

AN ANATOMY OF UNBELIEF

It is only with great diffidence that the following considerations on a difficult subject are put forward in the hope of being of possible assistance to others. By unbelief is meant the initial reluctance to accept the doctrines of Christianity as well as the disinclination to retain them that often comes upon those who devote themselves to an intellectual life. This unbelief occurs especially during the formative period, usually, but not necessarily, the years spent by young people at a university, or the time immediately following. The purpose of this essay is to try to isolate the various elements in modern life that tend to disturb settled faith in Christianity, and very briefly to indicate some way of trying to counteract them. Many of the causes are common to all periods of history, some are proper to our own age or have unusual strength now. This account does not pretend to be more than a limited and partial sketch.

Behind every problem of modern instability there lies, first, a fundamental insecurity in social life, affecting all of us in many and sometimes unsuspected ways. This insecurity is manifested in the multiplicity and diversity of moral and political, personal and emotional standards all round; these react in their turn to make more acute the basic insecurity in the soul—it may sometimes amount to a positive fear of life.

Against this general background, in the provincial universities especially, poverty, or at least narrow means, the ambiguities and uncertainties that arise from the gradual blurring in the old social distinctions, even, sometimes, the uncertainty of a future livelihood, are all powerful contributions to this antecedent instability in the very framework of life which we must emphasise if we are to construct a true picture of the situation.

Passing now to consideration of the individual, we may begin with the most general element. The modern subjective bias reaches its extreme in systematic idealism, but in a less intense way affects us all. The young especially are liable to an extreme turning in of their faculties which paralyses the will. Intellectually, the break with outside reality seems more consistent with the facts of their experience than the retention of a common-sense philosophy. The consistency is seen more clearly and seems more convincing than their appreciation of the illogicality and break of contact (in thought) with physical, and so with all, reality. There is a state of mind where the feeling accompanying an intellectual outlook is more power-

ful than the intellectual content itself, and there is a period in people's lives during which the cogency of logical considerations is weakened. In the intellectual atmosphere of to-day, moreover, this weakening of logic to which individuals are liable has been objectified and socialised, so that it is a fashion acceptable and comforting, rather than an error and reprehensible, to be immune from logic. This occurs even in circles where much is made of reason. This phase of mental life may appear in the years between early adolescence and fully adult life, when the pleasure of watertight argumentation begins to pall, and the full seriousness of life has not yet been realised. But it may come, too, in later life, after some fuller realisation of the complexity and bewildering multiplicity of life has deprived a soul of clear vision and has lightened as it were the ballast of judgment. Or again, it may be that the mental development of the cleverest and most learned of scholars is not accompanied by a full and deep sense of reality, and a man may have an arrested development of judgment quite unsuspected by the casual observer. Though it is impossible to fit such cases into rules, it is certain that such a period in mental development can occur, and that in the clever young it should be anticipated.

In the studies of the modern intellectual, both inside and outside the university, systematic doubt is raised to a place of honour in the methods of the intellectual life. Side by side with a careless and uncritical outlook we find, paradoxically, in the matter of principles (moral, metaphysical and sometimes even logical), a strong tendency to scepticism and doubt, regardless of the corrosive effect on the minds of the untrained, the weak and the young. It is not always deliberate, but, given the formation of the older generation of writers and teachers of all kinds in the as yet unalarmed agnosticism of the beginning of this century, it is inevitable. The young easily absorb the cynicism fostered by this cult of doubt; its assumption of superiority flatters them, and they rarely study or realise at all deeply the implications of their pose. This matter applies equally, so far as university students go, to studies in arts, science or other faculties, though not always in the same way. The effect among scientists may be to intensify their mental rigidity in their particular discipline at the expense of balance in the rest of their lives. In the case of the arts, it is astonishing how this general affectation of scepticism appears to expose the mind to the most ill-founded and undesirable enthusiasms. Medical and legal studies raise their own problems which, because not particularly new, are at least contained in a discipline and a tradition, proper to themselves and of some positive value in maintaining a mental balance,

The narrowness, and sometimes unwarrantable arrogance, of science, the formlessness of so much study in arts, these make the glorification of doubt and the excessive contemporary stress on emotion especially dangerous. This emphasis on feeling is perhaps at its worst in literary studies. Here the student is called on to admire so much that is, maybe, vibrant with sensibility, but completely divorced from morality and even good taste—for example, certain tendencies in the modern novel, or in so much of poetry since the romantics, or again in modern appreciation of the classics. While the scientific student is not subjected to this direct assault on the emotions, he is not immune from the general tendency around him. Perhaps his very concentration on the physical, as it weakens his appreciation of the abstract, may have the effect of delivering him up with so much less reserve to an excess of feeling outside the restricted sphere of his work. In whatever way it is transmitted, the effect of this over-emphasis on emotion on minds not yet passed the emotional upheavals of adolescence may be ruinous.

