

CHAPTER IV: THE WORLD INSIDE OUT

The first fallacy about the Catholic Church is the idea that it is a church. I mean that it is a church in the sense in which the Nonconformist newspapers talk about The Churches. I do not intend any expression of contempt about The Churches; nor is it an expression of contempt to say that it would be more convenient to call them the sects. This is true in a much deeper and more sympathetic sense than may at first appear; but to begin with, it is certainly true in a perfectly plain and historical sense, which has nothing to do with sympathy at all. Thus, for instance, I have much more sympathy for small nationalities than I have for small sects. But it is simply a historical fact that the Roman Empire was the Empire and that it was not a small nationality. And it is simply a historical fact that the Roman Church is the Church and is not a sect. Nor is there anything narrow or unreasonable in saying that the Church is the Church. It may be a good thing that the Roman Empire broke up into nations; but it certainly was not one of the nations into which it broke up. And even a person who thinks it fortunate that the Church broke up into sects ought to be able to distinguish between the little things he likes and the big thing he has broken. As a matter of fact, in the case of things so large, so unique and so creative of the culture about them as were the Roman Empire and the Roman Church, it is not controversial but simply correct to confine the one word to the one example. Everybody who originally used the word "Empire" used it of that Empire; everybody who used the word "Ecclesia" used it of that Ecclesia. There may have been similar things in other places, but they could not be called by the same name for the simple reason that they were not named in the same language. We know what we mean by a Roman Emperor; we can if we like talk of a Chinese Emperor, just as we can if we like take a particular sort of a Mandarin and say he is equivalent to a Marquis. But we never can be certain that he is exactly equivalent; for the thing we are thinking about is peculiar to our own history and in that sense stands alone. Now in that, if in no other sense, the Catholic Church stands alone. It does not merely belong to a class of Christian churches. It does not merely belong to a class of human religions. Considered quite coldly and impartially, as by a man from the moon, it is much more *sui generis* than that. It is, if the critic chooses to think so, the ruin of an attempt at a Universal Religion which was bound to fail. But calling the wreckers to break up a ship does not turn the ship into one of its own timbers; and cutting Poland up into three pieces does not make Poland the same as Posen.

But in a much more profound and philosophical sense this notion that the Church is one of the sects is the great fallacy of the whole affair. It is a matter more psychological and more difficult to describe. But it is perhaps the most sensational of the silent upheavals or reversals in the mind that constitute the revolution called conversion. Every man conceives himself as moving about in a cosmos of some kind; and the man of the days of my youth walked about in a kind of vast and airy Crystal Palace in which

there were exhibits set side by side. The cosmos, being made of glass and iron, was partly transparent and partly colourless; anyhow, there was something negative about it; arching over all our heads, a roof as remote as a sky, it seemed to be impartial and impersonal. Our attention was fixed on the exhibits, which were all carefully ticketed and arranged in rows; for it was the age of science. Here stood all the religions in a row - the churches or sects or whatever we called them; and towards the end of the row there was a particularly dingy and dismal one, with a pointed roof half fallen in and pointed windows most broken with stones by passers-by; and we were told that this particular exhibit was the Roman Catholic Church. Some of us were sorry for it and even fancied it had been rather badly used; most of us regarded it as dirty and disreputable; a few of us even pointed out that many details in the ruin were artistically beautiful or architecturally important. But most people preferred to deal at other and more business-like booths; at the Quaker shop of Peace and Plenty or the Salvation Army store where the showman beats the big drum outside. Now conversion consists very largely, on its intellectual side, in the discovery that all that picture of equal creeds inside an indifferent cosmos is quite false. It is not a question of comparing the merits and defects of the Quaker meeting-house set beside the Catholic cathedral. It is the Quaker meeting-house that is inside the Catholic cathedral; it is the Catholic cathedral that covers everything like the vault of the Crystal Palace; and it is when we look up at the vast distant dome covering all the exhibits that we trace the Gothic roof and the pointed windows. In other words, Quakerism is but a temporary form of Quietism which has arisen technically outside the Church as the Quietism of Fenelon appeared technically inside the Church. But both were in themselves temporary and would have, like Fenelon, sooner or later to return to the Church in order to live. The principle of life in all these variations of Protestantism, in so far as it is not a principle of death, consists of what remained in them of Catholic Christendom; and to Catholic Christendom they have always returned to be recharged with vitality. I know that this will sound like a statement to be challenged; but it is true. The return of Catholic ideas to the separated parts of Christendom was often indeed indirect. But though the influence came through many, centrest it always came from one. It came through the Romantic Movement, a glimpse of the mere picturesqueness of mediaevalism; but it is something more than an accident that Romances, like Romance languages, are named after Rome. Or it came through the instinctive reaction of old-fashioned people like Johnson or Scott or Cobbett, wishing to save old elements that had originally been Catholic against a progress that was merely Capitalist. But it led them to denounce that Capitalist progress and become, like Cobbett, practical foes of Protestantism without being practising followers of Catholicism. Or it came from the Pre-Raphaelites or the opening of continental art and culture by Matthew Arnold and Morris and Ruskin and the rest. But examine the actual make-up of the mind of a good Quaker or Congregational minister at this moment, and compare it with the mind of such a dissenter in the Little Bethel

