

MR. CROWLEY AND THE CREEDS
AND
THE CREED OF MR. CHESTERTON
WITH A POSTSCRIPT
ENTITLED
A CHILD OF EPHRAIM*
CHESTERTON'S COLOSSAL COLLAPSE

* The Children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle.

MR. CROWLEY AND THE CREEDS

(BY G. K. CHESTERTON)

Mr. Aleister Crowley publishes a work, "The Sword of Song: Called by Christians 'The Book of the Beast,' " and called, I am ashamed to say, "Ye Sword of Song" on the cover, by some singularly uneducated man. Mr. Aleister Crowley has always been, in my opinion, a good poet; his "Soul of Osiris," written during an Egyptian mood, was better poetry than this Browningsque rhapsody in a Buddhist mood; but this also, though very affected, is very interesting. But the main fact about it is that it is the expression of a man who has really found Buddhism more satisfactory than Christianity.

Mr. Crowley begins his poem, I believe, with an earnest intent to explain the beauty of the Buddhist philosophy; he knows a great deal about it; he believes in it. But as he went on writing one thing became stronger and stronger in his soul—the living hatred of Christianity. Before he has finished he has descended to the babyish "difficulties" of the Hall of Science—things about "the plain words of your sacred books," things about "the panacea of belief"—things, in short, at which any philosophical Hindoo would roll about with laughter. Does Mr. Crowley suppose that Buddhists do not feel the poetical nature of the books of a religion? Does he suppose that they do not realise the immense importance of believing the truth? But Mr. Crowley has got something into his soul stronger even than the beautiful passion of the man who believes in Buddhism; he has the passion of the man who does not believe in Christianity. He adds one more testimony to the endless series of testimonies to the fascination and vitality of the faith. For some mysterious reason no man can contrive to be agnostic about Christianity. He always tries to prove something about it—that it is unphilosophical or immoral or disastrous—which is not true. He can never say simply that it does not convince him—which is true.

A casual carpenter wandered about a string of villages and suddenly a horde of rich men and sceptics and Sadducees and respectable persons rushed at him and nailed him up like vermin ; then people saw that he was a god. He had proved that he was not a common man, for he was murdered. And ever since his creed has proved that it is not a common hypothesis, for it is hated.

Next week I hope to make a fuller study of Mr. Crowley's interpretation of Buddhism, for I have not room for it in this column today. Suffice it for the moment to say that if this be indeed a true interpretation of the creed, as it is certainly a capable one, I need go no further than its pages for examples of how a change of abstract belief might break a civilisation to pieces. Under the influence of this book earnest modern philosophers may, I think, begin to perceive the outlines of two vast and mystical philosophies, which if they were subtly and slowly worked out in two continents through many centuries, might possibly, under special circumstances, make the East and West almost as different as they really are.

THE CREED OF MR. CHESTERTON

(BY ALEISTER CROWLEY)

When a battle is all but lost and won, the victor is sometimes aware of a brilliancy and dash in the last forlorn hope which was lacking in those initial manœuvres which decided the fortune of the day.

Hence comes it that Our Reviewer's apology for Christianity compares so favourably with the methods of ponderous blunder on which people like Paley and Gladstone have relied. But alas ! the very vivacity of the attack may leave the column without that support which might enable it, if checked, to retire in good order ; and it is with true pity for a gallant opponent—who would be wiser to surrender—that I find myself compelled to despatch half a squadron (no more !) to take him in flank.

Our Author's main argument for the Christian religion is that it is hated. To bring me as a witness to this colossal enthymeme, he has the sublime courage to state that my "Sword of Song" begins with an effort to expound Buddhism, but that my hatred of Christianity overcame me as I went on, and

that I end up literally raving. My book is possibly difficult in many ways, but only Mr. Chesterton would have tried to understand it by reading it backward.

Repartee apart, it is surely an ascertainable fact that while the first 29 pages are almost exclusively occupied with an attack on Christianity as bitter and violent as I can make it, the remaining 161 are composed of (a) an attack on materialism, (b) an essay in metaphysics opposing advaitism, (c) an attempt to demonstrate the close analogy between the canonical Buddhist doctrine and that of modern Agnostics. None of these deal with Christianity at all, save for a chance and casual word.

I look forward with pleasure to a new History of England, in which it will be pointed out how the warlike enthusiasm aroused by the Tibetan expedition led to the disastrous plunge into the Boer War; disastrous because he separation of the Transvaal which resulted therefrom left us so weak that we fell an easy prey to William the Conqueror. Our Novelist should really make a strong effort to materialise his creation in “The Napoleon of Notting Hill” of the gentlemen weeping by the graves of their descendents.

Any sound philosophy must be first destructive of previous error, then constructive by harmonising truths into Truth.

Nor can the human mind rest content with negation; I honour him rather whose early emotion is hatred of Christianity, bred of compulsion to it, but who subdues that negative passion and forces his way to a positive creed, were it but the cult of Kali or Priapus.

Here, indeed, modern Agnostics are at fault. They sensibly enough reject error; but they are over-proud of their lofty attitude, and, letting slip the real problems of life, busy themselves with side-issues, or try to satisfy the spiritual part of the brain (which needs food like any other part) with the husks of hate.

How few among us can reach the supreme sanity of Dr. Henry Maudsley in such a book as “Life in Mind and Conduct”!

Hence I regard Agnosticism as little more than a basis of new research into spiritual facts, to be conducted by the methods won for us by men of science. I would define myself as an agnostic with a future.

But to the enthymeme itself. A word is enough to expose it.

