

## The Bankruptcy of Human Wisdom.

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NOT infrequently has resentment been expressed by the intelligentsia at St. Paul's apparently contemptuous references to human wisdom, especially to that where he sharply asks 'where is the wise? Has not God stultified the wisdom of the world? . . . The world with all its wisdom failed to know God in his wisdom' (1 Co 1<sup>20, 21</sup>, Moffatt). Why should this man, a Greek university man, himself no mean thinker, go out of his way to belittle human wisdom? Was there need for this ungenerosity? What is the mind for but to think? Besides, the Church has not accepted this estimate of Greek thought, as is evidenced by the first three centuries of acute thinking by Christian philosophers, to say nothing of St. Thomas Aquinas, who found in Aristotle a veritable gold mine.

Notwithstanding this rather peddling criticism, St. Paul's words have suddenly assumed a fresh meaning for our own time, since it is human wisdom that is now at the bar, once again, for judgment.

The Greeks, more than any other people, adored the human intellect. They were the philosophers, *par excellence*. Theirs was the utterly free mind, with liberty to examine every subject in heaven and earth. Nothing escaped them—the substance of the world, ethics, government, and even the gods. When St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, the Greek mind had been dominant for five centuries. And it was showing signs of exhaustion. A profound scepticism reigned. Its speculations were disintegrating. It had seemingly mastered everything, save the one thing that mattered. It had failed to know God, and failed equally to know man. Man had filled its entire canvas, yet it was over man that Greek wisdom finally broke. On the one hand it bore the fatal mark of an artificial aristocracy. The poor slave did not enter into the scheme of things. He was disfranchised by heaven and earth. Any 'wisdom' bearing this mark must sooner or later break on the mass of humanity which is not aristocratic. A philosophy that cannot comprehend all men is by that much in-

human. On the other hand it was too shallow. The best of the Greek philosophers were well aware of human weaknesses. In humility they confessed their own. They cannot be accused of vain glory. Yet it is evident they never reached the depths of the human spirit. The best of them had no perception of what Christianity means by 'sin'—that mysterious force which poisons and weakens human life. Was not St. Paul's charge true—that the wisdom of the Greek missed both God and man? It was noble so far as it went. Many pages of Plato, and, much later, Marcus Aurelius, bring to the cheeks of many Christians in our time, a blush of shame. Yet, on the whole, the effort was a moral failure. It knew nothing of redemption. It could not speak to the common soul of man. . . .

What the Greek failed to do by his wisdom the gospel accomplished by its message, which became a dynamic gospel for the real salvation of man. It brought God to him, in the revelation of our Lord. What an abyss between Zeus and the *Père Céleste* of Jesus! It also brought man to God, and man to his fellow man. The ancient gibe that Christianity was mainly a religion for slaves was nothing more than snobbish scorn on the part of persons who regarded themselves as superior to the common herd. The fact is overlooked that in Christ the slave knew himself to be a man. If chains manacled his wrists, he had a free soul. He was redeemed, and the Master who redeemed him, although crucified, was 'alive for evermore.' His light affliction was but for a moment. There awaited him an 'eternal weight of glory.' But on earth he entered immediately a new brotherhood, from which all artificial distinctions were excluded. 'Neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free . . . but all one in Christ.' Christianity destroyed false aristocracies, and at the same time refused to idealize man. With the sense of liberation in Christ, there remained the sense of sin, which deepened with growing saintliness. The greatest apostle, in the closing days of his utterly consecrated

life, could write of himself as 'the chief of sinners.' Where the Greeks failed, the gospel succeeded. It was at once divine, fully human, and really profound.

The Church humanized life, and, as Mr. Christopher Dawson so well shows, offered to the world a new culture, and a better way of living. With the best intentions it took over many of the pagan practices, baptized them into the Holy Name, believing that they might become really Christian as they shed their ancient husks. Therein was the major error. The ancient paganism was not destroyed, it was merely veneered and received a Christian polish. And so in time there reappeared many of the pagan vices, in new forms, but essentially the same. The higher officials of the Church were not always free from them.

