

MANICHEAN CHRISTMAS?

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THE SMELL OF EVERGREEN permeates the house; wires, lights, and candles are taken from storage; everyone is catching the spirit once again amid all the hustle of wreath-making. Christmas is fast approaching. Much effort is being expended on all the material details; there are the cards to all our friends; the holly, mistletoe and gayly colored ribbons, carefully arranged all around the house. Important though these things are, no real Christian misses the pivotal point around which all these material details hang together, from which they derive their only true meaning. For in the Christian home, set in the most prominent place we find a little crib, holding an Infant. This is what Christmas means to the truly Christian family: the birth of Christ our Saviour.

Many centuries ago, in a little insignificant town nestling in the hills of Palestine, this scene depicted by the little crib next to our tree was first enacted. For generations the Chosen People had been awaiting the fulfillment of God's promise to them: the Saviour, the Messiah, who was to lead them to the realization of the Kingdom. The prophets had foretold his coming. And now, although few understood, that which for centuries the Israelites had hoped for had come to pass. In a manner quite unexpected, God had carried out His design.

All this is familiar to the Christian. A mere glance at the crib suffices to bring the entire story of the Nativity back to mind. From the reading he has done and from his own reflection, the story of the Nativity has great significance for the Christian. He has learned the greatness of humility: for God Himself saw fit to enter the world in most humble surroundings. He has understood the paradox of the richness of Poverty. As his thoughts turned to the Virgin Mother, he marvelled at the singular way which God has chosen

to teach us the value of virginity. These and many more truths are brought home to him as he looks upon the crib.

There is yet another truth brought home most forcibly to the Christian as he recalls the birth of Christ. It may sound strange when expressed, but he senses the immense worth of human nature. He sees represented in the crib not merely a human being—he sees God as well. God and man, together! Divinity and humanity, united! God saw it fitting to become a man: He had a mother; He felt the affection in His heart for His family; He felt the cold; He ate and drank; slept and wakened. He was thoroughly human down to the least detail. In later life, He would know the bitter disappointment of a betrayed friendship. He would experience the joy of loving conversation with those close to Him. All these things, all these *human* things, Christ would genuinely feel. The Nativity is the greatest testimony of the profound worth of human nature. Even the angelic nature, so far superior in dignity to human nature, was never united so closely to the Godhead.

It is clear that, were human nature the least bit evil, the Nativity would emerge as an impossibility. God, being all good, could not possibly unite Himself so intimately with anything bearing even a trace of evil. All this might appear to be mere platitude, a truism that no one would seriously question. However, a mere glance at history shows that men actually have denied the goodness of human nature.

THE MANICHEAN DENIAL

While Christianity was struggling for survival in a predominantly pagan world, scarcely a century and a half after the death of Christ, there appeared in the East a new form of Gnosticism which was to plague the world for centuries to come. The moving spirit behind the new movement was a man known as Mani, born about the year 218, not far from present-day Baghdad. The recipient of "visions" early in life, he began to preach his ideas at the age of twenty-four.

Basically, his doctrine consisted in a Dualist interpretation of reality. There is a principle of good and another principle of evil which are in conflict, each endeavoring to gain mastery over the entire universe. The principle of good produced all spiritual things; the principle of evil, on the other hand, brought into existence all material things. Man, being composed of both these elements (i.e. part matter—part spirit), is the victim of a constant warfare. The

good principle is striving to release man from the clutches of the evil one; the evil one is at the same time trying to claim man for his domain. Accordingly, men are thus classified: 1) those who are slaves of the evil one (those enmeshed in a material life). 2) those who remove themselves from these materialities as much as possible and are consequently under the sway of the author of good. The former are called the members of the kingdom of darkness; the latter, the children of light.

The moral code of this sect consists in an austere asceticism. Man must set himself free from the clutches of the evil one. This is accomplished by a rooting out of all materialistic tendencies. The "three seals," one on the mouth, one on the hand, and one on the heart symbolize a total abstention from pleasure. The ascent to perfection is directly proportional to and a result of this rigid renunciation. Marriage is an abomination because it continues the process of generation which provides the evil one with further opportunities for snatching portions of the world of spirit for his domain. The escape from matter being the ultimate expression of perfection, suicide becomes the highest act a man can perform.

