold hand of Roman rule, which assorted well with the cold Stoic idea of *φύσις*, nature. It has been said that the early Empire, up to the middle of the second century at least, was a golden age of felicity, and we may admit that in some respects it did approach more than other ages to the ideal of utilitarians; but for thinkers it was not an age of felicity or brightness, heaviness was hanging over the spirit and canker was beginning to gnaw. The heavy cloud soon burst, and after the reign of Marcus Aurelius, Europe was a scene of general misfortune.

The philosophical attitude of the Stoics, whose tenets were more widely spread than those of any other school, could not be final; it naturally led to an absolute philosophy. For it disparaged the world and isolated the soul; but the world thus disparaged was a fact which had to be explained, and reason was constrained to complete its dialectic by advancing to repose itself in the Absolute or the One, just as in the eighteenth century the system of Kant necessitated the absolute philosophies of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.

Or, to put it from a religious point of view, the individual's own soul was not found a sufficiently strong refuge. Some stronger and surer resting-place was needed, something above the world and not over against it. And so the spirit endeavoured to grasp itself anew. The new idea was the Logos; the new world was the kingdom of the Son. A need was felt for mediation—for a place or mansion as it were for the soul to be near God. This was the positive idea that animated the age of the Roman Empire and tended to supersede Stoicism; it was common to the system of Philo, to Gnosticism, to Christianity, and to Neoplatonism. And in Christianity, especially, approach to God seemed a sort of refuge, and the negative tendency, derived from the apathy of the Stoics and the unsociability of the Cynics, to flee from the environments of life, was very strong, and found its expression in monastic ideals.

Thus these philosophies of the Infinite were the sphere to

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which the Stoic, Epicurean, and Pyrrhonic systems naturally led, by their own inherent defect. But we must now turn to the historical side and see how these late Greek thinkers prepared the way for the reception and spread of Christianity. It may be pointed out in a few words. In the first place, Epicureanism and Scepticism were atheistic and tended to discredit the popular beliefs in the pagan gods. In the second place, Epicureanism discredited devotion to one's country, and so, by uprooting patriotism, made the ground ready for the theory of universal brotherhood. In the third place, Stoicism, by its positive pantheistic theory and the surrender of the individual to the pulse of the universe, made a step towards the dependence of man on God's will or the doctrine of obedience, which is so cardinal in Christianity. And in the fourth place, the Stoic cosmopolitanism, combined with the Stoic theory of the law of nature, supplemented the non-patriotic sentiments of the Epicureans, and thus anticipated the christian embrace of all humanity. The fact that this Stoic theory affected the theory and practice of the Roman lawyers, and transformed the meaning of the phrase *jus gentium*, was an advance of the greatest importance in the same direction.

The resemblance between Christianity and Stoicism, which is in many points so striking, is sometimes unduly dwelt on. For if the Stoic and the Epicurean systems correspond to two different types of human nature, if some men are naturally stoical and others naturally epicurean, Christianity contained elements which attracted men of both these natures; as well as a stoical it had an epicurean side, and the second side should not be lost sight of.

For one of the most important elements in Christianity was the weight it gave to the tender affections, and one of the most attractive incidents in a christian life was the formation of a spiritual friendship or brotherhood. Now friendship and comradeship were regarded as most important elements in life by the Epicureans, beginning with the founder of the sect, who collected around himself a friendly society, while his disciples used to meet solemnly every month, and once a year in commemoration of his birth, in a manner which reminds us of the christian apostles meeting to commemorate their master. Friendship was a feature among the Epicureans as it was

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among the Christians, but not so in the system of the independent and lonely Stoics.

And then we may say that the joint life of brethren in a monastery, which, in the western lands of the Empire, ultimately acquired in many cases a certain brightness and cheerfulness, corresponded to the Epicurean spirit; while the solitary life of hermits who fled from their fellows and mortified their bodies was derived from the spirit of Stoicism, tintured with oriental asceticism, and sometimes degenerating into the life of Cynics, who were a sort of caricature of the Stoics.

A noteworthy difference between the two philosophies was that the Stoics looked back, while the Epicureans looked forward. The great poem of Lucretius is permeated with optimism, not indeed with the optimism which holds that there is more pleasure than pain in the world, but with an optimistic belief in human progress. The human race is represented as progressing, gradually freeing itself from the fetters of superstition and opening its eyes to a clearer view of truth. The Stoics, on the other hand, prefer to dwell on the glories and the heroes of the past, and care little to look forward; their pantheism did not lead them to an idea of progress. Now Christianity involved optimism in two ways. It not only involved happiness for believers in another life; it also involved the theory that the course of history had been one of progress, designed and directed by the Deity, and that the revelation of Christ had introduced a new era of advance for the world,¹ just as the teaching of Epicurus was hailed by followers like Lucretius as ushering in a new age. It was believed indeed that at any time the end of the world might come, and that a great change might take place; but, allowing for all differences, we cannot help perceiving that in the idea of the world's progress Christianity approaches more nigh to Epicureanism than to Stoicism.