Beneath the superficial scepticism, the premature weariness of life it induces and the excessive play of emotion which is the present fashion, there is a strong, almost unconscious, counter current of thought of great strength and capable of producing in some ways a complete psychic turn-about. No human spirit, least of all that of a young man or woman in all the strength of first achievement, is going to rest content with a permanent withering disbelief. The very real element of self-destruction inherent in such an attitude did indeed at one time seem dangerously actual. But the suicidal morbidity, of which *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* was an example, had already given way to something feebler and softer, though hardly less destructive to the soul, before the end of the nineteen thirties, and perhaps the last six years may have exorcised, for the present generation at least, the devil of destruction. No, the irrepressible instinct for affirmation of the human spirit and the exalted moral idealism which in the young seem inexhaustible must find an outlet. In a double sense this outlet is offered close at hand. The extreme fascination that monistic and pantheistic solutions ever possess is redoubled by the widespread modern approval of them in intellectual circles. In the western world, apart from dogmatic religion, such solutions are very often the only alternative that genuinely spiritual people have to offer to scepticism and materialism. Such solutions have also the advantage of making an easy transition from a materialist outlook to a pantheist one, for various forms of organised materialism can come to terms with the fundamental vagueness of the pantheist systems. The considerable vogue theosophy has obtained

in, of all unlikely places, Latin America, is a symptom of the sort of thing that, in the increasing spirituality of the twentieth century, is likely to supersede rigid materialism. The increasing influence of Jungian psychology is another pointer in the same direction; for, without depreciating its value and importance, one may hesitate before the subjectivism of this profound and impressive system of psychological investigation when it is taken as a substitute for religious discipline. It is easy to imagine the kind of amalgam possible or even likely between Marxism and the pantheisms a hundred years hence. In any case, the attraction for a simplifying identification in thought of the contrasting and opposing elements in mental and physical experience can exert a deadly influence. Although pantheism runs counter to the tendencies of scepticism and materialism, the two attitudes have the affinity of opposites and the common basis of a false simplification. Then there is no incompatibility between pantheism and the modern stress of feeling; and we may often discover a false mysticism of the emotions which can exalt the self in place of abasing it, and this comes very near to identifying the individual with God. This, in extreme forms. As a tendency, it is sufficiently dangerous. Once off the main road, the appetite for good is distorted, and if the pantheist-emotional setting is produced almost ready-made, the step is but a short one from the rejection of the holy in an objective focus, to the encompassing of holiness within the self and the canonisation of one's every feeling.

No psychological make-up can stand the strain: and there are many forms of breakdown. Most common is a state of exhaustion and inertia very like the accidie of the old spiritual masters and arising from a not dissimilar source, the over-estimation of the ego. So, very easily, we may come to real despair. If the soul goes the whole way, what began as a youthful and arrogant pose, becomes a genuine tragedy; the ability to believe is lost, the inability to believe positively encouraged by the diseased intellectual atmosphere in which the soul is immersed.

Here we return to the fundamental insecurity of modern life with which we began. If a young student finds himself in a condition resembling this diagnosis everything conspires to prevent a recovery. All of us, intellectual or not, urban or rural, suffer alike from the excessive stimulus of modern living: speed, the facility and frequency of personal displacement which amounts to a positive mania for being somewhere else, wireless, cinema, too many books, too many 'movements,' too much politics: there is no need to labour the point. And little as the outsider may be disposed to believe it, too much work and the wrong kind is demanded of the already over-

stimulated minds of students at the university—excessive lecturing and class work and no time for calm assimilation. The whole social setting in which their life is lived is itself uncertain and undefined and offers no moral support in time of stress. It is not difficult to understand that, given this exhausting overtaking of the mind, a soul in whose dark recesses some such movement as the above is taking place, loses its elasticity, is unable to recover from a depression that becomes chronic, and must give up all hope, humanly speaking, of recovering a sane outlook. In the case of a catholic, the process involves formal sin—this must never be forgotten. The offence done to the awful holiness of God must be realised, but it will be realised the more perfectly and the sooner if the notion itself of God can be made more real. The acceptance of punishment, the desire even for voluntary penance is sure to follow if only a means can first be found to heal the radical loss of contact with reality that the whole situation of loss of faith supposes.

The remedy to be proposed is twofold, in part intellectual (and this is especially valuable as a prophylaxis) and in part spiritual. For the sickness arises in that part of the soul where the intellectual operations merge with the movements of the will (if the transposition from activities to agent be permitted): the break in the contact of the intellect with reality brings with it a break in that act of the will to embrace reality which is at the root of prayer and union with God. If that fails where it has once been (even if only in germ) the knowledge of faith becomes stultified, and what is not used withers. The situation is similar in cases not of loss, or rather atrophy, of faith, but rather of reluctance to believe whatever is proposed in the way of Christian doctrine, except that here the breakdown implies a failure to elicit the act of the will rather than its cessation. In every case it is a question of maintaining the circulation of the life blood of the spirit: this is itself a working of supernatural grace but it is built on the soul's natural appetite for reality.

