

The Only Heritage We Have

by

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THE arrogance of the West in relation to other cultures may be decently cloaked in our time, for this is an age of polite falsities, but it is still obsessive. The fact that non-Europeans are expected to adopt Western patterns of Government and Western “post-Christian” morality (as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations) is sufficient evidence of this. Condemnation of any departure from Western norms of behavior by Africans, Arabs, or Asians is now expressed more in terms of sorrow than of anger, but it is expressed nonetheless and betrays a complacency that has scarcely been dented by two World Wars or by the dim realization that our history is a quite unparalleled story of destruction and exploitation.

This complacency blocks the way to any appreciation of what has been—and, to some extent, still is—the human norm elsewhere in the world, outside the environment we have created in the aftermath of Christianity. And yet, without such understanding, it is quite impossible for the modern world to see itself objectively or in context.

Mircea Eliade has suggested that for the past half-century Western scholars have approached the study of mythology from a completely different viewpoint to that of their nineteenth century predecessors. Unlike the Victorians, for whom the word “myth” was equivalent to “fiction,” modern scholars—so he says—accept the myth in the terms in which it has been understood in the “archaic” societies, that is to say as a “true story” telling us something about the nature of the universe and about man’s place in it.

This may be true of certain scholars, but it is very far from being true of the general public or, for that matter, of the television pundits who play such a dominant role in

molding public opinion. In this field, as in so many others, the intellectual assumptions of ordinary people are still based upon the scientific thinking of the last century; and if reputable scholars have at last abandoned the notion that the great “archaic” myths are no more than an inept, pre-scientific attempt to explain the observed phenomena of nature, their views have certainly not reached the writers of school text-books or penetrated the minds of most “educated” people in the Western world.

A superficial study of the life-patterns, myths, and rituals of “primitive” peoples played a significant part in undermining the religious faith of Christians in the second half of the nineteenth century. First, it was taken for granted that these other races were “lower on the evolutionary scale” than Europeans (What, after all, had they invented? Where were their railway trains?). Secondly it was assumed by people who had completely lost the capacity for analogical and symbolical thinking that the myths by which these races lived were meant to be taken quite literally and represented no more than the first gropings of the rational animal towards a scientific explanation of the universe. On this basis, since it was impossible to miss the parallels between “primitive religion” and the most “advanced” of religions, Christianity, the question had to be asked whether the latter also should not be classified as a pre-scientific effort to account for observed facts.

If these arguments were sound, then either one of two conclusions might be drawn from them. It could be assumed that religion is a phenomenon which evolves in step with human “evolution,” provided it is constantly purged of its “primitive” and “unscientific” elements and kept up-to-date; or else that religion as such, including Christianity, is no more than a vestige of the pre-scientific age and should be discarded together with all the other superstitions that we have inherited from the times of ignorance. Protestant sects constantly on the defensive are only too ready to adopt the first of these conclusions in the mistaken notion that it *offers* their religion some hope of survival, and we have recently seen the hierarchy of the Catholic Church stumbling into this very pitfall. They imagine that Christianity might be allowed to survive on a modest scale if it can be proved to be “useful” to society, that is, to make men better citizens, more decent

neighbors, more conscientious tax-payers; and they are ready to abandon everything that smacks of “other-worldliness,” of metaphysics or of ritualism. The more ground they give, the harder they are pressed by their enemies.

And yet there is only one question that needs to be asked, and the answer to this question cannot depend upon any contingency, let alone upon social or moral considerations. If religion is true, then it would remain no less true even if one could prove that it makes men worse rather than better citizens, more cruel rather than kinder. If it is false, then it would be no less false if shown to be capable of transforming this world into a earthly paradise. Behind and above all human and moral considerations this question stands alone in stark simplicity and the way in which it is answered is totally decisive.

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There are occasions when poison and antidote are to be found in the same place. Faced with the “confusion of perspectives” which has been the inevitable result of the breakdown of those human and geographical barriers which formerly divided different cultures and different religious domains into so many separate “worlds,” there is no going back to the simplicity of a single, self-sufficient viewpoint. It becomes essential to go forward to the recognition that perspectives never really clash, their orientation being always towards the same, unique centre. The knowledge of other doctrines, other ways to the centre, which has done so much to shake the faith of those who had believed their own truth to be the only one (as, in a sense, it was, since they needed no other to attain salvation) must now be used to revitalize all those relative truths which serve as bridges between our present existence and a realm beyond such relativities. One bridge is enough for any man. But first he must be convinced of its soundness. Under present circumstances this seems to depend upon having some general knowledge of the nature

of bridges.

