

THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY¹

MR ALDOUS HUXLEY once wrote an essay on vulgarity in literature. But literature reflects human life; and implicitly he has written many books on vulgarity in human life, on the squalor of humanity. The figures of the fifth Earl of Gonister and his companions at the end of *After Many a Summer*, undying and unliving, intolerable in their sordid brutishness, represent something that recurs again and again in different forms in his works. 'Vivre?' he quoted in *Vulgarity in Literature*, 'nos valets le feront pour nous'. That disgust with life, and in particular with the corporeal, still seems to lie at the root of his view of reality; and to colour his approach to Reality.

Some critics of *The Perennial Philosophy* have waxed indignant at the idea of describing as philosophy a book in which Plato and Aristotle are barely mentioned; others have taken the opposite line, and vindicated the author by viewing western philosophy as pseudo-philosophy because of its exclusive reliance on discursive reasoning: if the way to knowledge of Reality is humility, poverty of spirit, purity of heart, how can we describe as philosophers, as 'lovers of wisdom', any but those who take this way? The truth surely lies midway between these two extremes. As some of the great Christian mystics have shown in their own lives, there are three wisdoms: the natural investigations of reason, the study of theology, the direct mystical awareness of God; and they can each be valid and valuable in their own spheres, and each help and fortify the others. We have no right to upbraid philosophy in the western sense for not being mysticism; nor need we object if Mr Huxley chooses to use the term in a different, but etymologically justifiable, sense. What remains true is that, while western philosophy may justly be criticized for excluding the findings of mysticism from its data, this book may justly be criticized, not for failing to philosophize, but for failing to do justice to discursive reasoning in the total quest for God; and perhaps this failure links up with the author's general attitude to human life.

The Perennial Philosophy is a valuable book for many reasons. It does show the universality of the claims of mysticism; it does argue convincingly that mysticism is not a moment in the evolutionary process, a passing and primitive phase which must inevitably be superseded with the coming of greater enlightenment, but the fulfilment of something ultimate and changeless in human nature. It does, in the light of this age-old wisdom, show up the shallowness

¹ *The Perennial Philosophy*. By Aldous Huxley (Chatto & Windus; 12s. 6d.)

and sham of so much of our ways of thought and behaviour; it vindicates the old Greek idea of the nemesis which waits upon *hubris*—*hubris* in regard to nature as well as to God. It includes, in commentary as well as texts, not only the great broad lines of the Way, but a good deal of wise detail in the sphere of spiritual direction. And, in its collation of the teaching of east and west, it can do us western Christians a service not least by making us more humble and less provincial, more alive to the way in which God does indeed reveal himself, in the different ages and races, to men of good will. To have brought these testimonies together, so vastly different in so many ways, so strikingly similar in the substance of their message; to have expounded and explained them so clearly; and to have revealed so clearly in the light of their wisdom the true nature of the modern world we take too much for granted and the life we too easily lead: this is no small achievement.

And yet, of its nature, this is a transitional book. It ends in an ambiguity. *Tat tuam asi*: That art thou; there is the formula, the one-ness of God and man. But what an infinity of questions it raises. What is the *That*, what is the *thou*, what is the *art*, the union between the two terms?

Mr Huxley has, of course, his answers; but do they take us far enough?

Let us look first of all at the human term, the *thou*. The raw material is the human personality, begotten in sin but yearning, unconsciously if not consciously, for God. What must be done in it to make it proximately *capax Dei*? The mystics reply with one voice: it must go through the process of self-naughting; and the west is as vehement as the east, and as vehement as Mr Huxley could wish, in rejecting the 'stinking lump' of selfhood. But here already is the first major ambiguity, the first major divergence which underlies these apparently identical sayings. Mr Huxley offers a philological explanation of the western reverence for the idea of personality: we reject the gaunt humility of the Saxon 'selfness' and prefer the sonority of the Latin word, precisely because it bolsters up our own self-importance. Were we to speak of 'selfness' we might more readily see it to be a stinking lump. The thesis is attractively argued; but is it true? There is in fact a deep cleavage here between the teaching of Christianity and that of a great part of the wisdom of the east. The eastern wisdom commands the self to die; Christ commands the self to die and be re-born. In this eastern teaching it is indeed the self that is the stinking lump and that must be totally destroyed; for the Christian it is not the self but selfishness, not the true self but the false. And Mr Huxley seems to be guilty therefore of a tendentious exegesis when he changes the words of St Paul, 'I live now not I, but Christ

liveth in me', to 'for it is the Logos who *lives me*—lives me as an actor lives his part'.

We are thus led to the second ambiguity. That art thou: but what is the meaning of *art*, what is the nature of the union between the two terms? And it is clear that, if we stop short at the first half of the Christian formula, if what we set out to achieve is the death of the self and no more, then there cannot in fact be a union of two terms at all, since there will not in fact be two terms.

God created man to his own image and likeness. When we are trying to discover something of the love of God and man, it is wise to be humble and to examine the love of human beings for one another. That human love does in fact reveal to us the phenomenon of self-naughting: that copernican revolution which makes the centre of life—of thought and desire and effort—not the self any longer, but the other; but it also and simultaneously reveals to us that the end of that revolution is not the abolition of the self (which would mean the abolition of love with the destruction of the lover) but the discovery of the true self instead of the false.

