

CATHOLICS AS SUPER-PHARISEES

THE prominence of Pharisaism in the Gospels—the sustained energy of Our Lord's denunciation of it, His use of it as a sort of dark background against which to illustrate His own religious teaching, should alone be enough to convince us, since we believe in the divine *praeeparatio evangelii*, that the Pharisees are for all time a supremely important type of religious corruption. Whereas we generally look upon them as a type of such imbecile hypocrisy as could hardly be reproduced, and without a qualm of misgiving we continue to spit upon their gaberdines. One thing that helps us to regard their miserable failings as something quite foreign to us is the false notion we have that their general religious position was essentially Protestant, or rather Puritan, in spirit. The truth is that the Pharisees were more akin to Catholics than to Protestants; and they seem to have been far removed from Puritanism. Their multiplying of religious observances upon which we look with great disapproval was at its best an attempt to carry devotion to the Law, that is to the will of God, into everyday life: and not out of any hatred or suspicion of life but simply in order to sanctify it. For far from being Manichees they were not even passable ascetics. The famous rabbinic saying, "A man will have to give account on the judgment day of every good thing which his eyes saw and he did not eat" probably reflects their general mood. Apart from the New Testament, what evidence there is would seem to show that their religious programme was not regarded as burdensome by the people; rather one would gather that it was welcomed by them, only too gladly accepted as a very satisfying way of fulfilling their duties. It *was* a weight on their souls, but probably in a more profound and subtle sense than we should easily gather. We cannot safely suppose that the majority *felt* themselves any more burdened by their Sabbath rules and purification rites than we do by our Friday abstinence and Lenten fasts and Sunday Mass. And then again, the Pharisees were Catholic-minded in their belief in oral tradition as a principle of

CATHOLICS AS SUPER-PHARISEES

authority to be used along with the code of the Law. Their man-made traditions were not essentially evil, they were only Catholic abuses. Further, it is altogether probable that they had a Catholic grasp of the principle of the development of dogma (whereas we commonly think of them as Fundamentalists or obscurantists). For it is to the Pharisaic party of the last centuries of the old era that the honour belongs of having guided the Jewish faith through a most important stage of doctrinal development. The obtuseness, then, with which they resisted the Personal claims of Christ, we may suppose to have co-existed with a quite respectably enlightened theological mind.

But there is another consideration which should be brought to bear upon our prejudice against the Pharisees; it is this, that within recent years through research into the Pharisaic Rabbinic writings of the early centuries A.D., a body of indirect evidence has been formed which makes it unsafe to suppose (any longer) that the Pharisees in the time of Our Lord taught and lived their religion with anything less of sincerity and faithfulness to its highest available principles than what would appear to be the average among Christians. The argument cannot be gone through here. But this must be pointed out: that there is no evidence to be had from the Gospels with which to challenge its conclusion. For we should not dare to say: they must have been highly corrupt, these Pharisees—far more so than we have ever been at our worst—for Christ to have denounced them as He did. That would be too crude a piece of Pharisaism on our part.

It would be a mistake then to suppose that Catholicism is as such immune from Pharisaism—as though that were a germ which could only thrive in the atmosphere of narrow puritanical sectarianism. But it is true that your Catholic, if he does fall to Pharisaism, will be no ordinary Pharisee. He will be a Super-Pharisee. He will have succeeded in formalizing not only prayer and the ten Commandments and the rest, but also the Mass and Holy Communion. To get your perfect post-Christian Pharisee you precisely need a Catholic; he alone can achieve the requisite *corruptio optimi*.

But having suggested that the Pharisees of the Gospels are

BLACKFRIARS

a quite intelligent and cultured and sacramentally-minded religious body with whom in their failings, therefore, we Catholics should not be shocked to find we have something in common (though on a higher grade), it remains to point to some of the forms that vicious affinity may take. For clearly we are safe from the gross self-complacency of the Pharisee who thanked God in so many words that he was a better man than the other fellow. Should we ever have such a thought, we should not voice it, even to God. Or again we are never so much as tempted to get publicity value out of prayer. Normally it no longer has any, of a sort we could covet. But this only means that with changing conditions and fashions the technique of Pharisaism has changed; the spirit of it remains constant. To discover what that spirit is one must go behind Our Lord's portrayal of certain of the unlovely contemporary manifestations of the thing (in which moreover it is only reasonable to see a touch of symbolic caricature)—go behind the trumpet-blowing and the face-disfiguring—to consider the deep and essential indictment that is to be found in the Sermon on the Mount and in certain of the parables and, as further applied and systematized, in the epistles of St. Paul.