This knowledge can scarcely be effective unless it takes account of what is in fact the specifically human heritage (and primal material out of which all bridges have been built), the “primordial tradition” or “perennial philosophy.” This is the bedrock of all human awareness of what we are and where we are, and it might be said that all the doctrines which have served to keep us human through the ages and to enable us to make use of our heritage have been no more than divinely willed adaptations of this basic wisdom to the increasingly desperate needs of a “fallen”—and still “falling”—humanity.

The great acts of renewal, the Revelations from which are descended the world religions as we now know them, took place not as milestones on the evolutionary way but as medicines for a worsening sickness. They “happened” when (and wherever) the archaic wisdom was in so grave a condition of decay that a direct intervention from outside the normal context of human existence was required if men were to be saved from losing all sense of their real nature and destiny. In the case of Hinduism, the acts of renewal did not break the continuity of the tradition, but gave it a new impetus. Christianity was able to maintain a close link with the Judaic tradition (hence the inclusion of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible). And Islam, although it came into being in what was virtually a spiritual vacuum, has always been perfectly explicit as to its role: the Prophet Muhammad was not an innovator, but a reminder of forgotten truths and the restorer of an ancient wisdom, pointing a way of return to the normal and universal religion of mankind and crowning, by his mission, the work of countless prophets and messengers who had maintained the link between God and man since the beginning of time.

Such interventions and renewals would have been unnecessary if it had been possible then (or now) for men to tap the full resources of the primordial traditions by remounting the stream of time and—as the People of the Book might say—bursting back into the Garden of Eden. But the “direction of time” is only too clearly indicated in everything around us, in the running down of clocks, in the ageing and decay of things and organisms and in the dissolution of patterns into their component fragments. This

direction may be temporarily reversed (since creation is not a closed system) through the inbreak of That which *is* outside time, through Revelation or through the rituals of renewal practiced by many “archaic” peoples, but the possibility of returning once and for all to the place from which mankind set out does not exist within our frame of reference. The lightning stroke seizes upon the wandering fragments and organizes them into a pattern through which some quantum of meaning finds expression or some message is flashed upon the screen of existence. The pattern, however, must eventually be subjected to the normal processes of time and suffer the common fate of all things under the sun.

This is why we are denied access to the fullness of our heritage and surmise its existence from the bits and pieces, the echoes and the memories which are seen to lie all around us if only we are prepared to recognize them for what they are. These fragments, still to be found in the myths and rituals of the few “primitive” peoples who have not yet been totally submerged in the stream of modernism, are immensely precious. They may have been warped by the passage of time, and those who still live by them may in many cases have forgotten their true meaning, but the fact remains that they exist, they are accessible to us and, like a charred but still just legible document, they provide confirmation of our viceregal identity.

The religions with which the Westerner is most closely acquainted—those of Semitic origin and, perhaps, Buddhism—are “historical” in character, first in the quite simple sense that they do have a history strictly comparable to that of human institutions and temporal events, and secondly because the story of their achievements and of the vicissitudes they have suffered takes a significant place in their teaching. Time as we experience it in our daily lives is the background against which they are observed and understood.

The “archaic” doctrines, on the other hand, have no history. Their relationship to ordinary time has been that of rocks towards the sea which gradually erodes them. In this lies their strength, insofar as they recall conditions before the dawn of recorded history, and their weakness, in that they cannot serve as models in terms of which the men of our

time might organize their lives. They might in a certain sense be said to rest upon the ‘fiction’ that nothing has changed, nothing has happened, since time began. They have survived precisely because events in time have been treated as meaningless unless they could be related back to the pre-temporal patterns of creation, reintegrated into these patterns and thus transcended so far as their historical actuality is concerned. Inwardly, at least, they have made time stand still.

A particular characteristic quality of all traditional societies, says Mircea Eliade, is their opposition to the “ordinary” concept of time and their determination constantly to return, through ritual action, to the mythical moment of their origin, the “Great Time.” Neither the objects of the exterior world nor human acts as such have any separate being or significance—they are “real” only as imitations of the universal, primordial gestures made by God or the gods at the moment of creation. Nothing is worth noticing or mentioning unless it has been bathed in the waters of its source.

