

CHRISTIAN AND PAGAN

By ROSEMARY HAUGHTON

AN ARGUMENT rumbles on continuously, occasionally erupting into heated exchanges in newspapers and reviews, about whether christianity has definitely given its shape to the modern moral outlook, and whether, if it has, its influence has been beneficial or the reverse. The argument is never likely to produce anything but dust and ill-feeling, because it is normally conducted without any attempt to distinguish between what can be discerned as distinctively christian in any circumstances (if anything can be so distinguished) and what were in practice christian moral attitudes as these took shape in the cultural conditions in which christianity actually developed.

The most obvious instance, and the one most usually quoted, is the strong influence of christian sexual attitudes on all european (and later american) moral preconceptions, a state of affairs in which the very word 'morals' could come to refer to sexual behaviour only. There is no doubt that this attitude did stem from christian teaching, and was re-inforced in every possible way by the churches, for centuries. A modern christian would probably say that the heavy emphasis on sexual sin as *the* sin was not an inherently christian idea, since there is no trace of it in the New Testament, but that it crept in from other, probably gnostic, sources. The humanist may say with some justification that this is beside the point, even if true (St Paul is usually dragged in at this point to prove that christianity was always anti-sex and anti-human) because what matters is the actual fact of christian anti-sexual obsessions and their evil effects on western culture. At which point the question arises, did christianity shape european moral attitudes, or did the cultural pressures in Europe of the first christian millennium shape christian moral attitudes? There really is no possibility of deciding this question on the historical evidence, since the threads are so interwoven that the complete pattern, though fantastically complex, is really one web, and the colour of individual threads can no longer be traced through the overall design.

But this web is the fabric of western culture, and its pattern is increasingly discernible in the newer development of cultures whose

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origins are totally different. This is so even when the influence of the west is consciously despised and rejected. The process is similar to that by which the mediaeval Church rejected catharism, yet in its spirituality and moral attitudes came to be in many respects similar to the heretics. Likewise modern humanists reject christianity, but try to prove how unnecessary it is by appropriating, and trying to excel in, attitudes which have been held to be christian, such as care for the poor and needy, and an enthusiasm for peace, justice and brotherhood. In just this way asian and african cultures reflect the influence of western cultural attitudes whose origin they denounce. It is easy to exaggerate this tendency, and it may be only a temporary phenomenon in any case, but it is a fact that for the time being the governments of most of the countries of the world claim at least nominally to operate according to certain moral values which christians would regard as recognizably rooted in their own religion and its moral teaching – such things as respect for the rights of each citizen, however poor, for ‘impartial’ justice, for a just wage, for treaties and international obligations, and so on. No government likes to be accused of inhumane, oppressive or treacherous behaviour, and most will go to great lengths and expense to contradict or suppress evidence of such things, even when they have no intention whatever of abandoning the practices that lead to the accusations, and which they depend on for their very existence. The vast propaganda expenditure of the south african government in its attempts to convince the world of its amiable intentions towards and christian concern for its negro citizens, is only one example out of many that spring to mind.

If hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue, then this lip-service to the equality and honourable status of all human beings, to honesty in business and international affairs, and to the rights of the poor and unprivileged, is the strongest possible evidence of the way in which these values are accepted in principle over most of the world, even if the practice very seldom bears any relation to them. And christians have little right to be cynical about this disparity, since the yawning gap between principle and practice among people bearing the christian name has been one of the most obvious marks of christianity as an historical fact through the centuries. Of this fact, we may justly say that it is better to have good principles and fail to live up to them than to have bad and inhuman principles. This can also be said of the political principles at present operating over a large part of the globe.

This creates a totally new situation for christianity in relation to the 'pagan' world. The early Church was a tiny minority, and since it awaited the return of the Lord within a short time it did not expect to be anything else. Efforts to convert as many as possible were ceaseless, but the relation of christian to pagan was limited to these attempts to bring about individual conversions, and to ensuring that pagan neighbours had a reasonably good 'image' of the christian community, because this made further conversion more likely but also ensured a degree of tranquillity for the churches which, although constantly prepared for persecution, saw no sense in provoking it. It was only later that a supreme value was explicitly given to martyrdom, not only because (since the Lord's return was delayed) this was a sure and certain road to glory, but because of its value as witness to the truth, a very effective form of preaching. This shows already a changed attitude, and it developed in the early middle ages into the attitude summed up in the word 'Christendom'. The *normal* thing was to be christian. There *were* some pagans in the vague fringe regions of the known world, and some fervent men and women could always be found who would run considerable risks in the attempt to convert them, and save them from their almost certain fate in hellfire. Even at this time, people who actually had dealings with non-christians expressed doubts about the total depravity of all the un-baptized. The more thoughtful of those who went on crusades, encountering the rich culture and comparatively civilized *mores* of many saracens, and witnessing the degraded and brutal behaviour of many crusaders, said openly that God was not as partisan as the official line maintained.

