

## FLOGGING A DEAD HORSE

COMMODITIES often belie the promise of their labels, a failure noticeable in other things as well. Philanthropy turns out to be rather unfriendly, industrialism does not make for industry, a libertarian state denies the right of free association, and expels the Jesuits.

The name 'Rationalism' conveys the impression of something hard-headed and matter-of-fact, which scrutinizes everything in the cold light of reason, and is not averse from giving a cold douche to the emotional postulates of piety and idealism—and all that.

Accordingly, a Catholic, picking up *The Rationalist Annual*<sup>1</sup> for 1932, might perhaps be expected to fortify himself with the thought that still *le coeur a ses raisons . . .* But as he reads, and especially if he is a Thomist, the conviction grows that in reality the roles are reversed. He begins to feel like Charles Kingsley's East Wind blowing into a centrally-heated hall. He must mind his manners, for he has entered a religious edifice charged with all the earnest feeling of an ethical society; an atmosphere (to argue like a Rationalist) heavy, not with the fumes of incense, but the steam of damp umbrellas and goloshes. And if he stays, he must resist the temptation to scoff.

He soon gathers the impression that he is with an emotionalism, not a rationalism—almost a revivalist meeting in fact. Good downright feeling of the best sort: not sloppy, misty, vague, but vigorous and devoted; at its best, a generous mood of anger with tyranny and humbug. 'In any argument between St. Thomas and a modern Rationalist,' writes Professor

<sup>1</sup> London: Watts and Co.; pp. 94; 1/- net.

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Gilbert Murray,<sup>2</sup> 'the ratiocination would be all on the side of the saint, while the indignant emotion, good sense, decent feeling, and perhaps even the prejudice would be on that of the Rationalist.'

The quotation is lifted from a context which is certainly not meant to flatter St. Thomas, but there it is. 'No free thinker has used pure reason so exclusively and so perversely as Thomas Aquinas, who, it will be remembered, proved the existence of Hell by the argument that, if there were not some people in eternal and infinite agony, the happiness of God would be incomplete, just as perfect whiteness would be impossible if it could not be contrasted with perfect blackness.' It is beside the point to analyse now such a parody of St. Thomas's teaching. It is taken merely as one illustration, and by no means the most glaring, of that transposition of an idea into an image, of thought into feeling, which is so general in the Rationalism under review.

For good or ill, the reason should be unemotional and detached, concerned only to draw conclusions whether we like them or not. St. Thomas's teaching on Hell was quite dispassionate. It is quite unnecessary to show that it offends neither good sense nor decent human feeling for us to observe that, from a strictly Rationalist point of view, a mere gust of anger or pity affords quite insufficient grounds of criticism.

The substitution of an image for an idea seems an almost continuous process in the Rationalist 'discussion of Christianity. Descriptive terms with surging emotional connotations instead of exact, scientific expression. When it comes to attack, words with an ill-favoured brood hanging on their skirts queer the pitch—yes! A practising Christian is a 'devotee'; the

<sup>2</sup> *A Plea for Reason*. Further footnote references are to articles in the *Annual*,

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doctrine of the Atonement is crudely sketched out in terms of satisfying the blood-lust of an offended deity; 'appease' and 'vindictive' are telling words when pressed to the utmost of their emotional suggestion; the penal power of the Church is similarly presented; Freedom and Authority are set at ringing defiance with one another.

The reason, remember, is not only dispassionate; it is also contemplative, loving a certain quiet and delicacy of statement. But here the ear is pleased with the sounding phrase—'the sickening and unprecedented barbarities of the Inquisition'—and the imagination with the vivid picture. On the question of religious persecution, more emphasis is laid on the burning than on the heresy, more on the practice than on the principle.

Even so, there is little historical feeling for a civilization that lacked the refinement of the electric chair and the State Penitentiary. By a biological law every organism strives to expel irritants. Heresy was a social crime in the Middle Ages. But it was chiefly due to the conventions of the time that heretics were bound to have a bad time. Effective banishment could only have been out of the frying pan of a Catholic Europe into the fire of the surrounding Moslem world. Sir Alexander Cardew<sup>3</sup> invites our sympathy for the 'Franciscan monks' who were so hardly treated by Pope John XXII. But I wonder how far the practice of the Fraticelli would have disgusted his sense of respectability; and as to their theory, it was condemned by the Pope, not only as heretical, but in round Rationalist terms as well, *partim insana, partim fabulosa . . . damnanda potius cum suis auctoribus quam stylo prosequenda aut refellenda*.

In all this, I need scarcely delay to consider how inaccurately our position is generally stated: that 'the

<sup>3</sup> *A Roman Fairy Tale.*

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ideas of the Roman Church led by irresistible logic to the murder of heretics' is a fair specimen. And how superficially : for instance, that the Roman Church 'qualifies the dogma by admitting that unbelief is not damnable if it is due to "invincible ignorance"; but as no one quite knows what invincible ignorance means the qualification is unimportant.'<sup>4</sup> The point to note is how it is translated into a convenient complexus of imagery and feeling, and criticised as such.

