

Little, however, can be done towards bettering the social order either here in England or in the world at large until Christians begin to put these principles and their practical applications into execution; and this cannot happen until the narrow-minded, dogmatising specialists give place to groups of experts ready to share their knowledge for the common good, admitting its limitations and its dependence on the teaching of Christ as well as on the nature of man and society. This means a personal sense of responsibility on the part of everyone in so far as he has a special part to play in society. The Joint Pastoral has given an incitement to each individual in his own sphere of life to start acting for these specified ends. The living wage, the living room, the distribution of property, these are now everyone's concern, immediate, practical, on the door-step. But no one should forget the general setting of these ten points, that he is to act in the matter as a Christian, from a supernatural as well as a natural motive, ultimately for the glory and love of God. In spite of its limitation to a special time and a special country, the Joint Pastoral is not a Specialist but a Catholic pronouncement.

DESCARTES AND RELIGION¹

DESCARTES was personally a believer, a sincere Catholic. His education by the Jesuits of La Flèche, and the philosophy they had taught him there, had marked him profoundly. This man, whose mind was so free and enquiring, who was always so conscious of a vitally important intellectual vocation, who grounded all his philosophy on a daring effort to doubt everything, that he might vanquish doubt by doubt and so discover the unimpeachable certainties implied in the very existence of the thinking self, this founder of modern rationalism never doubted the Catholic creed; he could even be blamed for being insufficiently aware of that anxious questing restlessness of the soul that is worked upon and deepened by Faith. To the Protestant theologians who tried to force the religious issue on him, he answered smiling that he preferred to remain in the religion of his king and his nurse.

He was not giving them his reasons for believing; he meant merely that he preferred to be left in peace on this matter. His death was nobly and genuinely Christian. That fine sense he always had of the

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dignity of reason and intellectual integrity, of the grandeur of created nature, was itself religious. I am sure that at the opening of his philosophical career, with the illuminative experience of November 10th, 1619, still vivid within him, he was equally desirous of establishing the principles of physical geometry—his work *par excellence*—and of grounding Christian doctrine on such firm foundations that atheists and sceptics would be silenced for ever. And with all this his hostility to Theology was stubborn and bitter and calculating. How explain this paradox?

To begin with we must go back a little and remember that our main intellectual disputes in France had begun to take shape before the close of the Middle Ages. Behind the ideological conflicts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as M. Georges de Lagarde has shown so well, lay the long history of an ancient quarrel, more social than spiritual, which ranged against each other, under many different forms, on the one side the Communes and lawyers, the lay-powers claiming their temporal rights, on the other the canonists and theologians representing the clerical power and claiming its spiritual privileges. All that world was Catholic and all of it was combative. Hence the long history that followed—a family quarrel, a parish quarrel that ended badly.

Then came René Descartes, inheriting, as it seemed, and combining both these traditions which already divided the French mind between them. It was early in the seventeenth century, the vigorous young manhood of our classic period. The wars of religion were hardly over. They had, as Père Mersenne informs us, and as might have been expected, made a great number of atheists. At the same time, the educated classes were keenly interested in theological debate. And modern astronomy, mechanics, physics and mathematics were beginning to see the light.

Historically the work of Descartes, carried through with such laborious and intense intellectual fervour, was a double one. He had first to make room, among existing intellectual disciplines, for the new Science; and secondly to reconcile the two opposed traditions in French thought. In the first task he was successful; in the second he failed, because he went about it in the wrong way; so that in the event and against his own will he only succeeded in greatly strengthening one of our traditions at the expense of the other. It is important for us to understand the true nature of this enterprise and the reason why it took the wrong turning.

Already in the thirteenth century St. Thomas had clearly and accurately distinguished between the objects, methods and natures of Theology on the one hand and philosophy and the sciences on the

other. However, if we consider not the abstract doctrine but the way things were actually done, the sociological conditions, as it were, of the development of human knowledge, we must admit that philosophy and the sciences were for a long time cultivated, for the most part and in fact, simply as instruments of Theology; they remained in a state of servility. The outcome was of course disastrous when mediæval scholasticism itself decayed, and when the Aristotelians and theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—among whom were to be found such consummate thinkers in the purely metaphysical and theological orders—took sides with bitter zeal and blind arrogance against the new experimental and mathematical method of studying natural phenomena, a method and a science that constituted a formally distinct type of knowledge, entirely legitimate in itself, but which, in the minds of its promoters was bound up with faulty metaphysical systems.