before such culture came. And you will see how much of his health and happiness he owes to Ruskin and what Ruskin owed to Giotto; to Morris and what Morris owed to Chaucer; to fine scholars of his own school like Philip Wicksteed, and what they owe to Dante and St. Thomas. Such a man will still sometimes talk of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages. But the Dark Ages have improved the wallpaper on his wall and the dress on his wife and all the whole dingy and vulgar life which he lived in the days of Stiggins and Brother Tadger. For he also is a Christian and lives only by the life of Christendom.

It is not easy to express this enormous inversion which I have here tried to suggest in the image of a world turned inside out. I mean that the thing which had been stared at as a small something swells out and swallows everything. Christendom is in the literal sense a continent. We come to feel that it contains everything, even the things in revolt against itself. But it is perhaps the most towering intellectual transformation of all and the one that it is hardest to undo even for the sake of argument. It is almost impossible even in imagination to reverse that reversal. Another way of putting it is to say that we have come to regard all these historical figures as characters in Catholic history, even if they are not Catholics. And in a certain sense, the historical as distinct from the theological sense, they never do cease to be Catholic. They are not people who have really created something entirely new, until they actually pass the border of reason and create more or less crazy nightmares. But nightmares do not last; and most of them even now are in various stages of waking up. Protestants are Catholics gone wrong; that is what is really meant by saying they are Christians. Sometimes they have gone very wrong; but not often have they gone right ahead with their own particular wrong. Thus a Calvinist is a Catholic obsessed with the Catholic idea of the sovereignty of God. But when he makes it mean that God wishes particular people to be damned, we may say with all restraint that he has become a rather morbid Catholic. In point of fact he is a diseased Catholic; and the disease left to itself would be death or madness. But, as a matter of fact, the disease did not last long, and is itself now practically dead. But every step he takes back towards humanity is a step back towards Catholicism. Thus a Quaker is a Catholic obsessed with the Catholic idea of gentle simplicity and truth. But when he made it mean that it is a lie to say "you" and an act of idolatry to take off your hat to a lady, it is not too much to say that whether or not he had a hat off, he certainly had a tile loose. But as a matter of fact he himself found it necessary to dispense with the eccentricity (and the hat) and to leave the straight road that would have led him to a lunatic asylum. Only every step he takes back towards common sense is a step back towards Catholicism. In so far as he was right he was a Catholic; and in so far as he was wrong he has not himself been able to remain a Protestant.

To us, therefore, it is henceforth impossible to think of the Quaker as a figure at the beginning of a new Quaker history or the Calvinist as the founder of a new Calvinistic

world. It is quite obvious to us that they are simply characters in our own Catholic history, only characters who caused a great deal of trouble by trying to do something that we could do better and that they did not really do at all. Now some may suppose that this can be maintained of the older sects like Calvinists and Quakers, but cannot be maintained of modern movements like those of Socialists or Spiritualists. But they will be quite wrong. The covering or continental character of the Church applies just as much to modern manias as to the old religious manias; it applies quite as much to Materialists or Spiritualists as to Puritans. In all of them you find that some Catholic dogma is, first, taken for granted; then exaggerated into an error; and then generally reacted against and rejected as an error, bringing the individual in question a few steps back again on the homeward road. And this is almost always the mark of such a heretic; that while he will wildly question any other Catholic dogma, he never dreams of questioning his own favourite Catholic dogma and does not even seem to know that it could be questioned. It never occurred to the Calvinist that anybody might use his liberty to deny or limit the divine omnipotence, or to the Quaker that anyone could question the supremacy of simplicity. That is exactly the situation of the Socialist. Bolshevism and every shade of any such theory of brotherhood is based upon one unfathomably mystical Catholic dogma; the equality of men. The Communists stake everything on the equality of man as the Calvinists staked everything on the omnipotence of God. They ride it to death as the others rode their dogma to death, turning their horse into a nightmare. But it never seems to occur to them that some people do not believe in the Catholic dogma of the mystical equality of men. Yet there are many, even among Christians, who are so heretical as to question it. The Socialists get into a great tangle when they try to apply it; they compromise with their own ideals; they modify their own doctrine; and so find themselves, like the Quakers and the Calvinists, after all their extreme extravagances, a day's march nearer Rome.