The natural appetite must be protected, encouraged and strengthened; its supernatural increase must be maintained. This strengthening of the natural appetite falls to intellectual enterprise; the increase is a matter of prayer.

Taking now the first: all who embark on a mental life that is going to involve deep study of natural things, whether 'scientific' phenomena or the manifestations of the human spirit, are as a matter of course liable to be immersed in the details of their particular discipline to the point of serious disproportion in their intellectual vision. To this general danger are added those particular perils we

have just reviewed. It would seem as if a philosophical counter-balance were called for; against excess of detail and the particular opposing the most abstract ideas conceivable; against the depression ultimately engendered by modern tendencies, a demonstration of the glory and sheer joy of Being; to bring home in some degree to the jaded spirit the meaning and immensity of the great torrent of created and uncreated Being, the proper study of metaphysics and the true object of man's contemplation on the natural level itself. Moreover there is a subsidiary need in the intellectual order: the cultivation of a robust practical judgment. This is specially called for in the case of those who are sensitive—perhaps over-sensitive—to the human element in religion. Apart from the obvious error of judgment in supposing than an opinion different from one's own—however nobly ideal!—is as a matter of course less just, the temporal activities of 'other' catholics ought not to be the disturbing factor that they often are. The practical judgment of intellectual persons is often singularly weak. Apparently tough in their theories, they are delicate over practice—especially another's practice. It ought to be possible to devise some exercise in moral judgments.

Turning now to the religious aspect of the remedy, the writer only ventures on this plane with the greatest diffidence. In the first place it is the more important. The gift of faith will be preserved if the conviction be firmly established that by it we make contact in thought with that reality already exhibited in some degree of its splendour in the study of true philosophy, and, in our spirit, with the very heart of that divine reality. We must devote all our strength to achieving and ensuring the permanence of this conviction.

In the kind of case that one has principally in mind—that of the student at the university—rarely is there any question of a fully reasoned rejection of religious faith; it is much more that philosophical fragments—often of very heterogeneous nature—are utilised to support a mood. It is therefore the will that must be moved. While it is true that duty is a paramount consideration in the religious life, it may sometimes be effective to exhibit the immense drawing power of that Divinity whence the duty flows. It would be possible to lead from the metaphysical splendour of Being to the mysteries and depths of theology. In the ardours of pursuing natural knowledge, only the deepest and highest visions of revealed truth can succeed in maintaining a supernatural buoyancy. The tremendous truths of the life of Grace are not too great to be demonstrated to those whose thirst for life is in danger of being quenched with a merely natural substitute. Ontology and the theology of the life of Grace may be thought absurd remedies, but I believe they would not

be rejected. There is an application here of something Père Clérissac wrote in another connexion :

' . . . liberals are receptive and feverish persons ; receptive because they too easily take on the state of mind of their contemporaries ; feverish because from fear of wounding these various states of mind, they are troubled by a continual apologetic restlessness. They seem to suffer themselves from the doubts they are combating ; they lack sufficient confidence in the truth.' (*The Mystery of the Church.*)

It may be that insistence on apologetics engenders the very restlessness it is intended to allay. While I would not question the wisdom of this insistence in general, it may be that for some, it would be of great help to penetrate more deeply into the truths of religion. Of course it leads to prayer. Exhortations to prayer are sometimes harassing. Too great an insistence on some practices of the liturgical movement may rob the soul of the only chance in an overcrowded life for entering into itself and seeking the more abundant life for which everything else is made. In prayer the student (of any age) sometimes needs a cessation from study. If the soul, even the soul of the intellectual, could be encouraged to approach affectively that great stream of reality which has been shown to it in an intellectual way already, and if the person of our Lord could be shown to be the condescending manifestation of that same awful reality within our own lives and limitations, it might be that many defections, slight or grave, temporary or longer lasting, could be prevented.

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50 FAGGOTS. By Julian. (John Miles, Ltd. ; 7s. 6d. net.).

This is but a little book ; each faggot—those humble bundles of brushwood—occupying only a page or so. But quality is not judged by bulk, and the glimpses of the natural world, mostly set in Sussex, have a real freshness. Long ago Sussex was known as Selig (holy) Sussex—hence the corruption of ' Silly Sussex '—and it is remembrance of such things that gives grace to these pages. With a simplicity of manner which merits praise the natural world is linked with the heavenly—and this is done with an observing and tender eye, a touch of humour, and an apt memory for the legends of the Church.

These sketches originally appeared in the *Catholic Herald*, and they are worth reprinting.

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