

## “ENTHUSIASM”

### *A Critique of Ronald Knox's book*

An Anglo-Catholic vicar, in a parish in which I resided as Methodist minister, once said to me: “Those people whom you do not regard as Christians at all, I regard as Christians, but as bad Christians. There are without doubt people in this parish who are either immoral or unspiritual or both; but they have been baptised, and some of them make their Easter communion, therefore they must be Christians. I agree, of course that they are not very good Christians.” Here lies a fundamental difference between the Catholic and the Evangelical. As one reads Monsignor Knox's book the attitude exemplified by that vicar constantly comes to mind. It is not easy for an Evangelical Protestant to read it sympathetically, one must confess; its background conception of Christianity is so different from one's own. I must begin with this admission.

This does not mean that the book is all bad. Far from it. The chapters which bring a new view of certain figures in the history of the Church will challenge teachers of Church History to give chapter and verse for many of the more orthodox estimates. There is the refreshing wit which we have come to expect from the writer. His designation of Wesley's Scottish ordinations as "Gretna Green ordinations"; his comparison of Tertullian's secession to the Montanists with a hypothetical secession of Newman to the Salvation Army; his examination of Carlyle's description of George Fox until only the leather suit (which, he says, was actually a pair of breeches!) is left: these are only three examples of many. At times too he seems to have almost an affection (is that too strong a word?) for some of his erring subjects; notably for John Wesley, to a less extent for George Fox, and even for the erring James Nayler. There are passages in which he is even prepared to admit that the Church may have been at fault. He agrees that unworthy priests were a contributory cause to the rise of the Waldensians, and quotes that great English bishop, Robert Grosseteste, on the same subject of corrupt clergy. He hints that the regimentation which resulted from the Counter-Reformation was partly responsible for the vagaries of Quietism. The Jesuits, he says, certainly "trod unwarily" in the matter of Pascal's "Lettres Provinciales." Even with some of his conclusions about Evangelicalism and those figures favoured by Evangelicals we must agree. He may be just, for instance, in his strictures regarding Upham's "evangelicalising" of Madame Guyon. It is too strong to call Wesley an "unsmiling figure," but certainly Wesley was far from being a humorist. Even Wesley's admirers would agree that in the realm of religious literature, Wesley was "unashamedly a retailer." And Wesley did, as Knox says, far too often, sum up literature and art in random and often inaccurate "sizings-up." It is also true that there has been among Evangelicals such a thing as "Pietism disguised by snobbishness."

But on fundamentals we are completely at variance with Monsignor Knox. His underlying assumptions about what constitutes a Christian are not those of the New Testament. Yet he does not always come out into the open. He has an irritating habit of making no frontal attack on the people he brings before us; he disclaims, in fact, all intention of showing us a "rogues' gallery" for the ultimate benefit of orthodox Roman Catholicism. But he is skilful at dropping hints, making suggestions to which he does not commit himself, and quoting the adverse opinions of others. "An unfriendly critic" would say certain strong things about the early Quakers; the author does not identify himself with such a critic, but he gives you this opinion through a reference to a hypothetical person. Chateaubriand was perhaps unkind in something he said of Martin Luther; the author does not commit himself to the same viewpoint. Of the early Methodists' "watching over one another in love," he says, "it was easier to find a harsher name for it"; he does not provide that harsher name, but leaves you to think of some such word as "snooping." Twice we are told that John Wesley's eyes were hooded "like a hawk's"; are we too touchy in asking if there is a particular point in the simile? The wide circulation of Wesley's books in his lifetime: was it due to his imposing his will on his subordinates or to his literary gifts? We may make a good guess, says Knox; but he will not make it for us.

