

THE CIVIL WAR IN MAN

New Aspects of Renaissance Neo-Platonism

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IT seems to be a lesson of history that the commonplace may be understood as a reduction of the exceptional, but that the exceptional cannot be understood by amplifying the commonplace.'

These words from the closing passage of a most important recent book, Professor Edgar Wind's *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*,¹ draw attention to a great misconception in the usual interpretation of that movement, spread over a considerable stretch of time, which we call 'The Renaissance'. It is most often thought that this movement represented simply a revival of classical learning, an enthusiasm for technique, for style in all aspects of life, and a deepening sense of wonder at the mystery of Man himself. All these *were* features of the situation naturally, but its core is lacking if we merely consider them. Professor Wind has given us the missing heart: the heart of Renaissance art, architecture, poetry, music and science. What he presents to us is, of course, a religious vision, for nothing else could have had these effects. An esoteric vision, which is why he says that he deals with the exceptional, and one that verges often on heresy. But something which has nevertheless deep roots in the Christian past.

What was this vision? What brought these mighty manifestations into being? Briefly, a belief that it is the spiritual and not the material which is the essence of man, and that the truth of Christ existed in the world before Christ. These might seem unexceptionable truths, but in them lurked grave dangers. To begin with the second concept: great play was made with a famous passage from St Augustine's *Retractiones*:

'The thing itself, which is now called the Christian religion, was with the ancients and it was with the human race from its beginning to the time when Christ appeared in the flesh; from when on the true religion, which already existed, began to be called the Christian.'

Such a thinker as Pico della Mirandola, the former disciple of the Neo-Platonist philosopher Ficino, seized on this idea. But to him 'true religion' had always been esoteric, just as the Orphic hymns of Greece concealed under myths divine mysteries not fit for vulgar ears. As Professor Wind puts it:

'In praising the wisdom of such religious disguises, Pico claimed

1 Faber and Faber; 50s.

that the pagan traditions had a virtue in common with the Bible. That there were Hebrew mysteries as well as pagan, the Bible suggested by recording that on two occasions Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai for the purpose of receiving the tablets of the Law. Since it would be absurd to suppose that God needed in each of these instances forty days to hand Moses two tablets inscribed with ten commandments and accompanied by a series of liturgical rules, it was evident that God had conversed with Moses on further matters, and had told him innumerable divine secrets which were not to be written down. These were transmitted among the rabbis by an oral tradition known as the Cabbala (in which the theory of the *sephiroth* and the "absconded God" resembled the Neo-Platonic "emanations" and the "One beyond Being"). In relation to the written law of the Old Testament, the Cabbala was thought by Pico to hold the same position as the Orphic secrets held in relation to pagan myths. The biblical text was the crust, the Cabbala the marrow.'

Having this point of view, Pico, and other like-minded people, believed that the wisdom of the ancients, both Pagan and Jewish, could become the handmaiden of the Christian theologian, while theologians themselves, at first open-minded, gradually became sceptical on this point, as they saw Christian values being more and more threatened by Pagan ones.

Still Renaissance syncretism had its positive points, and indeed there is something very refreshing about an attitude which tries to find the basic truths behind all the great religions of history; which attempts to unite the Hindu sage, the Sibyl, the Persian mage, the Egyptian Hierophant, the Druid, the Orphic Theologist and the Cabbalist into a single choir all singing the praises of God. Especially attractive as the age wore on from Renaissance to Reformation and the soil of Europe grew bloody from bitter religious strife. And the effects on art of this stimulating syncretism simply cannot be over-estimated. Professor Wind explains that not all artists were deeply learned in this lore, though some, like Leonardo and Michelangelo, seem to have been, but all had contacts with the academies where this learning flourished and they quickly adapted the essentials of its symbolism to their purposes.

By following Professor Wind's written text and using the excellent illustrations to his book, we can see how Botticelli's *Primavera* takes on new meaning from the three Graces portrayed in it, symbolizing Giving, Receiving and Returning; Chastity placed between Beauty and Joy, in fruitful tension with Pleasure, yet reconciled by Beauty. We see why, from the Pompeian group onwards, one Grace always

faces backwards, looking away from time towards eternity. In Botticelli's painting *Generation* is ushered in by Nymph and Zephyr at the 'Northern Gate', while at its opposite stands Mercury, symbol of intellectual contemplation, touching the clouds with his wand. In the centre stands Venus, the less splendid and more matronly goddess of earthly love. While in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, it is the naked Heavenly Love that is portrayed. We can also see how Michelangelo adapted the Neo-Platonic interpretation of the myths of the Flaying of Marsyas and the dismemberment of Bacchus. The gruesome detail from his Sistine Chapel *Last Judgment*, showing St Bartholomew holding his own flayed skin, the 'old man' whom he has cast off, takes on a deeper significance when related to his Florentine Bacchus. Professor Wind provides, too, an exceptionally lucid account of the theory of harmony, attributed to Pythagoras, which played so important a part in all Renaissance architecture, music and principles of poetic composition.

