A Sermon

Preached
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

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on

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I would feel more confident if I was standing here before you dressed like Arthur Johnson during the thirty years of his chaplaincy, wearing hunting top-boots beneath his surplice and looking, as was said, like 'Vitality incarnate'. He was never in danger, as I fear that I am, of resembling Polonius. 'Caring nothing for dogma, and knowing nothing of theology', *The Times* obituarist wrote of Johnson, 'he … was thus the ideal chaplain for such a society as All Souls'.

Like Johnson, I know nothing of theology. To my regret I have failed, through weakness of will, shallowness of imagination and mistrust of big promises, in sure & unquestioning faith. Christian notions of duty, at which I scoffed when young, however seem increasingly attractive: the belief that there are things which we ought to do, even though they are unpleasant and mar our well-being; the belief that we are required by our Creator to use to the utmost the powers and opportunities that He has given us; the concomitant belief that it is a grave offence against God and humankind to waste time. When I was a VF here I reflected that although most of the Fellows think that they have shed Christian beliefs and practice, in one critical respect they strenuously uphold what Abraham Lincoln called 'the better angels of our nature'. I had never been among a set of people who wasted less time, and cherished every quarter of an hour.

This brought me to consider the personal spiritual histories within this college. We know about the intellectual development of many past Fellows: about their scholarship, their public responsibilities, their individual influence. Yet we impose on them a spiritual deracination that few of them actually felt. They held religious creeds, or at least had religious thoughts, that were vital motive

forces in their working lives, but which embarrassed posterity has immured in an oubliette.

The first married man to be elected (in 1919) as a Prize Fellow, Woodward, liked to quote from a letter of the Jansenist priest Pierre Nicole written in 1695. Nicole described his feeling that he had been born into a church lit abundantly by candles, by lamps and by flaming torches, which God allowed him to see being snuffed or doused, one after another, without any new substitute illuminations being lit. In this way, wrote Nicole, Christian faith grows fainter and murkier, because we do not deserve, and cannot expect, that God should fill the voids which He himself has made.[1] The thought that God is responsible for faithlessness, that the recession of belief is divinely ordained, that spiritual emptiness is purposive to Christianity, was arresting to Woodward, and startles me. Probably the thought should not surprise. In the words of Zaehner (elected in 1952), 'religion is basically irrational: at its worst it is below reason, at its best far above it. It can be studied rationally, and should be and must be, "for reason is God's scale on earth", but it can never be understood by reason alone. Whatever God may be, He is certainly not *only* a rational being: He is a tremendous mystery … He is a scandal and an offence.'

It was Zaehner who outraged the auditors at his inaugural lecture as Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics by denouncing the avowed purpose of his chair –

[1]Il me semble que je suis né dans une église de diverses lampes et de divers flambeaux et que Dieu permet que je les voie éteindre les uns après les autres, sans qu'il paraisse qu'on y en substitue de nouveaux. Ainsi il me semble que l'air s'obscurcit de plus en plus, parce que nous ne méritons pas que Dieu répare les vides qu'il fait lui-même dans son Église.

harmonizing the world's great religions – as, in his word, 'damnable'. He was a Catholic convert whose verdict on the Anglican leaders who presided over the 'dechristianization' of England was that on the church of Laodicea: 'Because thou art lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, therefore will I spue thee out of my mouth.' I am tempted to speak only of Zaehner this morning: the role that, as a former MI6 officer, he ascribed to Stalin in his theology; his persuasion that California hippies were a prelapsarian race of angels; and that Charles Manson was an ancient savage god reincarnate. But the pace and intensity of Zaehner's mind can make one giddy. Instead, as a contribution to the spiritual history of twentieth-century All Souls, I quote only one further passage from his inaugural lecture. 'Christianity,' declared Zaehner, 'has been rejected by the majority of British people because foolish men have either sought to defend its dogmas on purely rational grounds or have undermined their own position by abandoning those dogmas … rather than be thought unfashionable or even "reactionary" – titles of which they might well have been proud – they have progressively abandoned the mysteries of their faith and reduced their religion to a meaningless benevolence.'

Since 1881 every Warden has been a layman. The few Fellows in holy orders elected from the 1870s heard the long, inexorable, withdrawing roar of the Sea of Faith. 'We are all hereticks now,' Henson (elected in 1884) averred as Bishop of Durham in 1926. He meant, I think, that to profess faith in human nature, to trust in material progress, to be in any sense progressive is heretical: better, as psalm 118 says, to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man or princes; and necessary to submit to divine providence if Christianity is not to become a wan form of

meliorism. Lang (elected in 1888) admitted as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1937 that England had 'a largely non-Christian population'. William Temple, Visitor of All Souls from 1942, found Anglicanism's failure almost charming. 'The Church of England', he said, 'has often failed to be completely Christian … but it has never failed to be utterly, completely, provokingly, adorably English.'

The settlement between Church and State remained fundamental to Christian attitudes of many Fellows and to their pride in English exceptionalism. The majority thought that 'corporate religion' was necessary to society, and that its most reasonable expression was found in Anglicanism. Feiling (elected to Fellowship in 1946) wrote a book of political dialogues propounding his version of Toryism. 'Even wrong belief is better for a people than unbelief'; 'faith is the greatest thing in a nation' – these were its first principles. 'There is a point where toleration is a sin; at that breach stands Toryism', Feiling maintained. 'Remove religion as the general background of the popular mind and you leave the main chance, expediency, and the desire to let people have what they want if they shout enough for it: trouble is the essence of religion, but to save trouble the object of modern politics'. The Church of England was for Feiling integral to national greatness: 'unless we believe in ourselves as a chosen people, it is all up with us. I pin my faith on words like Cromwell's, "Who is a God like ours?" or Milton's, "First He revealed Himself to His Englishmen"; that is the spirit we must have'.