It follows that, for the ancients as for “primitive” peoples up to the present time, myth and history could not and cannot be separated, historical events being valid, in their view, only to the extent that they illustrated mythical themes. The modern historian, concerned to discover what “really” happened, has the unenviable task of trying to separate the two, but for the ancients it was the myth—the pre-temporal event—that was truly “real” and happenings came about only because the reverberations of this event determined the patterns of time or—if we translate this into religious terms—“that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets.” On the one hand we have a view in terms of which the world could not under any circumstances be thought of as separated from its timeless source, on the other a view which takes this separation completely for granted.

In the personal life as in the wider context of world events “archaic” man has considered the actions of daily life to be *real* only if they fill out the contours of a pre-existent and harmonious mould. There are certain ways of hunting (or, in agricultural communities, of plowing, sowing and reaping), certain ways of eating and making love and constructing artifacts which are in accordance with the heavenly precedents handed

down in the myths and rituals of his people—"We must do what the gods did Then"—and all other ways are disorderly and ultimately unproductive. His thirst for the Real and his awareness that, if he commits himself to trivialities, he must himself become trivial and lose the quality of dignity, the quality of viceregency, dominates all his faculties. In the circumstances of our time, so far from our origins, it might be said that he is defeated before he even starts, that the stream of time now runs too fast and too fiercely to be resisted and that the echoes which still reach him from "That Time" are too dim to be effectively obeyed. This may be so. But he lives on as a reminder and as a sign for those who are prepared to understand.

The fact that "archaic" man is a survivor from a period when the conditions of human life were quite different to what they now are makes it difficult for him to accept as "natural" misfortunes such as sickness, infertility or accidental death which do not seem to us at all mysterious in their origin. For him they indicate a disruption of the harmony and order which still appear to him as "normal" since he retains, however dimly, some recollection of a time before these ills had become the common lot of our kind, and he therefore ascribes them to some disruptive act of "witchcraft," or human failure. This is not really so remote from the religious point of view which finds their cause in human sinfulness. For the "primitive" as, in a certain sense, for the Christian, we live commonly under a curse, but the former—because he has chosen to ignore the changes which time has brought about—is still surprised by this fact and tries to pin the fault on someone in his immediate neighborhood.

Still at home in the world, still trusting the environment (which we see as something to be subdued and conquered), he assumes its innocence and blames himself or others like himself for the ills to which his flesh is heir. He does not see the rhythms of nature as phenomena of time: the alternations of day and night and the changes of the lunar cycle and of the seasons are events which happened once and for all in That Time, and his own life is integrated into their pattern because he and they are aspects of a single, timeless order.

And because time does not appear to him as a continuous, un-interrupted process, the

changes which take place in the course of his life are in the nature of mutations. We know of only one “rite of passage,” the dreaded phenomenon of physical death, whereas the life of “archaic” man is scattered with deaths and rebirths—rites of naming, puberty, marriage and so on—each representing a harsh severance from the past and a total break with the habits and attachments of his former existence, so that he might be expected to re-emerge from the ritual moment into the light of common day with a new name and a new identity. In such a context physical death cannot have the quality of uniqueness that it has for us, but is simply the greatest and most cataclysmic of the “rites” of passage. He does not need to think or talk in terms of a “life after death” since he is accustomed to regard every ending as the necessary prelude to a new beginning. He himself, in this most intimate selfhood, is projected into the primordial moment when everything began and every death, every break in continuity, coincides with the primal sacrifice out of which time and multiplicity were born into their fiery and self-consuming existence.

Rooted in a coherent world and free from the oppressive sense of meaninglessness which time and multiplicity induce when they are seen as self-subsisting, this man could scarcely be expected to ask the questions that we ask or to search high and low for a significance which (in his experience) saturates both the common objects of sense and the ordinary events which compose a human life-span. It is a fundamental assumption of all traditional doctrines, whether “archaic” or religious—however their outward forms may differ—that men have been provided not only with the mental, emotional and sensory equipment necessary for them to be able to cope with their worldly environment but also with answers to all the real questions that can be asked. The question that remains unanswered is the one that has been posed in the wrong terms.

