

Anti-Religious Thought in the Eighteenth Century

by Gilbert K. Chesterton

The eighteenth century was a time of rationalism and skepticism, driven by a desire for reason and a rejection of dogmatic and militant institutions.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 1:18, Colossians 2:8, 1 Peter 3:15

Topics: "Faith And Reason", "Rationalism Vs Christianity"

Description

Gilbert K. Chesterton delves into the eclipse of Christian theology during the rationalist advance of the eighteenth century, emphasizing the historical episode that has now become distant and distinct. He highlights the co-eternal nature of faith and reason, noting the shift from the Age of Reason to the modern world's intense interest in psychological and psychical matters. Chesterton explores the period when rationalism prevailed, leading to a revolt against dogmatic institutions and a rise in sceptical thoughts, ultimately giving birth to the reign of the rationalist.

Transcript

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(1926)

The eclipse of Christian theology during the rationalist advance of the eighteenth century is one of the most interesting of historical episodes. In order to see it clearly, we must first realize that it was an episode and that it is now historical. It may be stating it too strongly to say that it is now dead; it is perhaps enough to say that it is now distant and yet distinct; that it is divided from our own time as much as any period of the past. Neither reason nor faith will ever die; for men would die if deprived of either. The wildest mystic uses his reason at some stage; if it be only by reasoning against reason. The most incisive sceptic has dogmas of his own; though when he is a very incisive sceptic, he has often forgotten what they are. Faith and reason are in this sense co-eternal; but as the words are popularly used, as loose labels for particular periods, the one is now almost as remote as the other. What was called the Age of Reason has vanished as completely as what are called the Ages of Faith.

It is essential to see this fact first, because if we do not see its limitations we do not see its outline. It has nothing to do with which period we prefer, or even which we think right. A rationalist is quite entitled to look

back to the eighteenth century as a golden age of good sense, as the medievalist looks back to the thirteenth century as a golden age of good faith. But he must look back, and look back across an abyss. We may like or dislike the atmosphere of the modern world, with its intense interest in anything that is called psychological, and in much that is called psychical. We may think that speculation has gone more deep or that it has grown more morbid. We may like or dislike the religions of faith-healing or spirit-rapping; or a hundred other manifestations of the same mood, in fields quite remote from the supernatural or even the spiritual. We may like or dislike, for instance, that vast modern belief in "the power of suggestion" expressed in advertising or publicity and educational methods of all sorts. We may like or dislike the appeal to the non-rational element; the perpetual talk about the Sub-conscious Mind or the Race Memory or the Herd Instinct. We may deplore or we may admire all these developments. But we must fix it in our minds as a historical fact that to any one of the great 'Infidels' or Freethinkers of the eighteenth century, this whole modern world of ours would seem a mere madhouse. He might almost be driven, in pursuit of the reasonable, to take refuge in a monastery.

We are dealing therefore with an episode and even an interlude; though the man who likes it has as much right to say that it was an hour of happy daylight between the storms as a Christian has to say it of primitive Christianity or medieval Christendom. From about the time that Dryden died a Catholic to about the time that Newman began to write a little less like a Protestant, there was a period during which the spirit of philosophy filling men's minds was not positively Protestant any more than it was positively Catholic. It was rationalist even in Protestants and Catholics; in a Catholic like Pope or a Protestant like Paley. But it can be seen at the clearest when the last clinging traditions or presences were dropped; when the most stolid specimen of the Protestant middle classes is found busily scribbling sneers in the footnotes and even the index of a great history of the Fall of Rome; when a brilliant pupil going forth out of the Jesuit seminary turns back over his shoulder the terrible face of Voltaire.

In order to exhibit the essential quality, let us first compare the period with that which preceded it. Touching its historical causes, no man with a sense of human complexity will offer anything but contributory causes. But I think there are contributory causes that have been strangely overlooked. On the face of it, it refers back to the Renaissance, which refers back to the old pagan world. On the face of it, it also refers back to the Reformation, though chiefly in its negative aspect or branch in the old Christian world. But both these things are connected with a third, that has not, I think, been adequately realized. And that is a feeling which can only be called futility. It arose out of the disproportion between the dangers and agonies of the religious wars and the really unreasonable compromise in which they ended; : which may be translated, "Let every State establish its State Church", but which did mean in the Renaissance epoch, "Let the Prince do what he likes."