INITIAL SUCCESS

In its original form, Manicheism was not a heresy, i.e. it was not a misunderstanding of Christian dogmatic truth. It was not like a cancer which slowly developed within the Christian society, rather it was a force which attacked the Faith from outside. Its greatest success was realized in the countries east of Persia, especially China, Tibet and India. However, this is not to say that Manicheism had no influence whatever on the Christian world. For example, it struck hard at the Christianity of Egypt where the Catholic bishops suffered much at the hands of a Manichean governor.

In the West, North Africa seems to have been their area of greatest influence. We know from the writings of St. Augustine that this sect was very prevalent in the latter part of the fourth century. However, it is significant that this same Augustine wrote nothing concerning Manicheism during the last twenty-five years of his life. From this, it is clear that if the sect was not at this time effectively suppressed, it had nevertheless lost much of its force. If there was any significant spread of the error through what is now known as Europe (especially, France and Italy) no records have survived. Thus, it seems safe to presume that the Christians in this part of the world were little affected by the sect at this time.

RESURGENCE

Not until the early part of the eleventh century did France and Italy become infested with Manichean ideas. Once again the source of trouble was the East. Some Paulicians and Bogomili (offspring of the Manicheans) moved into Central Europe, having been driven out of Bulgaria by the Eastern Emperor. They began to preach their Dualist doctrine and their success was immediate, especially in southern France and northern Italy. At first secretly, then later in the open, great numbers of Christians gave their allegiance to the new ideas, calling themselves "Albigensians." Toulouse became the headquarters of this formal heresy and from here the doctrine threatened to spread throughout all of Christendom.

The danger increased steadily despite the efforts of the Holy See to stamp out the error by sending preachers into the infested areas. The advocates of the false doctrine were men of austere life, whereas those of the "old" religion were men of leisure and luxury. On this basis, the populace drew the conclusion that the new doctrine was the truth. Albigensianism was considered to be Christianity in its purest expression. Innocent III then attempted suppression by violence. Armed bands were sent to prevent the spread of the vicious ideas and ultimately to extirpate what was already firmly entrenched. This had some effect to be sure, but in the final analysis preaching proved to be the one means that effectively destroyed the heresy. Not, however, the preaching of men of luxury, but rather of men who outdid the protagonists of the new doctrine in austerity. The man who gave the inspiration to this form of preaching which provided the final answer to the heresy was St. Dominic de Guzman, the founder of the Dominican Order of Friars Preachers.

MANICHEAN CHRISTMAS?

What did the earlier Manichean Christians and the later Albigensians have to say about the Nativity? They professed to be followers of Christ. But was it not true for the Manichean, as well as for other Christians, that the Nativity involved the union of Divinity and Humanity in the Person of the Infant? Was not the admission of the Nativity tantamount to a recognition of the intrinsic goodness of human nature, at least of that human nature which Christ assumed?

Without entering into an exposition of the Manichean conception of Christology, we can, without hesitation, safely say that this

conception was not the true one. The Christ of the Manichean was definitely not the Christ of true Christian Theology. Instead of accepting the doctrine of the Nativity as the express revelation of God and then proceeding to examine the problem of moral evil in light of this infallible truth, they worked in just the opposite direction. They began with the fact of evil in the world, proceeded to explain this by a system inherited from Eastern mystery religions, and then approached the proposed doctrine of the Nativity, admitting only what was in accord with the presumed theory. On the presumption that all matter, and consequently human nature in its corporal aspect, is basically evil, it became imperative to deny the possibility of an Incarnation in the Catholic sense.

The Nativity as an historical *fact*, they were willing to admit—they (i.e. the “Christian”-Manicheans and later the Albigensians) insisted that they were Christians—followers of the man born in Palestine during the reign of Augustus. But the *meaning* of this historical event was another matter altogether. The reason for the insistence on their own novel interpretation of this event was the *presumed* truth of their explanation (on purely human grounds) of the problem of moral evil in the world.

NATURE AND SIN

There is without question something wrong with human nature. The Catholic, as well as the Manichean, is well-acquainted with this fact. There are deep-rooted tendencies in every man to do things out of harmony with what is accepted by both as the true moral code. Austerity was not the exclusive hallmark of Manicheism. St. Dominic did not censure the austere lives led by the false preachers in Toulouse. He vehemently disagreed with their teachings, but he outdid them in his rigorous manner of life. Indeed, St. Paul's burning words to the Ephesians “. . . that as regards your former manner of life you are to put off the old man, which is being corrupted through its deceptive lusts” convinces us of the truth that there is something radically wrong with our nature. His mandate to “crucify the flesh” points up the need for austerity in the truly Christian life.