The issue then defines itself more clearly: we are to choose between two alternatives. Either the love of wisdom is to take us to a final death of self, the result of which must not be union but absorption, the dreamless sleep, the void; or it must take us to a death which is only the gateway to rebirth, and leads therefore in the end to a real and personal union, a union of love. Which alternative corresponds to reality? We can answer only by discovering the nature of God; and so we reach the third great ambiguity.

Here we are faced at the outset with a special difficulty. The mystic is trying to express the Inexpressible; and he is therefore forced to take refuge in figurative language and paradox, and to rest content with remote approximations. It is for this reason that it is possible to interpret Christian sayings in, let us say, a buddhist sense ('My Me is God', said St Catherine of Genoa), and vice versa. But again the difference is as clear as it is deep. The mystics are at one in their worship of the Transcendent-Immanent, the Absolute, beyond categories, beyond understanding, the abyss of the Godhead. But what an infinity of difference, again, beneath these identities. You find mystics of east and west alike speaking of Godhead, of God, and of Incarnation: but with what difference of implication. And it is essential that those implications should be brought out; for on them depends the whole approach, the whole attitude, of the questing soul. This Mr Huxley recognizes: 'metaphysical thinking is unavoidable and finally necessary'; though elsewhere he asserts (very questionably: St Thomas for one did not find it so) that 'the habit of analytical thought is fatal to the intuitions of integral thinking'—and it is

this latter assertion that links up with his condemnation of formulae and legalism, of Christianity's 'unfortunate servitude to historical fact', its 'idolatrous preoccupation with events and things in time'. Are we back again at the vulgarity of man?

Let us be quite clear. We believe not in a creed but through a creed. We believe that doctrinal formulae can but approximate to the Fact. We believe that the world of time is immeasurably less important than the now of eternity. But we can become citizens of eternity only by using as we ought the world of time; and by using—as Mr Huxley himself admirably points out—the *minutiae*, the successive events in all their smallness, of our human lives on earth. Without dogma, worship must tend to become woolly, and the quest for God go astray into strange and sometimes sinister by-paths; there must, as Mr Huxley admits, be a map. And how can there be a map of that which is beyond description, how can there be a formulation of that which is beyond all forms? The complete answer is that the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us, and in the measurable reality of human events and facts we have seen his glory, the glory of the Godhead revealed.

The *Godhead* revealed. Godhead. God. Incarnate: what is the relation between these three terms? It is not enough to say that for Christianity there is but one incarnation while for buddhism there is an indefinite number: the meaning and purpose of the incarnation is different. Christ is not a man in whom God became manifest; a pattern, simply, of what man should be. The movement, so to say, is not upwards, but downwards; and the purpose is not a question only of providing a pattern, but of empowering, of so changing nature as to make it capable of re-creating the pattern. Similarly, the love of the personal God is not a step on the road to the discovery of the impersonal Godhead: it is the infinite dynamic stillness of the Godhead Itself that is revealed to us as comprising the mutual love of Father, Son and Holy Ghost; and that, by showing us relationship within the Absolute, shows up the possibility of a relationship *with* the Absolute, a real union, through love, of self with Self.

But again, how is the union to be achieved? If you think of incarnation as a psychological fact but not an historical event; if you think of the love of a personal God as but a stepping-stone, as milk for babes; then perhaps inevitably you think of the mystic quest as something to be achieved by man. So indeed Mr Huxley seems to view it: he speaks of grace, but it seems accidental rather than substantial to his thesis, and he has no use for the Christian theology of the sacraments. The quest tends to become an exclusively upward movement, and to consist in an escape from all that is human.

But *sine me nihil potestis facere*. Without me you can do nothing.

The Christian view is radically different; starts from an entirely different angle. Christianity knows all about the vulgarity of man; and all about the helplessness of man; none the less it asserts roundly, 'I can do all things . . . in him who strengthens me'. The first movement is the downward movement of divine love and pity and healing. The Word was made flesh; and that stooping down of Godhead into the world of time, that historical event which gives temporal history its eternal significance, that is the necessary condition of man's upward movement, and it is then indeed *man's* upward movement, not an escape from human life, but the redeeming of human life, even through its vulgarity, through its opacity, through the limitations and humiliations of flesh and blood; not an escape from the self, but the discovery of the self.