The root of this evil tree is pride, the common root of all sin. Pharisaism begins in a culpable blindness to the fact—and to all its implications—that man's relationship to God, alike in the order of nature and of grace, is that of creature to Creator. This fundamental relationship being adequately ignored, the whole spirit of any religion that may then be practised is pure and supreme hypocrisy. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," the first beatitude, is also the first shaft of Our Lord's denunciation of Pharisaism; and what it proclaims (its full meaning can only be gathered from the context of the whole New Testament) is the happiness of the man who recognizes his own nothingness apart from God, who accepts his life both natural and supernatural as a moment to moment gift from God, knowing that it is only in God (and in Christ)—that is, as being drawn to share in, as being kept in, and further drawn into the being of God—that he lives at all and that he can be enriched in his life. Such a

man is humble and suppliant before God, has the spirit of worship, and he has at least the rudiments of a mystic gift of wonder and awe that pays homage to the majesty of God and His immediate living and life-giving presence. On the other hand, opposed to this spiritual poverty you have a vulgar opulence of spirit as of the self-made man, or a patronizing arrogance as of the man of independent means: you have in fact all the various forms that pride takes, whether in a strutting or a stupid or a defiant or a lazy or a cynical ignoring of the basic reality of creatureship. And opposed to the quality of a religious wonder you have the dullness, the earthy-mindedness of the blatant materialist or of the bourgeois religious spirit.

To get the specific character of Pharisaism it is necessary that this false attitude towards God *should* find expression in and be furthered by a corresponding abuse of religion. The technique lies in this, that the means of religion be treated as the End, and the End be neglected. According to St. Paul's summary, religion to be a classic version of Pharisaism must be a religion of works as distinct from a religion of grace. To describe the perfect thing (in practice it can never be perfect; but this is the ideal to which one approximates): it is a system which looks to obtain and to increase righteousness not primarily and principally, as it should do, through God's free self-giving, but by virtue of the performance of good works, by the keeping of the commandments and the observance of a code of worship and ritual: that is to say in the first instance by virtue of what would amount to a relationship to creature things. It is only orthodox to consider the commandments and the religious observances prescribed by reason and authority as a condition to be fulfilled in order to enjoy God's favour, and also as a means of grace. The falsity lies in supposing that righteousness, or let us say the state of grace, is in the first instance achieved by the fulfilling of these laws—whereas it is achieved through the sheer bounty of God; and (or) that it *consists* primarily in the standing before Him vindicated as to them—whereas it consists primarily in active immediate union with Him. Well, what we regard (in effect) as the source and sustaining principle of

BLACKFRIARS

our life, we thereby inevitably regard (in effect) as its End too. Source and End *are* the same in reality.

Before we ever congratulate ourselves on being quite free from the leaven of the Pharisees, therefore, we must consider what a glorious state of soul we are daring to find in ourselves. Such freedom implies that *we* do realize more or less that in baptism God's love took possession of us, the love and mercy of Christ embraced us, gratuitously, flashingly, as newly and originally as in the beginning light was made with a *fiat lux*. It means further that we look upon our natural and supernatural life as a living in God, dependent upon Him as directly, as momentarily as the light depends on the shining of the sun; that we look upon progress in the spiritual life not as a jejune affair of acquiring virtues and shedding vices, fulfilling commandments and avoiding sin, but as the deepening of communion with God. It means that we keep the commandments of God and of the Church, not in a negative spirit of avoiding what would land us in a dangerous position, but in a positive spirit of love—eager to obey because we find in what is commanded the means of expressing our acceptance of and our further desire of God's giving of Himself. Then again it means that our prayer tends to be what is called contemplative prayer, that is to say prayer flighted so as to aim at personal communion with God as its highest and proper end: rising above the attitude that *characterizes* prayer as a duty that must be performed lest we be found wanting or—on a high plane of moralism—as an exercise to strengthen the will in its moral purpose or (even) as a petitioning for grace to enable us to lead a good life. It means that we at least powerfully tend in this direction.

The evil we are considering can be described as the neglect of the Personal love of God; just as the final guilt of the Pharisees in the Gospels lay in their rejecting the Person of Christ. The mind and the will, instead of moving steadily towards active communion with God are taken up in, so as to be bounded by, the business of establishing a situation, a harmony or a balance. At the lowest, this is the business of accumulating good works that should (outweigh the bad ones

and) tip the scales of judgment in our favour. "The Rabbis teach: Let a man always regard himself as half guilty and half meritorious. Then if he executes one (more) command, happy is he, for he has inclined himself to the side of merit; if he commit one more sin, woe to him, for he has inclined himself to the side of guilt."¹ Very crude it seems; yet it is only too psychologically easy to think of merit in terms of quantitative measure. Then there will be no hunger and thirst after righteousness, no suppliant wooing of the love of God in and through the good works we do, but a business-like storing and scoring of them up, as though to balance a budget. "Thou fool, this night do they require thy soul of thee." It is quite probable that the parable of the labourers in Matthew xx was intended to exclude a material-minded measure-for-measure interpretation of the promise in chapter xix, 28: "Behold we have left all things and have followed thee: what therefore shall we have? And Jesus said to them: Amen, I say to you that you . . . shall sit on twelve seats judging the twelve tribes. And every one who hath left house or brethren or sisters . . ." The danger being that the correspondence implied between good deed and reward should encourage an impersonal view of merit, that the external measure should dominate. "Ah well! It is all a purchase, all a prize. Buy then! bid then! What?—Prayer, patience, alms, vows." Yes, but we must recognize that it is God who gives us the purchasing power by making us lovable to Himself; that it is He who enables us to exercise that power in good works: our activity, our self-important bustle and industry is in reality but an accepting of and a co-operation with His quickening and driving influence. "Or who hath first given to Him, and it shall [i.e. in such wise that it should] be repaid unto him? For of Him or by Him and in Him are all things." And the prize, the reward, the End—even the relative or here-and-now End—is "in heaven," which does not mean far away above, but "with God," and therefore present: namely, in God's greater, more active love of us which our heightened loveliness to

¹ A Rabbinic saying as given by C. G. Montefiore in his *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings*.