Are we then contradicting ourselves? On the one hand, we recognize the fact that there is something basically wrong with human nature, on the other, we insist that human nature is intrinsically good. The contradiction is only imaginary: Human nature is thoroughly good; otherwise the Nativity could not have taken place and God would be deceiving man in persuading him that, in fact, the Second Person of the Trinity became intimately united with flesh.

On the presumption, therefore, that human nature is intrinsically good, let us consider the other horn of the "dilemma" viz., that something *is* wrong with this same human nature. This "something" is, of course, sin.

THE SIN OF ADAM

The very first man God created, Adam, of his own choice sinned. It was not the *nature* of Adam which sinned—rather it was Adam, the *possessor* of this nature, who sinned. Adam deliberately chose to rebel against God by attempting to overthrow the *order* which God had set up in His universe. It was not, as we said, the nature which sinned—for this nature was a part of the order itself. The entire nature, down to its most minute detail was designed by God and included in this design was the capacity of free choice. Humankind was to operate in the universe, according to the plan of God, *freely*.

Along with the myriad types of plants and animals, man formed a part of the magnificent work of the Creator. Man however, unlike the other parts of the material world, was to *co-operate freely* in the realization of his destiny. But this capacity for free co-operation brought with it the capacity to freely refuse to co-operate in the way intended by God. Hence, man stood in a unique and precarious position. The most dignified of all creatures in the material world, he was capable of abusing this dignity and, in fact, Adam did abuse it. But it was not the *dignity* itself which constituted the abuse; it was Adam himself endowed with the dignity, who was guilty of the abuse.

RESULT OF SIN—DESTRUCTION OF ORDER

The rebellion of Adam, his refusal to co-operate with the plan of God in the realization of his destiny, amounted to a rejection of the order intended by God. Adam shattered the harmony which had existed in the whole of creation. The things themselves did not lose their inherent goodness and perfection, but the order which had prevailed was now lost. Adam now looked out on a hostile world; he must now be ever on guard against the onslaughts of nature. The means of subsistence, protection against the elements and predatory beasts were now constant problems. Paradise indeed had become "a vale of tears."

More serious than the disruption of order in the world around him was the anarchy now reigning within Adam himself. Before the sin, he had not experienced movements of anger, concupiscence or

of any other passion, except when he had willed it. And he had never willed it, except when he had seen it right and fitting to do so. He had never desired anything which he could not have had or which it was not right that he should have. There was perfect accord within him and the order and harmony which he saw existing in the world all around him, he saw existing in himself as well.

The upheaval of order which took place inside of Adam did not villify those things which had previously been well-ordered. The movement of anger was not now an evil thing, just as it had not so been before. It was the lack of order found in the movement of anger which made it evil. Pleasures were not now evil—only disordered pleasures were now so. And thus it was throughout all of reality; the things in themselves remained good, as they had always been. The introduction of disorder, which resulted from the deliberate action of Adam, the king of creation, was the only evil, the only thing detested by God.

RESTORATION OF ORDER

It was to restore the pre-existing order in the world, and especially in the nature of man, that the Son of God became man. It was not to remake man into something else. Man would not now be merely spiritual, whereas before he had been both spiritual and material. God did not assume only a human soul; He assumed a body as well. He was a true descendent of Adam in all save the disorder of sin.

We can catch a glimpse of this order which Christ came to restore as we look at the crib next to the Christmas tree. The dumb animals stand by, giving of their warmth to comfort the Infant in the crib—serving the needs of man for which they were intended by their Maker. We are told that the angels hovered about, singing hymns of worship to the Incarnate God—another reflection of the proper order in God's universe. The harmony and beauty which prevail in the scene are given expression by the words of the angelic hymn recorded in the Scriptures, for we read in St. Luke: "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men of good will.'" Peace, order, quiet beauty—is not this truly the spirit of the Nativity?

The black pessimism of Mani has no place here. As we behold the Infant we do not see evil flesh, wicked matter. Rather we bow down in humble adoration before the *sacred* flesh of our Saviour, Who "was made flesh and dwelt amongst us."