But it was the discovery of the new world, and the expansion of normal trade with distant areas, that finally made it virtually impossible to believe either that all those millions could be damned through simple ignorance of Christ, or that it was at all likely, in the foreseeable future, that they would all be converted. The zeal that sent Francis Xavier scuttling across the world and gave such punch to his preaching evaporated gently, though the change took three centuries, and was evident at first either among the more sensitive who were actually in contact with pagans, or among those who were not convinced of the value of christianity in any case. The double influence of the 'enlightenment' and of an honest appraisal of the spiritual worth of actual 'pagans' and their beliefs, gradually altered the climate of christian feeling, though the official attitude remained unchanged even into this century, and was accepted by

those most closely integrated into the official system. So side by side with the weakening official doctrine, a new and more comfortable notion gradually arose and spread, according to which the convinced christians, in a world that was mostly 'pagan' either by its original culture, or by defection into unbelief, could provide an influence for good, an example to those who had eyes to see the value of truth, compassion, domestic fidelity, self-sacrifice and so on, and in this way be a witness to the reality of the christian revelation. This interpretation of what it meant for the Church to be a leaven in the heavy lump of a sinful and dissolute world worked quite well from the early nineteenth century onwards, and it was a realistic one in the circumstances.

The trouble now is that the circumstances have changed. In a sense, and to a real (almost a measurable) extent, the lump *has* been leavened. It may not be the best bread, but the yeast is visibly working, and it is working in a way which makes it clear that the power at work is a fundamental *human* drive towards a better world for human beings. This drive may sometimes have grown up in a culture bearing a christian label, or learned from one. It may even bear a christian label itself. But in most cases it does not acknowledge any debt to christianity and is often certain that christianity is a bar to freedom and true human progress.

It should not surprise christians (though it often does) that the values now more or less accepted as axiomatic for human contentment and progress are ones which christians once regarded as their prerogative. Fickle, greedy, cruel and self-deceiving as they are, human communities are capable of eventually discovering the overriding rightness of certain principles which christians know through their own religion, and of doing so without noticeable assistance from any direct christian influence. This is something we might expect if indeed the Spirit is at work in the whole world, without as well as within the christian groups, to form mankind towards its future in Christ. But whether we believe this, and accept that the situation is basically good, or whether one takes it to be the proof that mankind has outgrown the need for christianity (or any other religion) as a prop for moral values, it does seem as if christians have worked themselves out of a job. The acknowledgement of the Spirit's influence in any religion or without one may fit the facts, and may be very comforting, but it leads inevitably to questions about whether it is worthwhile to be a christian at all.

What creative relationships can christians have with the pagan

world if God is manifestly at work in ways and in places not recognizably christian? The answer that begins to emerge results from the realization of the fact that christian teaching is not only about christians. The christian revelation is a revelation about the nature and destiny of *man*, and about his need for and communion with God. Christians are in a position to know (if they want to) how human nature works, and what it is capable of as the Spirit works to transform it. Having this knowledge (not just information), they are in a position to co-operate with the work of transformation more effectively and completely, but the work goes on in any case.

All creation, not just the christian bit, groans together in labour to bring forth the sons of God. And that metaphor of St Paul's is helpful in an unexpected way in indicating the kind of role the christian can play in relation to his pagan neighbours who, equally with himself, are involved in the world's travail. It is an insight which is particularly relevant in the field of the christian's moral concern, which is the place where christians feel most challenged and most uneasy, in the face of claims that their traditional standards are restrictive, anti-human or just plain out-dated. One of the greatest medical advances in recent years has not involved spectacular surgery or 'miracle' drugs, but the discovery that even highly civilized women could bear children with little or no pain if they were taught to understand the processes of labour and trained to co-operate with them. The baby will be born, somehow, whatever happens. Even the ignorant, frightened woman, her head full of superstitions and tales of disastrous births, will bring a child into the world eventually. But she may slow down labour, and by conforming to ill-founded beliefs may even damage herself and the child. Bad management of labour can, after all, lead to the death of mother or child or both. On the other hand, the woman who understands what is happening, and co-operates fully, does not waste energy or hinder the progress of labour through tension produced by fear and ignorance. She is not merely passive, she takes an enthusiastic and active part in bringing the baby into the world, is fully aware of what she is doing, and experiences great joy in doing it. This is very much a spiritual experience, requiring the courage to commit oneself and go on doing so in spite of waves of panic and a desire to run away. In a real sense it requires faith, and it is this that makes St Paul's metaphor so clearly relevant, together with the fact that the culmination of all this training, effort, patience, courage and self-control is an experience of spiritual

illumination and joy which can only be compared to some degree of mystical experience.

All creation is in labour, but the christian community knows what is going on. The ignorance of the rest of the world varies in degree from merely faulty information about the process, with the consequent failure to co-operate fully and a certain passivity and fear, through an angry and desperate attempt to escape the situation or deny its existence, to something similar to the utter ignorance of a girl who, through low intelligence or through emotional isolation and muddle, does not even know that what is happening is the process of birth.

To put it very simply, in terms of this metaphor, the christian community knows that the world's labour certainly will bring forth Christ. And the christian community is the only one that does know this. And it may be possible to think of the christian's task in relation to the 'pagan' world in terms of this hope, which lays on the christian community two separate but related tasks. One is to do with morality, the other – more obviously – with an eschatological consciousness and witness.