The seventeenth century ended with a note of interrogation. Pope, the poet of reason, whom some thought too reasonable to be poetical, was once compared to a question mark, because he was a crooked little thing that asked questions. The seventeenth century was not little, but it was in some ways crooked, in the sense of crabbed. But anyhow it began with the ferocious controversies of the Puritans and it ended with a question. It was an open question, but it was also an open wound. It was not only that the end of the seventeenth century was of all epochs the most inconclusive. It was also, it must be remembered, inconclusive upon a point which people had always hoped to see concluded. To use the literal sense of the word 'conclude', they expected the wound to close. We naturally tend to miss this point today. We have had nearly four hundred years of divided Christianity and have grown used to it; and it is the Reunion of Christendom that we think of as the extraordinary event. But they still thought the Disunion of

Christendom an extraordinary event. Neither side had ever really expected it to remain in a state of Disunion. All their traditions for a thousand years were of some sort of union coming out of controversy, ever since a united religion had spread all over a united Roman Empire. From a Protestant standpoint, the natural thing was for Protestantism to conquer Europe as Christianity had conquered Europe. In that case the success of the counter-Reformation would be only the last leap of a dying flame like the last stand of Julian the Apostate. From a Catholic standpoint the natural thing was for Catholicism to reconquer Europe, as it had more than once reconquered Europe; in that case the Protestant would be like the Albigensians: a passing element ultimately reabsorbed. But neither of these natural things happened. Prussia and the other Protestant principalities fought against Austria as the heir of the Holy Roman Empire in the Thirty Years War. They fought each other to a standstill. It was utterly and obviously hopeless to make Austria Protestant or Prussia Roman Catholic. And from the moment when that fact was realized the nature of the whole world was changed. The rock had been cloven and would not close up again, and in the crack or chasm a new sort of strange and prickly weed began to grow. The open wound festered.

We have all heard it said that the Renaissance was produced or precipitated by the Fall of Constantinople. It is true in a sense perhaps more subtle than is meant. It was not merely that it let loose the scholars from the Byzantine Court. It was also that it let loose the sceptical thoughts of the scholars, and of a good many other people when they saw this last turn of the tide in the interminable strife between Christ and Mahomet. The war between Islam and Christendom had been inconclusive. The war between the Reformation and the counter-Reformation was inconclusive. And I for one fancy that the former fact had a good deal to do with the full sceptical expansion of the eighteenth century. When men saw the Crescent and the Cross tossed up alternately as a juggler tosses balls, it was difficult for many not to think that one might be about as good or bad as the other when they saw the Protestant and the Catholic go up and down on the seesaw of the Thirty Years War. Many were disposed to suspect that it was six to one and half-a-dozen to the other. This addition involved an immense subtraction; and two religions came to much less than one. Many began to think that, as they could not both be true, they might both be false. When that thought had crossed the mind the reign of the rationalist had begun.

The thought, as an individual thought, had of course begun long before. It is, in fact, as old as the world; and it is quite obviously as old as the Renaissance. In that sense the father of the modern world is Montaigne; that detached and distinguished intelligence which, as Stevenson said, saw that men would soon find as much to quarrel with in the Bible as they had in the Church. Erasmus and Rabelais and even Cervantes had their part; but in these giants there was still a great gusto of subconscious conviction, still Christian; they mocked at the lives of men, but not at the life of man. But Montaigne was something more revolutionary than a revolutionist; he was a relativist. He would have told Cervantes that his knight was not far wrong in thinking puppets were men, since men are really puppets. He would have said that windmills were as much giants as anything else; and that giants would be dwarfs if set beside taller giants. This doubt, some would say this poison in its original purity, did begin to work under the surface of society from the time of Montaigne onwards and worked more and more towards the surface as the war of religions grew more and more inconclusive. There went with it a spirit that may truly be called humane. But we must always remember that even its refreshing humanity had a negative as well as a positive side. When people are no longer in the mood to be heroic, after all, it is only human to be humane. Some men were really tolerant, but others were merely tired. When people are tired of the subject, they generally agree to differ.