These answers, however, are not of a kind to satisfy the questioning mind when it breaks loose from the personality as a whole and demands that everything should be translated into its own specific terms; nor can they be passed from hand to hand like coins. These answers are, by their nature, bonds of connection between the individual and all that is; but because they relate not to the partial but to the whole man it follows that the whole man must be apt to receive them if they are to mean anything to him. Division

and turbulence, obscurity or falsity at any level of his being, will set barriers in the way of total understanding; for totality can only be comprehended by totality: “It is not the eyes which grow blind. It is the hearts within the breasts that grow blind.”¹

Two quite different kinds of difficulty provide barriers to human understanding. The first (with which we are well acquainted in our age) is the technical difficulty of matters which require special training and instruction combined with an active practical intelligence if they are to be grasped, and in this case the barrier is there for all to see—no one supposes that he can master a book on nuclear physics merely because he is able to read. The second kind of difficulty is more subtle and perhaps more deceptive since it relates to the understanding of statements, symbols and stories which, on the surface, appear transparently simple and wide-open even to the most naive and least instructed intelligence. Like the tests which the traditional hero undergoes, but with a less obvious challenge, they try each man's capacity to plumb the depths of the truth that is offered to his understanding, but they also allow those of small capacity to think they have grasped all that there is to be grasped. In this sense they are, almost by definition, merciful, in that they give to each as much as he is able to receive. But there is always the danger that those who see only the concrete image, the outer husk, and—thinking themselves intelligent—assume that there is nothing more to be seen will dismiss such truths as being too trivial to merit their further attention.

Of this attitude, which is the common one of our time both towards the symbolic formulations of “primitive” peoples and towards the religious scriptures, one might say as the Jamaicans do of a stupid man who supposes himself intelligent: “Him is so ignorant that him don't even know him don't know.” The symbolic and analogical modes of thought which were natural to our remote ancestors and are still natural to certain “archaic” peoples are regarded as primitive in the evolutionary sense of the term, that is, as lacking in something that has since been acquired in the way of understanding. People speak of “pre-logical” modes of thought, implying that those who employed such modes

¹ Qoran. 22:46.

were incapable of the full exercise of reason and therefore a little less than human.

There is, however, a totally different view than can be taken of such matters and of our modern incapacity to think in the concrete and synthetic terms of symbol and analogy. According to this view, the transformation of symbols into rational concepts and into the ABC of explicit doctrines is to be regarded, not as an evolutionary advance, but as a concession to Man's diminishing aptitude for grasping any truth in its totality, its variety of aspects and its suprarational richness and density of meaning. It is the fool rather than the intelligent man who needs to have everything explained to him.

As Schuon has pointed out on a number of occasions, the explicit doctrine is already inherent in the symbolic formulation. Its deployment in terms of discourse and argument adds nothing to it and can never exhaust its meaning. Indeed, when the majority of people have begun to take symbols literally so that it becomes necessary to state in conceptual form what was previously implicit, there is an unavoidable impoverishment of meaning in the process of fitting it to the rigid limitations of human language. In our time learned men find it necessary to write whole books to explain the significance of one symbol in all the variety of its implications. "And if all the trees in the earth were pens and the sea, with seven more seas to help it, were ink, the words of God could not be exhausted."²

Symbols are, in the first place, things. Our understanding of them depends upon our capacity for seeing the elements of our environment as they really are (or in terms of what they really mean) rather than as they appear in terms of human appetite. And the essential truth, says Schuon, "is that everything, each thing, each energy by the fact that it exists... represents a possible entry towards the Real."³ The process whereby the environment gradually "congeals" or loses its quality of "transparency," until things are no more than objects which can either be put to practical use or else be kicked aside because they get in our way, is the same as the process whereby symbols are drained of meaning and reduced to the level either of poetic allegory or of "primitive science." For

² Qorn. 31:27.

³ Images de l'Esprit: Frithjof Schuon. p. 100.

modern man, only the objects of sense appear unquestionably real, while everything else is either “subjective” or “abstract.” For “archaic” man, reality resides not in the object as such but in what it signifies: stripped of this significance it is a shadowy thing on the verge of non-existence.