If my assessment of the community's role makes sense, the christian work in the field of morality must be to maintain through thick and thin the notion that the human hope depends on the right understanding of human nature, and out of this a right use of it. We can freely admit that we may be wrong about what precisely is a wrong use, as we have been in the past, but that does not undermine the conviction that there is a right and wrong way, in the sense that the right understanding and use of man will lead him forward into a real human future, while a wrong understanding, resulting in a wrong use, will lead him into destruction, or into a future which is sub-human: as indeed scientists, science-fiction writers, philosophers, poets, doctors and the rest keep telling us. The 'leaven' of christian morality has been effective in helping to create a situation where the rights of conscience are at least theoretically respected at the highest levels of government and of international consultation; but this very emphasis on conscience as the arbiter, and on a man's right to do as his conscience dictates without suffering penalties (unless his conscience is clearly disordered to the extent of threatening the well-being of others), makes it difficult for many people to realize that having a clear conscience is no guarantee that a particular course of conduct is actually right in the sense that it uses human nature in the right way. Just as

a bona-fide mistake in medical diagnosis will be as fatal to the patient as wrong treatment given out of malice, so moral acts done in good conscience may perfectly well be harmful to the proper development of human nature; even if they do not harm the individual in any noticeable degree, they may, when repeated widely, harm the overall development of the race. You don't have to be wicked in order to do harm, you just have to be ignorant. The christian attempts at moral diagnosis have often been very wide of the mark, and may be again; but this does not alter the fact that we ought to seek for a correct one, and that, in principle, it is possible to find one. Because physicians of the past often made use of theories about the working of the body which we now find laughable, we do not suppose that medical research is therefore discredited. Quite the contrary. More careful research is needed and more careful and sophisticated moral study is also needed, with the help of all the relevant modern disciplines, especially in the relatively untouched field of social morality; and christians have an important task here.

The notion of absolutes in morality is unpopular (though no one objects to it in physical science), partly because of a residual body-soul dualism which made it hard to think of human moral acts as *real* in the sense of having actual effects on human life, quite apart from the personal guilt or innocence of the person doing them. But christianity is committed to the doctrine of the resurrection, that is, of a final transformation of the *whole* man, and therefore only christianity is really in a position to perceive with sufficient clarity the direction of moral acts which lead towards that end, and of those which are heading into a dead end, however attractive it may seem and however lofty and humane the motives of those who point the way there.

In the past, efforts to convince the world of christianity's superior moral insight have failed badly, partly because some of them were far from superior, partly because of the arrogant attitudes too often adopted, and partly because this arrogance led to clumsiness in judging and culpable ignorance of non-theological disciplines that might shed light on moral problems. If we wish to carry any weight in forming the moral sense of our non-christian neighbours we can only do so from a position of humility, admitting past and possible future mistakes, but asserting confidently the right basis of research which is the certainty that man has a human future which is worth working for, even if it means looking twice, and sceptically, at some

apparently effective and beneficent method of dealing with present suffering. The hair-raising side-effects of even the peaceful uses of atomic energy, as well as the many other vast problems of pollution arising from discoveries and processes once welcomed as blessings for mankind, should provide a disturbing parallel and help us to avoid being too easily persuaded that what is immediately helpful is necessarily right, in relation to man's overall growth.

This is not a matter of clinging to old moral formulae; it is much more willingness to listen to the spirit in man, to be sensitive to 'currents' of life and to feel where they are leading. This is a task for the whole Church, and the individual's task lies within this overall demand. It can only work at all through appreciation of that related work of christians for the pagan world: the effort to maintain a permanent eschatological consciousness.

It is only because man is whole, and destined to be wholly transformed, that morality means more than having a good conscience and trying to avoid hurting other people. Once the doctrine of the resurrection goes the christian moral claim crumbles, and there remain only little bits of brick to be used in filling in the gaps of pagan moral structures, which have no ultimate hope except what they can make for themselves. And what they seem likely to make for themselves shows no sign of being anyways human, in the long run. The hope of the resurrection, and Christ's resurrection as its first-fruit and guarantee, is the one absolutely unique christian claim for mankind. It may be unacceptable to many, yet it often stirs even those who reject it as an ill-founded bit of wishful thinking. And when it is visibly backed up by the sort of moral standards and behaviour that it demands (when people act like christians, in fact), then it produces, if not conviction, at least a movement of mind towards the possibility that man may, after all, have a final destiny worth working for and suffering for.

The Church has, at different times, had many varied jobs to do: to protect, to civilize, to govern, to heal, to educate, to suffer, to oppose. Each has its use in its proper time and place, and to some extent they all go on all the time. But each age has an overall, wider mission, which also varies. Because of the way things are in a world reacting more closely than ever before, the present Church seems to have been forced back to a mission it had partly forgotten for a long time. It seems that all that christians can now do for the pagan world is to bear witness to the resurrection, in word and in act. Since this is what the Church was founded for, we might do worse.