He has the lawyer's habit (of which he accuses Tertullian, rightly) of passing over the strong points of his victim's case and making the weak ones seem weaker. There were other elements in Quakerism besides James Nayler; but perhaps Margaret Fell and the lovely Christian home at Swarthmore do not, after all, come under the category of "Enthusiasm." An uninitiated person might get the impression that John Wesley's "Journal" is full of psychological curiosities; but cases such as are quoted scarcely occur, on the average, more than once in every 200 pages of the Standard Edition. George Whitefield's "servilities" to noble lords and ladies are noted, yet nothing is said of his straight personal dealing with some of them, examples of which are to be found in Tyerman's two-volume biography. Norwich is quoted as an example of the

acknowledged leakages of members in early Methodism, and the impression is given of a Revival of religion which went in fits and starts; nothing is said of the peculiar history of pre-Methodism in Norwich, nor is anything said of Wesley's motive in pruning the membership—his passion for holiness. It is unfair, too, to criticise Wesley's statement that Molther's illness was a judgment of God, without reading Wesley's own reply to a contemporary who made the same accusation. (Wesley's Works, vol. VIII, pp. 409 and 452).

Many of the judgments made are quite uncharitable. Is it true that George Fox was estranged from James Nayler for so long, because Nayler had sought to make himself equal, not only with Christ, but with Fox? And was Fox unfor- giving? If it had been the Catholic Church which had excommunicated a Nayler the word would have been "discipline." Was it really an "affectation" of Madame Guyon to "leave all things to God"? if it was, how does Mgr. Knox know that it was? Cannot people genuinely leave all things to God? And what basis is there for the suggestion that Wesley's smile was not native to his cheeks, that is, that he was acting a part? Or that his friendliness to little children was not genuine? Or that his familiar address of his preachers as "Tommy" and "Sammy" and "Jemmy" was insincere?

I have hinted that there are some views which will challenge Church History teachers. Yet some of his views are obviously due to his having an axe to grind. Very few will discard Gwatkin for Mgr. Knox on the subject of Mon- tanism. The recent researches of Dr. Orcibal and Dr. Moss's "Old Catholic Movement" establish a quite different picture of Saint Cyran and Jansenism from that found in the pages of "Enthusiasm." Again, to turn from Knox's description of Molinos to that of Dr. R. Newton Flew in "The Idea of Per- fection" is to wonder whether the two men described are the same.

There are also many judgments which are not according to facts. The state- ment that "from the first Wesley strikes you as a man determined to forge a weapon" is contrary to the obvious fact that Methodist organisation came into being almost by chance and under pressure of circumstances. The statement that things began to go wrong in Methodism when John Wesley was absent, is falsified by, among other things, the remarkable growth, numerically and spiritual- ly, of Methodism during its founder's protracted illness in the early 1750's. There are many passages in which Wesley admitted a development in his ideas, which could be quoted against the statement that Wesley *always* thought that what he was saying at the moment was what he had been saying for the last forty years.

We come back to where we started. The differences between what Ronald Knox represents and what he describes are fundamental. Dr. H. G. Wood has said that Lytton Strachey's debunking of the Victorians was due to the fact that what meant everything to the subjects of the portrait meant nothing to the painter. The same is true of "Enthusiasm." We do not associate ourselves with the extravagances here noted; but we do stand for a religion of experience, mediated solely through the Lord Jesus Christ, Who gave Himself a ransom for us all, and made real by the Holy Spirit, Who imparts to the believer the Mind of Christ. Mgr. Knox seems at times not to be able to understand this. "The archdeacon, I am afraid is not a very spiritual man," he quotes, rightly exposing the spiritual pride. But there *are* people who are spiritual and unspiritual people, and the spiritual can discern unspirituality in others without pride, or Paul is wrong. Was Whitefield's opening of his heart to a friend in a letter, expressing the desire to be more humble, merely a "Heep-like sentiment"? Does not the Holy Spirit work within the believer a genuine desire for humility? And may we not confide it to our friends? What is totally lacking in this book is an appreciation of the believer's walk with God.

The writer does not seem to like Dr. Inge, from two comments he makes. It was Dr. Inge who said in "Life, Light and Love": "It is easier to discipline the enthusiast than to enthuse the disciplinarian." That perhaps sums up this book. Is it mere coincidence that this Roman Catholic writer expresses in one place exactly the view of that other authoritarian system, Marxism, when he says that "Whitefield was scheming to capture the aristocracy, while Wesley aimed at a theocracy of the petit bourgeoisie"? I wonder.

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