Him connotes. (Supposing that through good works we *have* become more lovable to Him. And we can never know that. We can never know that we merit before God.) If our eyes are set upon that reward, our intention in effect directed to that, then all is well. There is the only real reward or treasure: there then our hearts must be.

To ascend to a higher level, you can have instead of the business-like multiplying of good deeds a self-centred acquiring of good dispositions, pursuit of the virtues, striving after perfection, which shall be just as effective a conversion of means into end. "They sewed together fig leaves and made themselves aprons"; which was very well for their bodies. And they learned to be ashamedly self-conscious; which again was well enough for the body. But Pharisaism means the muffling up of the soul; and such shame as belongs to Pharisaism, its inferiority-complex, arises from a spiritual self-concern and self-dissatisfaction which is morbid. It is morbid because it rests on the essentially proud assumption, imagination, that the self has to be decked out *for* God, the temple prepared—and *then* the Shechinah will come; as though the clothing itself were not by God and so part of His coming, or as though the building of the temple were not His doing and so part of His loving active presence. There is such a deferring and relegating of the intention of active union with God that it is in effect ruled out of real life. The spirit of the *Canticle of Canticles* is excluded, and that sense ignored according to which the acquiring of virtues means stripping rather than clothing the soul. "He that will save his life shall lose it": this self-regarding desire and pursuit of moral well-being has in it a good deal of a sort of ultimate snobbery, insofar as what inspires it is a fear of being out of the swim, an anxiety to cut a good figure. The Pharisee's love of the first places in the synagogue, his concern for his fringes, etc., can be taken as symbolic of this stultifying self-assertion, pathetic effort of self-preservation and self-cultivation. The only way to save the life of the soul is really to live it. And that is precisely what the Pharisee does not do. He is like the athlete who is more concerned to keep in form than to know the joy of his limbs in action. He is like

the servant who kept his talent wrapped in a napkin; to whom it was not said, "Enter into the joy of thy Lord," inasmuch as he had been too morbidly self-regarding to have entered upon that way of joy already. For the Pharisee is the man of religion who practises his religion but never goes into the action of the love of God. "Come to me all ye that labour and are heavy burdened": if the common interpretation is right and this is an invitation addressed in particular to those groaning under the system of Pharisaism, then the yoke here from which the love of Christ releases is not primarily that outward system itself—"all things whatsoever they shall say to you, observe and do"; it can be said to be the yoke of a galling pursuit of introverted self-culture, which turns the law—the Law of Moses, or now the Law of Christ—into a means of death.

It may somewhat unite these scattered reflections to lead them to the conclusion that it is in a Catholic life which has in it nothing of what may vaguely be called mysticism, but remains on a level of "Plain Tommy," or on such a "sound" basis as it would be accurate and not merely modest to describe as a keeping to one's Catholic duties—it is in a Catholic life of that sort that the eight returning devils of post-Christian Pharisaism can hope to find their lost home, an ideal house *empty*, swept and garnished. There is no pessimism in this conclusion, as though an explicit, cultured mysticism were called for, or as though the immediate love of God meant the incessant awareness of God. What is needed is the right mastering intention, the right direction and drive and consecration. The light of thy body is thy eye. Where thy treasure is there is thy heart also—and the reverse. The lukewarmness which God has declared He cannot endure, is presumably not the mediocrity of feeble performance—for "the bruised reed he will not break"; but the mediocrity of a debased hope and intention. "I have brought up children and exalted them: but they have despised me." The diseased state of soul which is Pharisaism, rooted in pride, branching out into formalism, flowering in a moral Narcissism, can be kept out of Catholic life by the central, liturgical living of it and in no other way. The danger is of

BLACKFRIARS

not seeing The Tree for the trees: thus missing the only valid way of worship, of losing one's life to God, of having access to God in and through all the prosody of law and ceremony: "Child of Light! Thy limbs are burning through the veil which seems to hide them."

* * * *

P.S.—In practice there was the choice of allowing a certain tone of superiority to creep into these jottings or of committing the worse offence of a public confession. No fresh accusations are intended against the brotherhood. Only, taking for granted the justice of certain stock accusations of our preachers from Sunday to Sunday, or of our prophets from century to century—the suggestion is offered that a large part of the evil they find in us is authentic Pharisaism. It is very dearly bought, that comforting hiatus we allow between the Gospel warning: "*Unless* your justice abound more than that of the Scribes and Pharisees you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" and the indictment of the sermon, if it means that we are missing a divine diagnosis of our own condition.

RICHARD KEHOE, O.P.