Creation is crudely contrasted with the scientific theory of Evolution and the modern exegesis of Genesis. Biblical inspiration is considered to be upset by the bloodthirstier bits of the Old Testament; the existence of God by a rhetorical account of physical evil. The Christian ideal of purity is just the crystallization into a code of the sexual habits of a nomadic eastern tribe. Immortality is just the dope by which the priests exploit the ignorance of the masses.

The following scenario is too good to be omitted : the growth of Jewish religion is presented as 'the evolution of Jehovah from a sacred stone . . . the phallic stone-god was invoked in respect to populousness . . . to appease this god of fertility the generative organs of male infants were rudely mutilated. Next we picture his followers captives. Lacking in artistic and decorative tastes, dreamy, imaginative, and not wanting in philosophic idealism, the prisoners in sorrowful mood by the waters of Babylon sat down and wept. At length, casting their eyes heavenwards, they allowed their thoughts to wander from material objects of this world . . . now he dwelt in the open firmament, the Invisible, yet Almighty Ruler of the Celestial Sphere. Ultimately Jehovah completely dwarfed all other gods of the Semitic peoples, and stood as Israel's National Deity.'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> 'Robert Arch' : *Your Belief and Mine*.

<sup>5</sup> Professor C. J. Patten : *The Evolution of Stone-Worship*.

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Then religion is treated as if it offered a refuge from the awful mysteries around us, as if it were a sort of spiritual cinema. Mr. Llewelyn Powis, in a plea for sensation pure and simple,<sup>6</sup> rehearses the tragic submission of the poet to a Materialist universe. It is a mood not without nobility, but it is not rationalism. It repeats the notion that religion and metaphysics are 'all of them projections of our misdoubts . . . pitiful expedients to subordinate an Absolute, unpartisan and withdrawn, to our own advantage.' All this leaves off where St. Thomas is beginning. Not one of his positions is only a response to an instinctive wish, and all, whether they bring comfort or fear, are held under unyielding intellectual pressure. A Thomist can appreciate the strength of the *Wessex Novels*, but he feels that while the philosophy goes far, it does not go far enough. There is a pessimism, as well as an optimism, of the surface of things. He feels that Rationalism is rarely more than the sustained evocation of a mood. Mr. E. S. P. Haynes in his youth 'could not see any way of evading the logic . . . an omnipotent God must be a scoundrel of the deepest dye, while on the other hand a benevolent but inefficient God was rather a disappointing object of worship.'<sup>7</sup> It is all rather effective debate, cogent appeal to emotion, good rhetoric often without rant, but it is not rationalism. We feel inclined to murmur, after the French general at Balaclava: 'It is magnificent, but it is not thought.'

It must not be imagined that the mood is always harsh. Materialism has provoked the tenderest poetry. Kindliness, tolerance and humour are not absent. Witness the description of the contents of *The Bible and Modern Thought*: 'Moral meanings are brought out. The poetry is appreciated. The Bible is put

<sup>6</sup> *The Poetic Vision*.

<sup>7</sup> *Winwood Reade*.

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into its proper historical place. All is human, natural, rational. Miracles are smilingly treated as legends. Yet it is all done without critical notes, and in a spirit of respect for a venerable scripture.' Then there is a delicious fee-fi-fo-fum picture of Cardinal Lépiciér. 'Far be it from us,' says Sir Alexander Cardew, 'to call the Cardinal bloodthirsty. He may be the most humane of human beings. Yet it cannot be denied that his long harping on the question of the death penalty for heretics leaves a painful impression. The glee with which he dwells on the shooting of Ferrer in Spain, and the gusto with which he quotes to his enemies, the Modernists, the record of the Church's lethal power and prowess, seem significant.' Ferrer—poor lamb!

The humour, perhaps, is not always intended. An old-fashioned Protestant might permit himself a grim chuckle at the fancy of Roman 'ecclesiastics to whom the authority of Bible texts is overwhelming.' And telling us that the *mules du pape*<sup>8</sup> may be not unconnected with blood-dipped shoes or *mullei* of pagan gods, a surgeon rear-admiral throws a sinister significance into an italic: 'When a Pope died, *red* slippers adorned his feet for the faithful to kiss.'<sup>9</sup>

Rationalism in its manner, its provincialism, the burden of its criticism, in its whole setting, seems to wear a Nonconformist look. Its spirit is a sort of Nonconformity emptied of Christianity, but preserving a certain sturdiness, vigour, and earnestness, a sense of individual responsibility which finds its eleventh commandment in 'Thou shalt not interfere.'<sup>10</sup> Historically speaking, Rationalism is largely rooted in Nonconformity; and you get the impression that its anti-

<sup>8</sup> White satin slippers embroidered with a cross.

<sup>9</sup> Surgeon Rear-Admiral C. M. Beadnell: *The Nature and Origin of the Kiss*.