But against this clear mood, as against a quiet evening sky, there stood up the stark and dreadful outlines of the old dogmatic and militant institutions. Institutions are machines; they go on working under any sky and against any mood. And the clue to the next phase is the revolt against their revolting incongruity. The engines of war, the engines of torture, that had belonged to the violent crises of the old creeds, remained rigid and repellent; all the more mysterious for being old and sometimes even all the more hideous for being idle. Men in that mellow mood of doubt had no way of understanding the fanaticism and the martyrdom of their fathers. They knew nothing of medieval history or of what a united Christendom had once meant to men. They were like children horrified at the sight of a battlefield.

Take the determining example of the Spanish Inquisition. The Spanish Inquisition was Spy Fever. It produced the sort of horrors such fevers produce; to some extent even in modern wars. The Spaniards had reconquered Spain from Islam with a glowing endurance and defiance as great as any virtue ever shown by man; but they had the darker side of such warfare; they were always struggling to deracinate a Jewish plot which they believed to be always selling them to the enemy. Of this dark tale of perverted patriotism the humanitarians knew nothing. All they knew was that the Inquisition was still going on. And suddenly the great Voltaire rose up and shattered it with a hammer of savage laughter. It may seem strange to compare Voltaire to a child. But it is true that though he was right in hating and destroying it, he never knew what it was that he had destroyed.

There was born in that hour a certain spirit, which the Christian spirit should be large enough to cover and understand. In relation to many things it was healthy, though in relation to some things it was shallow. We may be allowed to associate it with the jolly uncle who does not believe in ghosts. It had an honourable expression in the squires and parsons who put down the persecution of witches. The uncle is not always just to Spiritualists; but he is rather a comfort on a dark night. The squire did not know all there is to know about diabolism, but he did stop many diabolical fears of diabolism. And if we are to understand history, that is humanity, we must sympathize with this breezy interlude in which it seemed natural for humanity to be humane.

The mention of the squire is not irrelevant; there was in that humanity something of unconscious aristocracy. One of the respects in which the rational epoch was immeasurably superior to our own was in the radiant patience with which it would follow a train of thought. But it is only fair to say that in this logic there was something of leisure, and indeed we must not forget how much of the first rational reform of the age came from above. It was a time of despots who were also deists or even, like Frederick the Great, practically atheists. But Frederick was sometimes humanitarian if he was never human. Joseph of Austria, offending his people by renouncing religious persecution, was very like a squire offending the village by repressing witch-burning. But in considering the virtues of the age, we must not forget that it had a very fine ideal of honourable poverty; the Stoic idea of Jefferson and Robespierre. It also believed in hard work, and worked very hard in the details of reform. A man like Bentham toiled with ceaseless tenacity in attacking abuse after abuse. But people hardly realized that his utilitarianism was creating the new troubles of Capitalism, any more than that Frederick of Prussia was making the problem of modern militarism.

Perhaps the perfect moment of every mortal thing is short, even of mortal things dealing with immortal, as was the best moment of the Early Church or the Middle Ages. Anyhow the best moment of rationalism was very short. Things always overlap, and Bentham and Jefferson inherited from something that had already passed its prime. Not for long did man remain in that state of really sane and sunny negation. For instance, having covered the period with the great name of Voltaire, I may well be expected to add the

name of Rousseau. But even in passing from one name to the other, we feel a fine shade of change which is not mere progression. The rationalist movement is tinged with the romantic movement, which is to lead men back as well as forward. They are asked to believe in the General Will, that is the soul of the people; a mystery. By the time the French Revolution is passed, it is elemental that things are loose that have not been rationalized. Danton has said, "It is treason to the people to take away the dream". Napoleon has been crowned, like Charlemagne, by a Pope. And when the dregs of Diderot's bitterness were reached; when they dragged the Goddess of Reason in triumph through Notre Dame, the smouldering Gothic images could look down on that orgy more serenely than when Voltaire began to write; awaiting their hour. The age was ended when these men thought it was beginning. Their own mystical maenad frenzy was enough to prove it: the goddess of Reason was dead.

One word may be added, to link up the age with many other ages. It will be noted that it is not true, as many suppose, that the rational attack on Christianity came from the modern discoveries in material science. It had already come, in a sense it had already come and gone, before these discoveries really began. They were pursued persistently partly through a tradition that already existed. But men were not rationalistic because they were scientists. Rather they became scientists because they were rationalists. Here as everywhere the soul of man went first, even when it denied itself.

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