In her challenging book, *The Good Pagan's Failure*, Miss Rosalind Murray insists upon the point that the Christian spirit never really *penetrated* the soul of the old paganism. It did not transform it. Hence we have the sad story of what we call 'the Dark Ages.' Mr. Belloc seems to be under the impression that the 'Dark Ages' are an invention of malicious 'sectarian' Protestantism. But before Luther appeared, the Friars were declaiming against the vices of the people, reproving them for drunkenness, vendetta, and other sins which St. Paul long before had catalogued as 'heathen' vices. Miss Murray is abundantly justified in her condemnation of the pagan spirit, which, in its baser aspects disfigured the 'Dark Ages,' and broke out again and again in history in gross forms. In our own time we see its resurgence in the beastliness and brutality of the Marxian and Nazi régimes. In the name of *kultur* every kind of pagan barbarity has again raised its head. The better part of humanity universally condemns it.

When in 1453 the Turks captured Constantinople, they, without knowing it, prepared the way for a revival of classic 'paganism.' The Greeks, with their precious MSS., fled to Europe, and the revival of learning began. Europe heard again, for the first time in nearly a thousand years, the majestic periods of classical Latin and Greek. With the language, there came also the vision of that ancient world. The past was invested with a strange

enchantment. The Church had forgotten the 'gospel of the kingdom,' and had overstressed the 'other world' beyond. Heaven and hell were of greater importance than the present world which, socially at least, was in a sad plight. To be a saint one must escape from the world and seek refuge in the cloister. The common world, while remaining nominally 'Christian,' was, in reality, a far from Christian world. Princes, barons, lords, and men of wealth had the monopoly of what education was available. The ordinary man was little better than a serf. There had been a great deal of rebellion before 1453. Groups of people were formed to obtain warmth of soul amidst the chill of nominal religiousness. Other groups were agitating for better conditions of life; the Renaissance brought new hope. That world before Christ appeared to them to be more human than the world they knew and lived in. Why not then return to it? There will always be debate as to the final moral results of the Renaissance upon the soul of man, but there can be none as to its intellectual results. The human mind suddenly achieved its freedom. Men could think freely without consulting the ecclesiastical mind. So wide scepticism prevailed. It was now MAN not God that filled the canvas. Art, literature, and interrupted science were reborn. And these things in themselves were good and necessary. . . . Activity of the mind was completed by practical activity. The modern world was born. Men reached out, expanded, explored, travelled—and *exploited*. Man was capable of everything. Humanism was entirely sufficient. A circle was drawn round this world, and within it man enclosed himself. Urged by the new humanism, many became inhuman. The marvellous exploits of that time must not blind us to the fact that the conquest of the world meant enslavement for the peoples who were conquered. Knowledge was not put to the service of coloured and distant peoples. It became, often enough, an instrument of greed. An image of Christ or one of the saints might be at the prow of a ship, in which hardened men sailed with murder in their souls. . . .

The Reformation of the sixteenth century attacked the world from another angle. If the Renaissance freed man's mind, the Reformation

freed his soul. He had liberty of access to God. Both movements proceeded side by side. Sometimes their principles overlapped. There were notable Christians who accepted the new learning and the new religious freedom. They saw nothing incongruous in this. They knew Christ and rejoiced in His liberty. Having found Him who is the Truth, the whole realm of lower truth was also theirs. Others refused the new learning, and stood aloof. To them God was all, and man nothing, with his wisdom. (That, of course, remains in part true of our own time.) But gradually the two were separated. For vast numbers life was loosened from all religious direction. Religion might be retained for certain emotional uses, but it had its limits, and on no account must it intrude upon other domains. 'Religion is religion, and business is business.' Commercial life was undertaken mainly for profits, and not for human service. Political life became infected with the idea of power. The main good of the *πολις* was obscured. Intellectual life played with abstractions. Men could think as they liked and speak as they liked. The idea of a supreme authority disappeared.

The pace quickened, the gulf widened, until, when the Enlightenment reached its zenith in the seventeenth century, Man openly wounded men. Colonial conquests were undertaken mainly for gain. A little earlier Hawkins could rejoice in the slave traffic. While prayers were recited in the cabin, negroes, forcibly dragged from their African homes, were dying in the hold. We have forgotten the horrible story of that period. The African world has not forgotten. The East India Company fought those who wished to educate the Indian native, 'they were only cattle, for the service of the white man.' That same company resisted William Carey's entry into India as a missionary; to evangelize these people would be to spoil them as hewers of wood and drawers of water. A member of Parliament could unblushingly tell the House that men like Carey were 'dangerous fanatics.' In Britain the intelligentsia were largely Rationalists and humanists, but they never lifted a finger to ease the burden of the poor, whom they left in utter ignorance and sunk in animalism. Down to the first third of the nine-

teenth century there was steady resistance on the part of the powers that be to the education of the people. And it took Shaftesbury forty years to obtain anything like justice for the workers in Britain. To that one man, said Lord Salisbury at the time of Shaftesbury's death, we owe most of the recent reforms in which working people rejoice.