<sup>10</sup> A. Gowans Whyte: *The Eleventh Commandment*.

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clericalism is almost summed up in the chapel dislike of the vicar 'and other ordained interferers.'

The provincial setting heightens the impression. Although he notices with approval the Continental Sunday (incidentally passing over any influence Continental Christianity may be thought to have had on it) Professor Laski<sup>11</sup> implies that the efforts of religious devotees and enthusiasts to deprive the masses of Sunday amusement is a symptom of mediaevalism. Yet it cannot be doubted that Mrs. Grundy would have considered St. Catherine of Siena or any mediaeval saint a scarcely respectable, in fact a highly indelicate person. Nor is that body which chiefly inherits the genius of the Middle Ages conspicuous for its kill-joy activities. Quite recently the Catholic rector of a Lancashire seaside resort incurred much odium from the ministers for his refusal to object to Sunday games in the parks. And he was typical.

Rationalism tends to identify Christianity with old-fashioned Nonconformist expression. The rebound is from Fundamentalism. This explains, and justifies as well, much of the attack. Rationalism has met a type of Protestant theology on its own ground, and has effectively fought it image for image—a theology to which the intellectual distinctions of the scholastics were a *bombinans in vacuo*. It has not touched the accurate theological statement of Catholic doctrine, though we need not deny that it has made us cautious about our literary and pictorial expressions. What was reputed to be an authentic Christian feeling in the eighteenth century can be tempered, and has been in fact, by the honest Rationalist feeling of the nineteenth.

Feeling can counter feeling, image change image, metaphor dispute metaphor—all this is the substance of the Rationalist controversy with Christianity. But

<sup>11</sup> *A Rationalist Outlook*.

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it is easy to confuse an idea with its more or less appropriate image. It is the fatal temptation which only scientific training can mitigate, and it is a temptation to which Rationalism succumbs. The intellectual position of authentic Christian truth it has not reached. It may have taken the paste, it has certainly left the diamonds.

This being the case, the Rationalism under consideration has lived its day as an intellectual force of much significance, although belated expressions of it have contributed to the recent revolutions in Mexico and Spain, and to the opposition against the exercise by Catholics of their rational rights in securing the religious education of their children—‘the virtual blackmail of Parliament by religious enthusiasts.’<sup>12</sup> (Russia?—but that is another question.)

Much of it went with the malexpression of Christianity it destroyed. But even in its general philosophy it is chiefly interesting as a Victorian period piece, like its partner, the Manchester school. The times have changed. The appeal to Voltaire no longer carries the same weight. Gone are the days when the thinker could happily work with knobby little images. Bergson has seen to that. The modern critique of science has demolished the old Rationalism, whose supreme scientific criterion was the quantitative. Need we wonder, then, that it regards Eddington and Jeans with some animus? A distinguished novelist and playwright ‘as a late Victorian, nurtured on Darwin and Huxley,’ observes ‘the mist of metaphysics’ slowly tending ‘to thicken round the more stark and clear-cut definitions of half a century ago, as ivy twines about a tree. When I was young we were told that physics, the strong, must be merciful to metaphysics, the weak; but now it is all the other way round.’<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Professor Harold J. Laski.

<sup>13</sup> Eden Phillpotts: *Other Worlds*.



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At its social philosophy, too, a man of to-day might be permitted a cynical amusement when Winwood Reade's *Martyrdom of Man* (1870) is commended with the words, 'and at last, despite the long agony of uncounted and uncountable worlds, Reade displays to our dazzled vision a world made free by mechanical power, aerial transport, and synthetic chemistry.' Free of what? Employment presumably.

A Thomist will agree with Professor Gilbert Murray that at a time when every science seems to conspire to stress the irrational, it is more than ever necessary to assert the standards of the reason. And most Catholics probably feel more at home with the vigorous, if not always sure, dialectic of the Rationalist, than with the sub-rational luxuriatings of some of the moderns.

Be this as it may, the mood called Rationalism is largely a survival of the past. I repeat, with some malice, some words from a Rationalist address at Whitefield's Central Mission: 'If there are any Fundamentalists present I am sorry, because this is a Fellowship of Youth, and the idea of a *young* Fundamentalist is dreadful.'<sup>14</sup> Rationalism is the present Fundamentalism of philosophy. The world has moved on, Catholic philosophy is still with it, but Rationalism has been left behind.

Thomism is not shaken by contemporary science. It is not ungrateful for the parallelisms of physical science with its philosophy which modern investigation has shown to exist. But without wishing to look a gift horse in the mouth, it was quite content with the old scientific atomism and determinism. Perhaps at times the new movements in their apparent lawlessness prove rather embarrassing allies. But at least they have killed the convention (it was never really a philosophy) of Rationalism.

<sup>14</sup> *Your Belief and Mine.*

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There is a rationalism which is perennial, but it is not spelt with a capital R. Hence the title of this article. You may well doubt the flogging, but not that the horse is dead.

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