Muscular Christianity, as practiced in All Souls, involved not field sports but training in mental athleticism. From the pulpit Bell, elected in 1906, afterwards vicar of a mining parish, urged self-optimisation as a Christian duty.

'People may think they want comfort; what they really want is a chance to be themselves,' he preached. 'You may think you want to be in bed on a cold morning; what you really want to be is the sort of person who can get up and get on with something worth getting on with.' Religious teaching should make Christian lives striving, disciplined and purposive: otherwise, said Bell, 'only one or two in a thousand will remember in a tight corner that they are men and not sheep.'

A morality of hag-ridden guilt and retribution was the basis of the Christian indoctrination of Holloway (elected in 1946). He was the only child of working-class parents living in south-east London in the 1920s. Their sense of the world beyond their front door owed little to religion. Their Day of Judgment came once a week, with a new batch of stories of shame and punishment in the *News of the World*. The birch for bad boys, the Black Maria, hard labour, the broad arrow, penal-servitude-for-life, Dartmoor, and supremely the gallows provided all the mystery and awe they needed. His parents knew by heart the judge's formula as he donned the black cap and pronounced the death sentence. The Holloways venerated the rituals of the hangman's knot behind the left ear, the trap opening, the black flag hoisted over the gaol and the burial in quicklime. Although Holloway's mother was bored by the 'cozifying dilutions of modern Christianity', and disbelieved in an after-life, she was awe-struck by thoughts of Satan. Phrases like 'hell-fire', 'the last trump' and 'the crack of doom' fixed themselves deeply in her mind, and for a time frighteningly in her son's.

By contrast Woodward, although his evangelical Anglican family also believed in the Devil, was as a boy more afraid of Zulus and boa constrictors than of Satan.

He recalled: 'The practical emphasis of our religion was on duty and on acquiescence in the Divine Will. Go-getting, self-assertiveness, exploitation of your neighbour, these things were sins, and, in addition, offences against good manners.' Born in 1890, he said that for his generation of undergraduates at Oxford, 'the chief interests of those who would now be described as "intellectuals" was either in social questions or in religion'. As a young man, he expected to take holy orders and was nickname 'the *Abbé*' by his friends. His religious sense was imbued with the rapturous sentience of unity with the universe known as 'oceanic feelings', and which Woodward himself called 'that rainbow-like, cosmic emotion which is evoked by the beauty of place.' Sitting in a blacked-out Great Western train trundling him from Paddington to Oxford in 1941, he wrote: 'I can see now a cross-road at Shenley, in Hertfordshire, where, on a spring evening in 1905, I understood, suddenly, that I was part of the physical universe, part of the quiet fields and lines of elms at which I was looking. I stayed at this cross-road for a long time, leaning against my bicycle, not knowing why I was content, content for ever and ever, content merely to look at the fields and the trees, and to know – to *know* – that they and I were the same.' As Domestic Bursar from 1924, Woodward was, he said, 'more interested in religion than in anything else, and the basis of my religious experience was still a deep sense of my own identity with the bright universe stretching out from the woods and meadows of southern England to Orion and the great constellations.'

Woodward could not say when in the 1930s he ceased to call himself a Christian. Thereafter, when he attended this chapel on set services of commemoration, he felt as he did when, in a Moslem country, he listened to devout men

reciting the Koran: he did not doubt the rightness of such acts of piety; but he felt remote from personal religion. Even after his loss of faith, the early chapters of St Luke – one of which we heard this morning – always made him believe, he wrote, that 'if things had happened so, there would be no unsolved secret to elude mankind century after century. I do not know [he continued] any ceremony on earth more profound, more humble, and more magnificent in hope than the Christian mass.'

Woodward wrote two spiritual memoirs, seldom read now, and yet both works of rare delicacy and inspiriting thought. 'I cannot envisage a society of human beings without religion, and yet possessing an art, a literature, and a way of life not entirely and fundamentally futile. I cannot believe that for millions of years hence men will endure this sense of unsatisfied awareness which is the fate of my own generation'. He found 'the literature of modern materialism … unconvincing often to the point of silliness' and even 'ignoble'. As a historian, he doubted that secular materialism would prevail for more than a century or two. Woodward served as a soldier in the Great War, held the chair of international relations and gave the earliest public lecture in this university on the atomic bomb. 'In my lifetime' – he wrote in words that strike hard towards the history of worship in this chapel – 'In my lifetime I have been witness of enough destruction, but I can use no other term to describe the loss of the accumulated treasures of Christian piety. It seems to me a delusion to suggest that, if people cease to believe that God is present in the consecrated Host, they can listen equally well to the words and setting of the mass; that there need be no difference between a Christian and a non-Christian attitude towards the sacrifice on Calvary. There is a whole world of

difference, just as there is a world of difference between taking part in a battle and reading a chapter of military history. The destruction is there; the loss is real, and not to be explained away in comfortable terms.'