We are free, being what we are, to regard such a view as false, but we only make fools of ourselves if we dismiss it without even bothering to ask what it is all about and without considering—if only for a moment—the possibility that we might be wrong. For this is the only heritage we have. Our human past has nothing else to offer us. And before we resign ourselves to abject poverty (comforted, no doubt, by the forlorn hope that science will eventually make us rich) we might do well to recall Pascal’s question as to whether the heir to a fortune would ever think of dismissing his title-deeds as forgeries without troubling to examine them. Folly, however, is more often the symptom of a vice than of a lack of intelligence, and it is not uncommon for arrogance to induce a willful blindness. If “history is bunk” and our human past a tale of ignorance and superstition, then we might claim to be giants; but if we are the heirs of men who were nobler than us and knew more than we do, then we are pygmies and must bow our heads in shame.

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There is no virtue in the accumulation of factual knowledge for its own sake, and to suggest that human intelligence is soon confused and, indeed, clogged when it is fed with too many irrelevancies is not to belittle this intelligence. But once men have wandered outside the normal limitations of the knowledge that is useful to them in terms of their spiritual and physical needs, then it becomes necessary, not to bring them back to the limited perspective (which is impossible, since history cannot be reversed), but to balance the scraps of knowledge they have picked up as a dog picks up stray bones with an awareness of truths which set these scraps in their proper context.

What possible relevance can the habits of some ancient people or of an Australian aboriginal tribe have to the lives of people in modern Europe or America? None, until the latter have strayed outside their own world and begun to concern themselves with such things. But once this concern exists it may lead us to a region of false ideas which devastate our homeland—like deadly bacteria brought back from outer space—unless they can be rectified in terms of a perspective wider than any that is provided by a purely local viewpoint. If we insist upon knowing about things which are, from the practical point of view, none of our business, then we have to grow a few inches to accommodate this strange knowledge. Otherwise our capacity for comprehending the world, our world, as a whole that makes sense may burst at the seams.

The ordinary Christian of earlier times did not need to know that God has spoken in many languages and through a great variety of masks, and the disturbing fact that the vessels in which this Speech is preserved are necessarily relative in character was irrelevant to his “salvation.” He was securely lodged in a religious context that fulfilled his real needs, answered his questions and provided him with his bridge to eternity. All that concerned him was to perfect and intensify his own way to God, making use of the entirely adequate doctrinal and ritual supports available to him: the knowledge that there existed alternative ways, equally effective for those to whose habits and patterns of thought they were adjusted, could not have helped him in this task. And if, through ignorance, he assumed that his own faith was the only truth and that such others as he might hear of through travelers' tales were necessarily false, this did no harm. It was when the geographical barriers came down and the Europeans—first Christian and, later, ex-Christian—fanned out over the globe that the situation changed radically.

“No blame can be attached to a person for attacking a foreign Tradition in the name of his own belief if it is done through ignorance purely and simply,” says Schuon; “when however this is not the case, the person will be guilty of a blasphemy, since by outraging the Divine Truth in an alien form he is merely profiting by an opportunity to offend God without having to trouble his own conscience. This is the real explanation of the gross and impure zeal displayed by those who, in the name of religious conviction, devote their

lives to making sacred things appear odious...”⁴ A study of certain aspects of Christian missionary endeavor suggests that there was indeed a “gross and impure zeal” at work, but this zeal has been intensified in the service of the pseudo-religion of “progress.”

So long as a particular religion is contained and insulated in its own “world” (the frontiers of which have been determined by geographical or racial factors) the arguments and dogmas upon which the faith of the majority of believers is based can remain, in the precise sense of the term, parochial. Their narrowness and their vulnerability to criticism founded upon a more sophisticated knowledge or a more rigorous logic than is provided by the parish worthies, does not matter if they are effective, that is to say, if they open windows onto the truly universal. They can, of course, only do this if they are—within the limits of certain terms of reference—adequate representations of the truth, but such representations do not need to be very subtle or very comprehensive so long as they serve to awaken the truth that is already present at the centre of man's being or, from another point of view, to open his heart to the action of Grace.