Why the recital of this story? *Because it is the background of the conflict which has now burst upon the world.* We shall entirely miss the significance of what happened in 1914-1918 and what is happening to-day, and we shall be unable to visualize and to prepare for a different and better future, unless we keep in mind the facts we have so briefly, and so imperfectly sketched. It is cheaper and easier to select this or that man as a scapegoat, and gather upon his head our anger, than to trace the course of events which have culminated in Bolshevism, Nazi-ism, and Fascism. Evils have a way of gathering themselves into a dangerous point, as does impure blood into boils, tumours, and carbuncles. The evil man, who seduces and destroys an entire people, is the menacing focal point of evils which men, as a whole, have created. The destruction of the evil man is of little avail if the evils which produced him remain uncured. The crisis of 1914-18 was a sufficient warning to the world. But its causes were never attacked. Men still clung to their old 'wisdom,' and built their fabric upon it. Now that wisdom is in shreds. It has revealed itself as incredible folly.

It is only as we trace the long road carefully, that we can see the entire process. In the Middle Ages, one of the cruellest tortures was that of the crushing chamber. The victim was placed in a pleasant room where he might read and write. Excellent food was pushed through his door each day. Gradually he noticed that the chamber became smaller. The final torture came when, at length, its iron sides closed in upon him and crushed him to death. The horror of it all was, that he saw his fate, but was unable to escape it. Has not man in his wisdom built himself a chamber analogous to that? He was promised freedom on condition that he renounced the only religion which alone could liberate him. He could free

himself without reference to any Divinity or commanding Moral Law. He believed the story that he had come from the jungle. He would not believe that he was made in the likeness and image of God. And he has been squeezed back into the jungle. His wisdom of invention has turned him into a robot. His wisdom of diplomacy has ended in wars. His wisdom of Nationalisms has separated nation from nation. He was promised happiness, and as Thomas Masaryk has shown, in his *Modern Man and Religion*, suicide developed, until in some places it has become epidemic, and may be described, as he describes it, as 'suicidism.' The wisdom of man is aghast at its own performances. . . . But what of religion during this period? And in particular, what of Christianity? We have become so accustomed to the parrot cry, 'Christianity has failed,' or 'the Church has failed,' that repetition has made many believers nervous. It would be fatal to pretend that Christianity as presented to men in institutions and in many lives, represents the mind of Christ. But the more decent kind of sceptic has always distinguished between Christianity as truth, and Christianity as practised. Mr. Bernard Shaw can say that Christianity may save the world, but it must be really believed and truly lived. There is no need to pursue this line here. What concerns us in this study is the attempted disintegration of the living faith by various attempts at human wisdom divorced from that faith. There is, for example, the acid of respectability, so characteristic (in England at least) of the Victorian era. As a rebound from the fashion of the eighteenth century, which was frankly contemptuous of religion, there entered the new fashion of patronizing it. It was 'the thing—the correct thing,' to attend church (especially the State church). 'No gentleman abstained,' though many gentlemen were very rude during the sermon. The fashion passed when Edward VII. came to the throne. It then became 'the thing' to omit church, and take to the golf course instead. For the really devout, the Oxford Revival gave to the Church and the sacraments something of reality. Then the humanist reappeared to replace the vulgar kind of secularist who has disgusted people.

Ethical societies sprang up. Religion was equated with geniality, social endeavours, kindness, tolerance. This world was all, the only religion consisted in making it a better place to live in. Life was one thing, religion quite another, an opinion to be held, or not held, at will. Many of these humanists were sincere, high-minded men, who however, forgot that their humanism had been conceived in an atmosphere which, despite man's fogs, Christ had created. And their humanism repeated the folly of the Greeks: it was too aristocratic, too restricted. It had no gospel of redemption for the common man. It accepted the social standards of its class. To it anything like a 'Salvation Army,' was 'Corybantic' (to use Huxley's jibe). At the heart of it, humanism was sterile. Lofty in thought, it was impotent in practice. On the very eve of August 1914 the most famous Rationalist-humanist of his day wrote confidently, 'Christianity has no future—its day is over. For salvation we must look to science and culture.' . . . Yet such humanists as Julian Huxley and C. E. M. Joad want 'religion without God.' They must have prayer. The *mystique* within them must be fed. And now, under our eyes, 'humanism' is in ruins. The breakdown of human wisdom, divorced from God, is complete. Red Mars is laughing at it. Sensitive human beings are disenchanted and alarmed.