Other things have been hated before and since Christ lived—if he lived. Slavery was hated. A million men died about it, and it was cast out of everywhere but the hearts of men. Euripides hated Greek religion, and he killed the form thereof. Does Our Logician argue from these facts the vitality of slavery or Delphi? Yes, perhaps, when Simon Legree and the Pythoness were

actually making money, but to argue their eternal truth, or even their value at that time, is a further and false step. Does the fact that a cobra is alive prove it to be innocuous?

With the reported murder of Jesus of Nazareth I am not concerned; but Vespasian's "Ut puto Deus fio" is commonly thought to have been meant as a jest.

Our Romanticist's unique and magnificent dramatisation of the war between the sceptic or lover of truth, and the religious man or lover of life, may be well quoted against me. Though Vespasian did jest, though Christ's "It is finished" were subjectively but the cry of his physical weakness, like Burton's "I am a dead man," it is no less true that millions have regarded it as indeed a cry of triumph. That is so, subjectively, for them, but no more, and the one fact does not alter the other.

Surely Our Fid. Def. will find little support in this claim on behalf of death. We all die; it was the Resurrection and Ascension which stamped Christ as God. Our Philosopher will, I think, fight shy of these events. The two thieves were "nailed up like vermin" on either side of Christ by precisely the same people; are they also gods? To found a religion on the fact of death, murder though it were, is hardly more than African fetichism. Does death prove more than life? Will Mr. Chesterton never be happy until he is hanged?

These then are the rear-guard actions of his retiring and beaten army.

The army itself is pretty well out of sight. There is a puff of artillery from afar to the effect that "no man can contrive to be agnostic about Christianity." This is very blank cartridge. Who is agnostic about the shape of the earth? Who prides himself upon a profound reserve about the colour of a blue pig, or hesitates to maintain that grass is green? Unless under the reservation that both subject and predicate are Unknowable in their essence, and that the copula of identity is but a convention—a form of Agnosticism which after all means nothing in this connection, for the terms of the criticism require the same reservation.

Our Tamburlaine's¹ subsequent remark that the poor infidel (failing in his desperate attempt to be agnostic) "tries to prove something untrue" is a *petitio principii* which would be a blunder in a schoolboy; but in a man of Our Dialectician's intelligence can only be impudence.

The main army, as I said, is out of sight. There is, however, a cloud of

I. Not to confuse with Tambourine or alter into Tamburlesque.

dust on the horizon which may mark its position. “Does Mr. Crowley suppose that the Buddhists do not feel the poetical nature of the books of religion?” I take this to mean: “You have no business to take the Bible literally!”

I have dealt with this contention at some length in the “Sword of Song” itself (Ascension Day, lines 216 to 247): but here I will simply observe that a poem which authorises the Archbishop of Canterbury to convey Dr. Clifford’s pet trowels, and makes possible the Gilbertian (in the old sense of pertaining to W. S. Gilbert) position of the Free Kirk to-day, is a poem which had better be burnt, as the most sensible man of his time proposed to do with Homer, or at least left to the collector, as I believe is the case with the publications of the late Isidore Liseux. Immoral is indeed no word for it. It is as criminal as the riddle in “Pericles.”

That our Pantosympatheticist is himself an Agnostic does not excuse him. True, if every one thought as he does there would be no formal religion in the world, but only that individual communion of the consciousness with its self-consciousness which constitutes genuine religion, and should never inflame passion or inspire intolerance, since the non-Ego lies beyond its province.

But he knows as well as I do that there are thousands in this country who would gladly see him writhing in eternal torture — that physiological impossibility — for his word “a casual carpenter,” albeit he wrote it in reverence. That is the kind of Christian I would hang. The Christian who can write as Our Champion of Christendom does about his faith is innocuous and pleasant, though in my heart I am compelled to class him with the bloodless desperadoes of the “Order of the White Rose” and the “moutons enragés” that preach revolution in Hyde Park.

When he says that he will trace “the outlines of two vast and mystical philosophies which if they were subtly and slowly worked out, etc., etc.,” he is simply thrown away on Nonconformity; and I trust I do not go too far, as the humblest member of the Rationalist Press Association, when I suggest that that diabolical body would be delighted to bring out a sixpenny edition of his book. I am not fighting pious opinions. But there are perfectly definite acts which encroach upon the freedom of the individual: indefensible in themselves, they seek apology in the Bible, which is now to be smuggled through as a “poem.” If I may borrow my adversary’s favourite missile, a poem in this sense is “unhistorical nonsense”.

We should, perhaps, fail to appreciate the beauty of the Tantras if the Government (on their authority) enforced the practices of hook-swinging and Sati, and the fact that the cited passages were of doubtful authority, and ambi-

guous at that, would be small comfort to our grilled widows and lacerated backs.

Yet this is the political condition of England at this hour. You invoke a “casual cameldriver” to serve your political ends and prevent me having eighteen wives as against four: I prove him an imposter, and you call my attention to the artistic beauty of Ya Sin. I point out that Ya Sin says nothing about four wives, and you say that all moral codes limit the number. I ask you why all this fuss about Mohammed, in that case, and you write all my sentences — and your own — Qabalistically backwards, and it comes out: “Praise be to Allah for the Apostle of Allah, and for the Faith of Islam. And the favour of Allah upon him, and the peace ! ”

War, I think, if those be the terms.

POST-SCRIPT

War under certain conditions becomes a question of pace, and I really cannot give my cavalry as much work as Our Brer Rabbit would require. On the appearance of his article “Mr. Crowley and the creeds” I signified my intention to reply. It aborted his attack on me, and he has not since been heard of.

*In the midst of the words he was trying to say,
In the midst of his laughter and glee,
He has softly and suddenly vanished away—*

I supposed I always was a bit of a Boojum !