But religious dogmas are particularly vulnerable to those who, instead of using them as stepping-stones to a forgotten but still recover-able knowledge, sit down to examine and analyze their structure. Dogmatic doctrine cannot be more than an *aide-memoire*. It collapses when treated as though it were a scientific statement, for what it represents cannot be simply stated in the way that the laws which govern the movements of the planets or the formation of crystals can be stated. The latter belong to our own level of existence and may be expressed in the language of our kind, whereas the truths towards which dogmas (like symbols) point the way are not reducible to any of the dimensions of relativity. They will not come down to us, except in the form of intimations—bait for the spirit not yet entirely submerged in the glassy depths. It is we who are required to go to that central place where they reside in their essential fullness, and the certainty that we are able to do this is among the basic certainties upon which the religions, as well as the primordial doctrine, have built their castles. When this is lost sight of—and the innermost

⁴ The Transcendent Unity of Religions: Frithjof Schuon (Faber and Faber) p. 28.

room of the castle is locked up—religion loses its *raison d'etre* and falls into decay.

And of course we lose sight of this certainty. It gets buried under the debris of the centuries. But the innermost room is still there and the lock will still turn though the key may be rusty; for the reservoir of Grace which is the luminous centre of every Revelation is timeless, immune from the process of decay which erodes its temporal outworks. God does not retreat: it is we who go away.

Our absence (carried downstream from our spiritual home) has been, according to traditional teaching, the occasion for the great religious Revelations which, if they could not outwardly and objectively restore the primordial harmony—for Paradise lost is not regained at the same level of existence—at least made possible an inward and spiritual restoration which might be reflected in the environment so far as the circumstances of the time permitted; and indeed the tales common to Christianity, Islam and Buddhism of the transformation of matter or of concord between men and beasts in the presence of the saints suggests that the environment has been restored to something of its primordial perfection at such moments. But the very fact that these moments have to be described as miraculous reminds us that time goes on.

It is as ferry-boats equipped to carry men across the stream of time (rather than as dams blocking the stream) that the world's religions have provided the means of “salvation.” What men are to be “saved” from is fragmentation, dismemberment, and dispersal in multiplicity, and what they stand to lose in such a process of fragmentation, is their real identity as human beings. The unity which a particular religion imposes upon its people is necessarily somewhat rigid, at least in its outward forms, but this is the nature of ferries, and it is only as rigid structures that they can serve their purpose. The fact that one religion forbids what another permits, or that sexual and alimentary regulations are not the same for all, in no way undermines the validity of these rules in their own context, as parts of a single, seaworthy structure which has been built in the light of a particular religious perspective. The perspective determines the blueprint and the method of construction, while the given environment provides the materials.

Those in our time who assert their right to approach God “in their own way” and condemn all organized religion seem unaware that, even if they themselves are capable of making this approach (as, in the nature of things, some few may be), they are also asserting the right of other men to drown and perhaps condemning them to drowning. The question that has to be posed is not whether the possibility exists of a man breaking through to Reality on his own, without the assistance of traditional supports and a religious framework, but whether this in fact happens save in the most exceptional cases. The answer to the first question would necessarily be in the affirmative, since it deals only with possibilities and “with God all things are possible.” But the second can only receive a negative answer. And this is what matters. Churches and temples are necessary, not because God is what He is, but because we are what we are. Though present everywhere, He is most easily found wherever a particular religious crystallization has, like a burning glass, focused the rays of His Grace.

Such words as “structure” and “crystallization” suggest something rather more concrete than an idea or an aspiration. As we have seen, the life of “archaic” peoples is so thoroughly determined by their myths, symbols and rituals that what happens outside this sacred framework can hardly be said to exist. For them there can be no opposition between sacred and profane, since they are unacquainted with the profane. Given the conditions of a later time and the increasing remoteness of our world from its divine source, the world's religions have had to face this opposition, although the extent to which they have acknowledged its existence varies greatly. The orthodox Hindu has much in common with “archaic” man and is scarcely aware of a profane sphere set over against his ritual practice. The Moslem who still lives in a tight-knit Islamic community knows something of the same cohesion of life in the world with religious life. The case of Christianity is quite different.

