

As I Please

George Orwell

1944

SOME weeks ago a Catholic reader of Tribune wrote to protest against a review by Mr Charles Hamblett. She objected to his remarks about St Teresa and about St Joseph of Copertino, the saint who once flew round a cathedral carrying a bishop on his back. I answered, defending Mr Hamblett, and got a still more indignant letter in return. This letter raises a number of very important points, and at least one of them seems to me to deserve discussion. The relevance of flying saints to the Socialist movement may not at first sight be very clear, but I think I can show that the present nebulous state of Christian doctrine has serious implications which neither Christians nor Socialists have faced.

The substance of my correspondent's letter is that it doesn't matter whether St Teresa and the rest of them flew through the air or not: what matters is that St Teresa's 'vision of the world changed the course of history'. I would concede this. Having lived in an oriental country I have developed a certain indifference to miracles, and I well know that having delusions, or even being an outright lunatic, is quite compatible with what is loosely called genius. William Blake, for instance, was a lunatic in my opinion. Joan of Arc was probably a lunatic. Newton believed in astrology, Strindberg believed in magic. However, the miracles of the saints are a minor matter. It also appears from my correspondent's letter that even the most central doctrines of the Christian religion don't have to be accepted in a literal sense. It doesn't matter, for instance, whether Jesus Christ ever existed. 'The figure of Christ (myth, or man, or god, it does not matter) so transcends all the rest that I only wish that everyone would look, before rejecting that version of life.' Christ, therefore, may be a myth, or he may have been merely a human being, or the account given of him in the Creeds may be true. So we arrive at this position: Tribune must not poke fun at the Christian religion, but the existence of Christ, which innumerable people have been burnt for denying, is a matter of indifference.

Now, is this orthodox Catholic doctrine? My impression is that it is not. I can think of passages in the writing of popular Catholic apologists such as Father Woodlock and Father Ronald Knox in which it is stated in the clearest terms that Christian doctrine means what it appears to mean, and is not to be accepted in some wishy-washy metaphorical sense. Father Knox refers specifically to the idea that it doesn't matter whether Christ actually existed as a 'horrible' idea. But what my correspondent says would be echoed by many Catholic intellectuals. If you talk to a thoughtful Christian, Catholic or Anglican, you often find yourself laughed at for being so ignorant as to suppose that anyone ever took the doctrines of the Church literally. These doctrines have, you are told, a quite other meaning which you are too crude to understand. Immortality of the soul doesn't 'mean' that you, John Smith, will remain conscious after you are dead. Resurrection of the body doesn't mean that John Smith's body will actually be resurrected—and so on and so on. Thus the Catholic intellectual is able, for controversial purposes, to play a sort of handy-pandy game, repeating the articles of the Creed in exactly the same terms as his forefathers, while defending himself from the charge of superstition by explaining that he is speaking in parables. Substantially his claim is that though he himself doesn't believe in any very definite way in life after death, there has been no change in Christian belief, since our ancestors didn't really believe in it either. Meanwhile a vitally important fact—that one of the props of western civilization has been knocked away—is obscured.

I do not know whether, officially, there has been any alteration in Christian doctrine. Father Knox and my correspondent would seem to be in disagreement about this. But what I do know is that belief in survival after death—the individual survival of John Smith, still conscious of himself as John Smith—is enormously less widespread than it was. Even among professing Christians it is probably decaying: other people, as a rule, don't even entertain the possibility that it might be true. But our forefathers, so far as we know, did believe in it. Unless all that they wrote about it was intended to mislead us, they believed it in an exceedingly literal, concrete way. Life on earth, as they saw it, was simply a short period of preparation for an infinitely more important life beyond the grave. But that notion has disappeared, or is disappearing, and the consequences have not really been faced.

Western civilization, unlike some oriental civilizations, was founded partly on the belief in individual immortality. If one looks at the Christian religion from the outside, this belief appears far more important than the belief in God. The western conception of good and evil is very difficult to separate from it.

There is little doubt that the modern cult of power worship is bound up with the modern man's feeling that life here and now is the only life there is. If death ends everything, it becomes much harder to believe that you can be in the right, even if you are defeated. Statesmen, nations, theories, causes are judged almost inevitably by the test of material success. Supposing that one can separate the two phenomena, I would say that the decay of the belief in personal immortality has been as important as the rise of machine civilization. Machine civilization has terrible possibilities, as you probably reflected the other night when the ack-ack guns started up: but the other thing has terrible possibilities too, and it cannot be said that the Socialist movement has given much thought to them.

I do not want the belief in life after death to return, and in any case it is not likely to return. What I do point out is that its disappearance has left a big hole, and that we ought to take notice of that fact. Reared for thousands of years on the notion that the individual survives, man has got to make a considerable psychological effort to get used to the notion that the individual perishes. He is not likely to salvage civilization unless he can evolve a system of good and evil which is independent of heaven and hell. Marxism, indeed, does supply this, but it has never really been popularized. Most Socialists are content to point out that once Socialism has been established we shall be happier in a material sense, and to assume that all problems lapse when one's belly is full. But the truth is the opposite: when one's belly is empty, one's only problem is an empty belly. It is when we have got away from drudgery and exploitation that we shall really start wondering about man's destiny and the reason for his existence. One cannot have any worth-while picture of the future unless one realizes how much we have lost by the decay of Christianity. Few Socialists seem to be aware of this. And the Catholic intellectuals who cling to the letter of the Creeds while reading into them meanings they were never meant to have, and who snigger at anyone simple enough to suppose that the Fathers of the Church meant what they said, are simply raising smoke-screens to conceal their own disbelief from themselves.

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