And, in general, the heroism of the Stoics, even of the later and milder Stoics, was not a christian virtue; and man's dignity, which for Christians depended on his having a soul, was reduced by the feeling of his abasement before God. On the other hand, Christianity exalted the feminine un-Roman side of man's nature, the side that naturally loves pleasure

¹ This idea underlies St. Augustine's *de civitate Dei*. Ambrose, in his letters to Valentinian II, speaks of gradual progress, light coming out of darkness.

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and shrinks from pain and feels quick sympathy,—in fact, the Epicurean side; and thus Mr. Walter Pater makes Marius, a natural Epicurean, or rather a refined Cyrenaic, turn by the force of that very nature, *anima naturaliter christiana* in Tertullian's words, to the new religion. This is the human, and to most men attractive, side of Christianity¹; it had another, an inhuman, side, of which I shall have to speak hereafter.

After the victory of Christianity, paganism was dying out, but even in the sixth century it was not yet dead. Towards the end of the fourth century Gratian gave up the title of Pontifex Maximus; the altar of Victory in the Senate House at Rome was removed, though Symmachus and the senators made an affecting appeal to spare it; the Olympic games were abolished, and the oracle of Apollo became silent. The effort of Julian, the last effort of the benighted faith, lured the exiled gods of Greece back for a moment to their ancient habitations. But the verses—*εἶπατε τῷ βασιλῇ χαμαὶ πέσε δαίδαλος αὐλά*, etc.—in which the Hellenic spirit uttered its latest breath, expressed the consciousness that the old things had passed away,—the laurel, the spring, and the emblems of paganism. “Tell the king, on earth has fallen the glorious dwelling”—the words have a dying fall; and with the song of Greece the gods of Greece also retreated down the vast and dreary edges of the world, which was no longer a meet habitation for the deities of Olympus. But the schools at Athens still flourished in the fifth century, and the pagans who taught there—as Leontius, Plutarch the philosopher, Proclus—were in no danger of suffering the fate of Hypatia at Alexandria. They were quietistic; they did not attempt to oppose the new faith, and the government wisely left them in peace.

The Christians themselves were not quite emancipated from the charm, or, as some thought, the evil glamour, of classical antiquity. The pagan rhetoric, with all its ornaments, was not dispensed with by the most learned christian divines. It was as dear to the heart of Chrysostom as to that of

¹ M. Édélestand du Ménil says of Christianity: “Non seulement il minait par la base les deux grands empêchements de l'amour dans l'ancien monde, le laisser-aller de l'épicurisme au plaisir et les orgueilleuses indiffé-

ences du stoïcisme; il initiait l'Humanité tout entière à cette vie de l'âme que quelques sages avaient seuls encore soupçonnée.” (Introduction to *Floire et Blanche*, p. c.)

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Libanius, and Eusebius, the historian of Constantine, succeeded by its means in producing some effective passages. Similarly, Latin divines like Augustine and Salvian did not despise the science of style. But the art of the ancients had more than this external influence. Christians who had really a taste for art were, by embracing the new religion, placed in a spiritual difficulty. The new religion created a repugnance to the old fabulous mythology, as a sort of emanation from Tartarean powers, and to the old philosophies and modes of thought. There were not many like Synesius who could be both a Platonist and a Christian. There were not many even like Tertullian, who would admit that the best of the ancients possessed “a soul naturally christian.” And yet in spite of themselves they could not put away a hankering after the classical art whose subject-matter was pagan myth and pagan history, now to be replaced by the truths of the Old Testament. St. Augustine felt a thrill, and deemed the thrill wicked, at such lines as—

infelix simulacrum atque ipsius umbra Creusae.

Jerome could not resist the fascination of Cicero. One Germanus, a friend of Cassian, had to confess with many tears that often, while he was engaged in prayer, the old heroes and heroines would pass into his soul, and the remembrance of the ancient gods disarrange his thoughts of God. Such asceticism as this was more common in the West than among the Greek-speaking Christians. It may be added that pagan symbols and mottoes were used on christian tombs, and pagan ideas adapted in christian art.

There is a legend which made its appearance about the fourth century, remarkable both in itself and as having been versified by the Empress Eudocia, the legend of Cyprian and Justina. It illustrates the thaumaturgy and the asceticism of the age as well as the conflict of Christianity and paganism, and is also interesting as presenting us with a prototype of Faust. Justina was a beautiful christian maiden of Antioch, passionately loved by a pagan youth Aglaides, who, unable to win her affections which were given to Christ, determined to move Acheron. For this purpose he engaged the services of Cyprian, a powerful magician, learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and in the magic of the Chaldeans. But the demons of temptation that the wizard's art raised against Justina were