The Hindus never questioned the subordination of the temporal power to the spiritual, and Islam brought its own corner of the world under the rule of the spiritual descendents of the Prophet. But Christianity came into being in a hostile environment which was therefore by implication profane. Unlike Hindus or Moslems, Christians were

immediately in contact with things that were not sacred and had to compromise with the profane sphere (or suffer martyrdom). Since the religion did not contain within itself such rules of conduct and of political organization as are set out in the Hindu scriptures and in the Qoran, it had to assimilate much of its worldly structure from the Hebraic environment into which it was born and from the Roman environment into which it grew to maturity. Even at the height of its power, when Christendom was mighty and unified, a distinction was admitted between the spiritual and the temporal (therefore profane) spheres which would have seemed intolerable to Moslems at the time when the Islamic civilization was at its zenith.

It was always more natural to Christians than to others to suppose that there were aspects of human life which lay outside the immediate orbit of religion. These things could be kept in order—or neutralized—so long as men acted as good Christians in relation to them, but they did not in themselves belong to the sphere of the sacred. Through this loophole, unimportant so long as the majority of Westerners thought primarily in terms of being good Christians, has crept the entirely profane world of our age which goes its own way while permitting the survival of religion as a “personal matter”—so long as it does not interfere in more important domains.

Personal faith is one thing, religion another. The two are intimately bound up with one another, but the distinction must be made. A man may pursue a spiritual path in isolation from his social and economic environment, but the very idea of religion implies the in-corporation of the public realm in a spiritually determined pattern so that not just “a man” but all men are assisted towards their goal by everything they do and everything they touch in the normal course of their daily lives. The ferry-boat is a world in itself, an ark supplied with all the necessities of life.

But things break away. First one aspect of living claims autonomy, then another, building themselves their own little ships—but ships for sailing downstream, in accordance with the direction of time, not for crossing over. Politics, science, industry, art and literature go their way, each proudly independent of everything except the current itself and their own increasing momentum. Until finally one more little ship is added to

the flotilla calling itself, perhaps, “Religion Adapted to the Needs of Our Time” and carrying certain regulations governing the personal life and a cargo of ideals. Somehow it never quite manages to keep up with the rest: possibly some memory tugs at it, against the pull of the stream, or the strangeness of its cargo sets it apart.

To question the usefulness of any attempt to adapt religion to what are supposed to be the needs of our time is not to decry the intrinsic value of personal piety or, indeed, to underestimate the nobility of those who live a “Christian life” in the contemporary context: what is questionable is the propriety of diluting truth for the sake of meeting error halfway and of applying evolutionary theory to the marks of eternity that are embedded in the matrix of the temporal world. To put the point bluntly, if God wished to speak to the modern world it may be supposed that He would find a way of doing so. There is a limit to how far men can go in interpreting the divine Word in terms of a language from which all the appropriate words have been excluded. If people have gone away from the central place that is their real home, then charity requires that they should be shown the way back. To imagine one can take the centre out to them—while they stay where they are—is folly.

The effort to make religion—and in this case it is Christianity with which we are specifically concerned—acceptable to as many people as possible has a way of defeating its own object. This has happened to a striking degree in the Protestant countries, where Christianity has too often been reduced to a matter of morality and idealism. But there are two quite separate factors that come together to undermine faith and to block the spread of religion. In the first place there is the refusal to admit that the very structure of contemporary life (in particular the work by which the vast majority of people have to earn their living) excludes religion, being profane in root and branch, and that Christianity can only be integrated into this structure if it denies its own truth. The success of certain “extremist” sects which have flatly refused to compromise with the modern world suggests that compromise is not in fact essential to the survival of Christianity. Secondly, Protestant Christians have to a great extent cast aside their metaphysical and intellectual heritage for the sake of appealing to “ordinary” people, and the

Catholic Church now seems ready to follow their example.

These “ordinary” people may not be greatly concerned with intellectual considerations, but those from whom they take their cue—those who, in the long run, have the most effective influence upon their ideas—are concerned. An ironic situation has arisen: Christianity has been simplified and de-intellectualized to make it more palatable to the majority, and instead of gratefully accepting this watered-down religion, the majority have looked to the more educated, more questioning and intellectually demanding minority for guidance. The latter, after one glance at the pap that is on offer, have turned their thumbs down.