In short, the story of these sects is not one of straight lines striking outwards and onwards, though if it were they would all be striking in different directions. It is a pattern of curves continually returning into the continent and common life of their and our civilisation; and the summary of that civilisation and central sanity is the philosophy of the Catholic Church. To us, Spiritualists are men studying the existence of spirits, in a brief and blinding oblivion of the existence of evil spirits. They are, as it were, people just educated enough to have heard of ghosts but not educated enough to have heard of witches.

If the evil spirits succeed in stopping their education and stunting their minds, they may of course go on for ever repeating silly messages from Plato and doggerel verses from Milton. But if they do go a step or two further, instead of marking time on the borderland, their next step will be to learn what the Church could have taught. To us, Christian Scientists are simply people with one idea, which they have never learnt to

balance and combine with all the other ideas. That is why the wealthy business man so often becomes a Christian Scientist. He is not used to ideas and one idea goes to his head, like one glass of wine to a starving man. But the Catholic Church is used to living with ideas and walks among all those very dangerous wild beasts with the poise and the lifted head of a lion-tamer. The Christian Scientist can go on monotonously repeating his one idea and remain a Christian Scientist. But if ever he really goes on to any other ideas, he will be so much the nearer to being a Catholic.

When the convert has once seen the world like that, with one balance of ideas and a number of other ideas that have left it and lost their balance, he does not in fact experience any of the inconveniences that he might reasonably have feared before that silent but stunning revolution. He is not worried by being told that there is something in Spiritualism or something in Christian Science. He knows there is something in everything. But he is moved by the more impressive fact that he finds everything in something. And he is quite sure that if these investigators really are looking for everything, and not merely looking for anything, they will be more and more likely to look for it in the same place. In that sense he is far less worried about them than he was when he thought that one or other of them might be the only person having any sort of communication with the higher mysteries and obviously rather capable of making a mess of it. He is no more likely to be overawed by the fact that Mrs. Eddy achieved spiritual healing or Mr. Home achieved bodily levitation than a fully dressed gentleman in Bond Street would be overawed by the top-hat on the head of a naked savage. A top-hat may be a good hat but it is a bad costume. And a magnetic trick may be a sufficient sensation but it is a very insufficient philosophy. He is no more envious of a Bolshevik for making a revolution than of a beaver for making a dam; for he knows his own civilisation can make things on a pattern not quite so simple or so monotonous. But he believes this of his civilisation and his religion and not merely of himself. There is nothing supercilious about his attitude; because he is well aware that he has only scratched the surface of the spiritual estate that is now open to him. In other words, the convert does not in the least abandon investigation or even adventure. He does not think he knows everything, nor has he lost curiosity about the things he does not know. But experience has taught him that he will find nearly everything somewhere inside that estate and that a very large number of people are finding next to nothing outside it. For the estate is not only a formal garden or an ordered farm; there is plenty of hunting and fishing on it, and, as the phrase goes, very good sport.

For this is one of the very queerest of the common delusions about what happens to the convert. In some muddled way people have confused the natural remarks of converts, about having found moral peace, with some idea of their having found mental rest, in the sense of mental inaction. They might as well say that a man who has completely recovered his health, after an attack of palsy or St. Vitus' dance, signals his healthy

state by sitting absolutely still like a stone. Recovering his health means recovering his power of moving in the right way as distinct from the wrong way; but he will probably move a great deal more than before. To become a Catholic is not to leave off thinking, but to learn how to think. It is so in exactly the same sense in which to recover from palsy is not to leave off moving but to learn how to move. The Catholic convert has for the first time a starting-point for straight and strenuous thinking. He has for the first time a way of testing the truth in any question that he raises. As the world goes, especially at present, it is the other people, the heathen and the heretics, who seem to have every virtue except the power of connected thought. There was indeed a brief period when a small minority did some hard thinking on the heathen or heretical side. It barely lasted from the time of Voltaire to the time of Huxley. It has now entirely disappeared. What is now called free thought is valued, not because it is free thought, but because it is freedom from thought; because it is free thoughtlessness.