But what of our first proposition? The spirit not the body is the essence of man. To see this anti-materialist position pushed to its uttermost we need to look at another Renaissance figure, much influenced by the tradition Pico della Mirandola stood for, the great German seer, Jacob Boehme. Again, a notable book has lately been produced on him, *Sunrise to Eternity*, by John Joseph Stoudt.² According to Boehme man is a fallen angel, a once spiritual being now entrapped in matter, and, final humiliation, divided into sexes. Psyche, ensnared into servitude to Nature, must long seek her Amor, from whom she should never have been parted. Originally man had a 'spiritual body' like the Risen Christ's. His two essences, later divided, 'formed one body, wherein was the most holy tincture and divine fire and light, viz. the great joyful love-desire, which did inflame the essence, so that both essences did earnestly desire each other in love, desire, and love one another. . . . And yet they are not two bodies, but one; but of a twofold essence, viz. one inward, heavenly, holy and one from the essence of time; which were espoused and betrothed to each other eternally.' True, man had a mixed nature as he was intended to be Lord of Creation. But the spiritual kept the material as it were imprisoned, purified it till it was clearer than glass. As Dr Stoudt puts it:

'Primitive Adam, in whom death was not yet real, really had no need of reproducing, he just lived on, for he was man, the species and individual together.'

Yet the creation of which this man was the lord, already to some degree had become corrupted. In its very formation consequences of the Fall of Lucifer, which had preceded it, became apparent. Paradise

² The University of Pennsylvania Press and the Oxford University Press, 1957.

had once stretched over the whole earth; now it was confined to a single garden:

‘The creatures, each made after its kind, are also in the world of conflict, and the struggling, striving of creatures in field and forest is witness to Lucifer’s fall and to a corruption within creation.’

Into this partly corrupted Nature man was sucked down by his own weakness. He could not sustain the Divine Vision; he slept, and in that sleep Eve was created. The eating of the fruit was simply the seal of his earlier fall, the fall into matter.

Clearly this is pure Gnosticism. And there is a streak of such Gnosticism in all Renaissance Neo-Platonism. Curiously enough, in that predominantly humanistic age the shades of the prison-house were always felt to be falling, the shadow of the flesh upon the spirit. But one cannot just dismiss Boehme’s system of thought because it bears the mark of contemporary weaknesses. As Dr Stoudt’s book shows, it is a formidable system, tackling with some success many of the problems which have baffled philosophers for centuries. Boehme is more impressive when he recognizes the necessity for the ‘Dark Fire World’ which exists from all eternity in God, as does the ‘Light Love World’, than when he tries to blame the harshness in Nature upon Lucifer’s fall. That very harshness, the ‘astringency’ as he calls it, which is the quality of the Fire World, is the source of being and energy. The extra-ordinary concept of the ‘*Un-grund*’ too, the Abyss of the Divine Being which we can only conceive as Nothingness, is a remarkable achievement. Above all, in his revival of the dialectical method, through his effect upon Schelling, Boehme influenced Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson and Heidegger, as Dr Stoudt points out. Indeed, indirectly, he influenced Marx.

Most of the figures mentioned in Professor Wind’s book were devout Catholics. A man who carried Neo-Platonism to its logical conclusion like Giordano Bruno, taking up a position closer to Hinduism than to the Church, was exceptional. He paid for his logic with his life. The clerics who were enthusiastic for the ‘true religion’ of the ancients, the artists who wished only to use their talents in the service of Christ, were only following the example of their medieval forbears. Father Conrad Pepler, O.P., has pointed out recently in his *Three Degrees of Mysticism*³ how the mystics of the Middle Ages absorbed an almost dangerous proportion of Neo-Platonism into their systems, and while this had some beneficial results, it had many drawbacks. We are still suffering from the contempt for the body and the physical side of creation which it fostered; as from the anti-religious

3 Blackfriars Publications; 12s. 6d.

re-action against such puritanism. Gradually the need for a different approach is becoming recognized. As Josef Goldbrunner puts it:⁴

‘Formerly spiritualisation was the goal, now it is the moulding of the whole human life.’

If any aspect is rejected the holiness which is wholeness cannot exist. But it is still difficult for us to see this, so deep is the Neo-Platonic tradition in our own heritage. And yet the whole matter has been strangely overlooked, and when most people picture the Renaissance today they see it rather as an example of hedonism than anything else. They ignore the tendencies which flourished among the great minds of Catholic Europe. They do not see the profound significance of Boehme’s position; a loyal Lutheran (though much affected, according to Dr Stout, by the Catholic mystics of the Low Countries), who yet reached an extreme position which would not have been out of place in a Marcionite. They do not understand what were the roots of the Puritan movement in which the Renaissance ended. Perhaps the publication of these two most vital works will help towards a better estimation of our traditional European civilization.

4 Josef Goldbrunner: *Holiness is Wholeness*. (Burns and Oates, 1955.)

OBITER

VARIATIONS ON A THEME. ‘Two households, both alike in dignity’ begins the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, setting the framework for the two hours’ traffic of the stage that is to tell the story of those star-crossed lovers; but those who have had the good fortune to see both the Bolshoi dancing their version of the tragedy and, more recently, *West Side Story* may well feel that the words apply almost equally aptly to those two extraordinary performances. It is hard to say which proved the more surprising, though for widely different reasons.

We have been extremely slow to appreciate the full implications of the implacable Soviet insistence on realism in art, and when the Bolshoi sailed slowly and majestically into their first night at Covent Garden, most of us simply could not believe our eyes: that about two-thirds of the evening was going to consist of this realistic, old-fashioned over-emphatic mime did not at first occur to us. The sets were banal, the costumes unimaginative and the colours uncertain so that all the blaze we had expected was signally lacking. What was far more disconcerting, however, was the pace and wholeheartedness of the action. In the banquet scene, everybody was doing something all the