This is, in itself, an over-simplification. There are members of the effective “elite” who have chosen to look into the matter for themselves and have rediscovered the metaphysical roots of the Christian religion and others who have been content to go down on their knees in simple faith, and among relatively 'uneducated people there are those who demand intellectual satisfaction. But it cannot be denied, particularly in this age of mass media, that a Church which cannot or will not appeal to the leaders of opinion must sooner or later lose the masses and that the ignorance of Christian doctrine (and Christian symbolism) displayed by those who dismiss religion as a fairy story is so abysmal that one can only assume they were never told any more of Christianity than a simple-minded missionary might see fit to tell supposedly simple “savages.” Religion, when its metaphysical and “mystical” core is forgotten, is eminently attackable from the point of view of those who accept the scientific view in its entirety, but what is in fact attacked (whether in private conversation or through the mass media) is the religion of tiny tots, Sunday School Christianity. And the attack is met with Sunday School argument.

When two men—a priest, perhaps, and a scientist—sit down before the television camera to discuss religion, the priest might be supposed to have three courses open to him. Scornful of the scientist's intellectual provincialism, he could bring down on the latter's head the full weight of ancient doctrine, with all its metaphysical depth, its complexity of definitions, its swift transition between levels of symbolism; or he might rise to his feet and call upon God to strike down his adversary in an immediate

manifestation of the divine Wrath (for who is to say that miracles no longer happen if no one demands them any longer?). Finally, he might ask the man to go away and find out something about Christianity instead of asking foolish questions. But anger is now thought unseemly in a Christian, and doctrine is too complicated for little minds. Nor must there be any hint that terror lies in wait for a world which goes astray or that the consequences of living in error can be a great deal more serious than the consequences of “living in sin.”

In the event, this discussion is a cozy affair. The scientist demolishes religion as it is understood by a good child. The “man of God,” while completely accepting the theory of knowledge upon which the scientist has built his argument, defends religion in the language of a good child. Both, it seems, learnt the same lessons at school. Both, perhaps, recited the verse which begins, “Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild...” But one cast it aside, while the other was touched by it, neither of them aware of how inappropriate such a verse (or others of its kind) might be in the context of a religion drenched in the blood of the martyrs—and of the heretics—and flowing from a Revelation which, like every catastrophic inbreak of Reality, brought down among men, not peace, but the sword.

Though God has said to the Islamic world, “My Mercy precedes my Wrath,” Moslems have never imagined that Wrath was abolished by its subordination to the ultimately all-embracing Mercy. But contemporary Christianity—partly in reaction against the Hell-raising fulminations of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—has drifted into a situation in which God is defined entirely in terms of the nicest human qualities and anthropomorphic symbolism is taken so literally that the Absolute is humanized to the point of absurdity. From this has sprung the natural reaction of those who are unable to forgive God for not being a Christian as they were taught to understand the term, the anger of men betrayed by those whom they most trusted, the sad blasphemies of those who—seeing a sick world around them—can only ascribe its creation to a monstrously sick deity, while the real villains of the peace, the gentle teachers of the good child's religion, go gently on their way.

Thibon has written concerning “the simple tale of the creation of God by man” and

there is nothing surprising in this since God in Himself is—as the theologians teach—“uncreated” whereas images, ideas and concepts are of the order of created things. Of necessity the tiger knows a tigerish deity, and among men only those few who have sloughed off their own image and achieved within themselves a kind of total nudity can know God otherwise than through their own image. But what is seen through this warped glass is nonetheless there, and the humanized image serves as a bridge to a region beyond the limitations imposed upon all created images provided it is recognized as a bridge. The great danger is that it will be mistaken for a stopping-place rather than as a point of departure, and this is the danger to which Christianity, at least in modern times, seems to have been particularly exposed. Europeans have always been—in a rather special sense of the term—simple-minded (the ancient Romans were) and peculiarly inclined to take the symbol for the thing symbolized, always trying to reduce all that *is* to manageable proportions and to confine it within the bounds of “common sense.” They have succeeded at last in reducing God to the dimensions of an Old Man in the Sky and, having achieved this, are horrified to discover what a useless (and immoral) Old Man this is.

Just as individual men risk spiritual suffocation in a world less and less capable of recognizing any values beyond those of the social realm, so religion is in danger of separation from its timeless source if it chases after the little ships that are being carried so far downstream: there is a process at work here that can culminate only in an existence which is no more than a simian parody of human life. And this existence, in its brief time, would be close to the condition which Christians define as hell: a separation from Reality as near to completion as may be possible (“a fraction of a degree above absolute zero”) and, since pain is the symptom of separation, an agony of cosmic proportions.