Nothing is more amusing to the convert, when his conversion has been complete for some time, than to hear the speculations about when or whether he will repent of the conversion; when he will be sick of it, how long he will stand it, at what stage of his external exasperation he will start up and say he can bear it no more. For all this is founded on that optical illusion about the outside and the inside which I have tried to sketch in this chapter. The outsiders, stand by and see, or think they see, the convert entering with bowed head a sort of small temple which they are convinced is fitted up inside like a prison, if not a torture-chamber. But all they really know about it is that he has passed through a door. They do not know that he has not gone into the inner darkness, but out into the broad daylight. It is he who is, in the beautiful and beatific sense of the word, an outsider. He does not want to go into a larger room, because he does not know of any larger room to go into. He knows of a large number of much smaller rooms, each of which is labelled as being very large; but he is quite sure he would be cramped in any of them. Each of them professes to be a complete cosmos or scheme of all things; but then so does the cosmos of the Clapham Sect or the Clapton Agapemone. Each of them is supposed to be domed with the sky or painted inside with all the stars. But each of these cosmic systems or machines seems to him much smaller and even much simpler than the broad and balanced universe in which he lives. One of them is labelled Agnostic; but he knows by experience that it has not really even the freedom of ignorance. It is a wheel that must always go round without a single jolt of miraculous interruption--a circle that must not be squared by any higher mathematics of mysticism; a machine that must be scoured as clean of all spirits as if it were the avowed machine of materialism. In living in a world with two orders, the supernatural and the natural, the convert feels he is living in a larger world and does not feel any temptation to crawl back into a smaller one. One of them is labelled Theosophical or Buddhistic; but he knows by experience that it is only the same sort of wearisome wheel

used for spiritual things instead of material things. Living in a world where he is free to do anything, even to go to the devil, he does not see why he should tie himself to the wheel of a mere destiny. One of them is labelled Humanitarian; but he knows that such humanitarians have really far less experience of humanity. He knows that they are thinking almost entirely of men as they are at this moment in modern cities, and have nothing like the huge human interest of what began by being preached to legionaries in Palestine and is still being preached to peasants in China. So clear is this perception that I have sometimes put it to myself, as something between a melancholy meditation and a joke. "Where should I go now, if I did leave the Catholic Church?" I certainly would not go to any of those little social sects which only express one idea at a time, because that idea happens to be fashionable at the moment. The best I could hope for would be to wander away into the woods and become, not a Pantheist (for that is also a limitation and a bore) but rather a pagan, in the mood to cry out that some particular mountain peak or flowering fruit tree was sacred and a thing to be worshipped. That at least would be beginning all over again; but it would bring me back to the same problem in the end. If it was reasonable to have a sacred tree it was not unreasonable to have a sacred crucifix; and if the god was to be found on one peak he may as reasonably be found under one spire. To find a new religion is sooner or later to have found one; and why should I have been discontented with the one I had found? Especially, as I said in the first words of this essay, when it is the one old religion which seems capable of remaining new.

I know very well that if I went upon that journey I should either despair or return; and that none of the trees would ever be a substitute for the real sacred tree. Paganism is better than pantheism, for paganism is free to imagine divinities, while pantheism is forced to pretend, in a priggish way, that all things are equally divine. But I should not imagine any divinity that was sufficiently divine. I seem to know that weary return through the woodlands; for I think in some symbolic fashion I have walked that road before. For as I have tried to confess here without excessive egotism, I think I am the sort of man who came to Christ from Pan and Dionysus and not from Luther or Laud; that the conversion I understand is that of the pagan and not the Puritan; and upon that antique conversion is founded the whole world that we know. It is a transformation far more vast and tremendous than anything that has been meant for many years past, at least in England and America, by a sectarian controversy or a doctrinal division. On the height of that ancient empire and that international experience, humanity had a vision. It has not had another; but only quarrels about that one. Paganism was the largest thing in the world and Christianity was larger; and everything else has been comparatively small.