What is wrong? It can be stated in a word—Masaryk's word: '*Man has lost his balance because he has lost his spiritual centre. He has lost the one religion which unifies life.*' The more that sentence is pondered, the more clearly its truth appears. When the nervous centre of our physical life is disturbed, we become unbalanced, irritable, see things out of perspective, and misinterpret events. When the psychic centre is deranged, we are open to all kinds of delusions and aberrations. In the cosmos, all order depends upon the parts remaining in obedient harmony with their centre. If it were possible for a planet voluntarily to detach itself from its sun, there could be only one fate awaiting it. The principle is rigorous everywhere. *Man qua Man*, and all men within the One Man, have their true centre in God. They have the power,

by reason of their freedom, to remain in harmony with that Centre, or to detach themselves from it, and become their own centre, revolving around themselves. As mere creatures they cannot escape God, in whom they live, move, and have their being, but as moral beings, they can omit God from their lives, and create their own laws which they deem to be wisdom. And if this is not what they have done, then what *is* the cause of the world's confusion? Either the will of God is the law of man's life, or he is left to will for himself as best he may. But he cannot find within humanity ONE Will, which constitutes his centre, and unifies his life. He is confronted with numerous wills which are engaged in perpetual strife, making a common brotherhood impossible, and inevitably leading to wars. Each nation does what is right in its own eyes. The humanist forgets all this, yet he blandly idealizes 'humanity,' in the abstract, and takes no account of his utter dependence upon God for every breath he draws, and no account of the sin, the pride, and the greed of the man, to whose real nature he is blind. He is in love with a phantom, while the reality is loading its guns. It is this suave independence of God, this pathetic belief in the all-sufficiency of man, this imprisonment of the soul in a small material planet, with its consequent *myope* and vanity, that is largely responsible for the present state of the world. Surely Masaryk is right in his contention, that man has lost his spiritual centre, and with it, the one power which alone unifies his life. Hence the disintegration which confronts us. The words of St. Paul remain true for our time; wisdom, divorced from its eternal

source, has turned in upon itself, and stands revealed as folly.

It is to the Church primarily that the Apostle's message comes to-day. For the Church is the one body which lives by the principle of the Divine Wisdom which is also Love—as supreme for the life of man. At the heart of Christianity stands a Cross, the human expression in an inhuman form, of the self-sufficiency which thrusts aside the Kingdom of God as exacting and inconvenient, in favour of a kingdom of earthly power. And that earthly kingdom, of which they were so enamoured and so sure, crumbled in their hands when a more powerful kingdom crushed it out of existence. The event of A.D. 70 stands out in history as Judah's folly; and the Cross, erected to witness to the 'folly' of Christ, has become the eternal symbol of the Divine Wisdom as redemption. The Church has always conquered 'in this sign'—whenever it has surrendered to the wisdom of the world, it has taken the way to weakness and folly. Christianity lives by the supernatural. It fades and flags when it tries to live by anything lower.

Sine tuo numine  
Nihil est in homine.

Is not our supreme need, in this mad hour, to return to our *Veni Creator*, and sing it with the soul, and with an uttermost surrender to God? The intellectual battle for the faith has been fought and won. The battle for the soul of man is now at its height. A Church living by the Divine Wisdom alone can win *that*. The wise of the world who thought to win it have lost the war. If they do not know it, the rest of mankind does.

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## In the Study.

### *Virginibus Puerisque.*

The Harbour.

BY THE REVEREND STUART ROBERTSON, M.A.,  
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'Their desired haven.'—Ps 107<sup>30</sup>.

A LITTLE fishing village. It might be anywhere on the east coast of Scotland, or the coasts of

Cornwall or Devon. I know exactly where it is, but I am not going to tell. Perhaps somebody may recognize it from the description.

It is a gap in a bold and rocky coast, the only gap for miles. On either side of it, cliffs rise from the sea, impregnable, inhospitable, here and there thrusting out from their base reefs of cruel rocks that show at low tide like the teeth of some extinct