The Word was made flesh, and was wrapped in swaddling clothes. There is something else about the Godhead which these historical events reveal. You think of the vulgarity of man, the servitude to the needs and limitations and earthiness of the flesh, the squalors of egoism, the vulnerability of existence, and it is tempting to follow the mysticism which breaks away from it all, tempting to think of an 'unselfing' which shall be a deliverance into the impassibility of the One. (But God is not impassible, because love is not impassible: he was crucified, died and was buried.) You think of the vulgarity of ecclesiastical man, the superstitions and sentimentalities, the degradations and the emotional wallowings into which worship can descend; you think of the dependence on the ministrations of the grubby official hands in which the divine Reality is held; and again how tempting to brush it all aside as a man-made distraction, as a substitute and a hindrance. But no; one of the lessons that is most forcibly stated in this book is the lesson that there is no way to God except through humility of heart; and humility is the acceptance of fact, the acceptance of the facts about oneself as they are. The facts about humanity are that, body and soul alike, he comes from God; body and soul alike, wayward and stupid and sinful, he is loved by God; and body and soul alike he must make his way back to God through the power that is offered him. And all that is very humiliating, no doubt; but it ceases at once to be humiliating if you remember the fact that 'He emptied himself, taking on himself the form of a servant', and in that assumption of human misery turned the misery into a glory.

He was wrapped in swaddling clothes. It changes our idea of human squalor; but it does more than that. It completes our idea of God. Let us return to the humble human example, the nature of human love. There is in human love an element we call tenderness: it finds expression in the desire to protect—to protect from harm and

hardship and suffering; but in itself it is an awareness which produces that desire: an awareness that you find equally in the love of man for woman and of woman for man: an awareness of dependence, of a certain helplessness, of vulnerability; an awareness that in the mature human being there still remains something of the child. Without that element of tenderness love is at best imperfect and may well be destroyed; and God in the infinity of his love and his pity has shown us how even here, even in our approach to the Infinite Transcendent, that tenderness is not excluded. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes. Here as elsewhere we are to go *per humanitatem ad divinitatem*: this is not essentially or even necessarily a question of devotion to the human childhood of Christ: it is a question primarily of what that childhood reveals to us of the Godhead, and of what it teaches us of the fullness of man's loving response to divine love.

If we are to worship God as our Father, how can it also be possible for us to have in our love this element of tenderness as for a child? It is possible because God has made himself vulnerable and helpless and dependent: not merely, once again, in his human childhood and its weakness, but in that divine quasi-abrogation of sovereignty whereby he leaves us to choose whether we shall love him or no. He has made himself vulnerable because he has given us free-will: he has made it possible for us to despise and reject him, as in fact we do. And to the lovers of God that aspect seems to be central: wholly different from the sentimentalities, the anthropomorphisms, the human projections, into which worship is at times degraded, you find this awareness and love in the depths of the spirit. It is for this that apostles work and suffer and die.

Metaphysical thinking is necessary. What we learn of the nature of God must determine in the last resort what we think of the nature of man. If we can think of God in this light, then we can begin to see man also in this light; we shall be concerned less with the vulgarity and more with the vulnerability of the human heart; less with the egoist squalors of the adult and more with the continuing helplessness and pathos of the child. Feed my lambs, as well as my sheep, Christ told his followers; and if we find such deep Christian mysticism—as in fact we do—in so many of the simple and unlearned, it is precisely because the nature of God as self-revealed to them, and the understanding of the tragedy and pathos of man which that implies, have made it possible, have prepared and purified the heart.

As perennial and as universal in the world's history as the mystic quest is the making of sacrifice; and here again the same lesson is clear. In sacrifice generally, and in particular in the Sacrifice which fulfils all sacrifices, there are the two movements: the offering and

immolation to God, the receiving from God; and it is the self in its fullness, it is man's life together with all the things that go to make up that life, that is offered, in order that, through the acceptance of the sacrifice, the self and its total setting may be restored: not an escape from squalor, but the redemption of squalor. First the death, but then the re-birth.

First the death; our Lord is quite clear: only he that hateth his life shall find it. But—hateth *his* life, not hateth life. If we want to see what the words mean we must look at the life of him who said them. He did not hate life, he did not hate the squalors of humanity, he who so loved the earth and its fullness and all the small things of the world, he who was so gentle with the weak and the timid and the sinful, while being himself so unprotected from the harshness and the crudity of human things. He did not teach us to destroy our selfhood, he who so often speaks of I and Me, for he knew that love is marriage, is a union in which not the essence but the egoism and the isolation of selfhood are transcended. Mr Huxley resorts again to philology to point out that the idea of two-ness always involves the idea of evil; but does it? Division, yes; for division implies the privation of desired union. But two-ness need not mean the same as division: it can on the contrary mean the same as union; for without it there cannot be union, there can only be fusion and therefore destruction. Our Lord teaches us not to speak of I and Me and Mine as *we* use the words, egoistically; he teaches us to kill the false self; he teaches us to hate our own self-centred lives, because then we can learn to love and in so doing we shall discover our true lives, our true selves, the lives and selves of which the centre is the Other.

It is because of these unstated cleavages, these unresolved ambiguities, that *The Perennial Philosophy* strikes one as a transitional book; and it is because of their importance that so little has been said of the book's great qualities, the many memorable things that are in it. Metaphysical thinking is unavoidable; and must lead in the end to a greater definition in one direction or the other. And on that choice of direction how much depends! Christian mysticism must be defined in terms that show its care for, and redemption of, the pain and need of the world: a care that is God-like, and God-filled, because it is indeed a sharing in the very nature of Love: *In tormento e travaglia servire i fratelli.*

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