In this brief note I shall not concern myself with the philosophical aspect of this intellectual tragedy. A deplorable misunderstanding whose effects are still with us gave rise to the notion that the physico-mathematical sciences of phenomena worked on the same material as philosophy—even as Theology—and led Descartes to tie his physics and mechanics to a mechanistic philosophy and an unstable metaphysic within which all the elements of the older wisdom were dissociated and set against one another. Here I consider the effort of Descartes only from the point of view of its bearing on religion. How can we characterise it from this point of view?

It may be said in brief that Descartes, whom Bossuet reproached for being too suspicious of the authority of the Church, while he was certainly aware of the revolutionary dynamism implicit in his philosophy, had certainly also a vivid apprehension of all the troubles that the theologians were in a position to bring on him, and of the very effective means they could employ against his enterprise—I mean social means, denunciations, delations, *arrêts du Parlement*, appeals to the secular power, etc. We know besides how timid the condemnation of Galileo had made him, moving him to declare that he himself taught the immobility of the Earth more than anyone, for, in his view, the Earth, while it revolved round the Sun, remained motionless in relation to the force which carried it, like a ship borne along by the current but motionless in relation to the water.

In mock reverence he used to call the doctors of sacred science 'those more than men'; but if you would know what real sentiments lurked beneath his extraordinary prudence; you have only to read the conversation with Burman in which he roundly affirms that the theologians knew how to abuse and scarcely anything else.

To put it briefly, and in the perspective of a philosophy of culture and modern history, what Descartes proposed as a proper and normal procedure, was to bring philosophy and the sciences to their state of legitimate autonomy, in spite of the Aristotle of the theologians; to develop them as types of free enquiry worthy to be embraced for their own sake and determining for themselves their own ends and means. To do this he had to combat the theologians of his time. Hence his effort to shake off the theological yoke. But he did not only think: Down with the theologians!—which would certainly have been thoroughly *male sonans*, but which, so far as it goes, still remains within the historical and human sphere of the sociology of the mind. He thought also: Down with Theology! But this was to meddle with the properly intellectual order, and it was quite false in itself, and it overturned the hierarchy of wisdom. In this respect, then, he made it his business to deny Theology's right to exist as a science, just as later Kant was to deny to metaphysics the right to exist as a science. What then became of Faith? By refusing to admit that Faith, wedded to reason, could give birth in the mind of man to an obscure but valid science of the divine, Descartes was forced to construct a false conception of Faith: of this Faith which in him, I maintain, was genuine and sincere.

In place of the true idea of Faith—a burning gaze of the soul cleaving to the First Truth and to its testimony, by which the soul springs towards God as he is in himself, as transcending all our ideas and images and feelings, and attains him in the darkness of revealed statements, unsatisfied and unslaked until it see him face to face—instead of this, Faith was conceived as a mere submission of the will to formulae accepted from on high, with more respect and reverence the more securely they were packed away in a safe corner where nothing could endanger them and where they would endanger nothing. Instead of a supernatural gift of dim knowledge, Faith, for Descartes, became a supernatural gift of sheer obedience. And instead of tending to penetrate and vivify all the soul's energies, and the reason itself, in the accomplishment of their proper tasks, it now kept itself strictly separated from reason, isolated from the natural activities of the soul, so that henceforth these might go about their tasks by themselves and so attain unaided to a perfect knowledge of what lay within their reach and a perfect control over human life on this earth. Thus man was split apart—split into the man of mere nature or reason to whom this world and full worldly happiness was assured, and the man of Christian Grace and Faith whose reward was laid up in heaven. The final outcome, two centuries later, was the man of the bourgeois world, who, by a wise division of labour, unforeseen in the Gospel,

managed to serve two masters at the same time : God for an eternal reward, and Mammon—*i.e.* the increase of industrial wealth for its own sake or the will to power or the self-sufficient state—for his happiness here and now.

As for human reason, which Descartes conceives as a kind of natural revelation, he makes it also depend directly on the same inaccessible deity with whom he had connected his simplified theory of religious belief : on this God who demands sheer, blind submission ; who could have made square circles, had it so pleased him, or mountains without valleys, or even amused his omnipotence by spitefully deceiving philosophers. It is well known that once Descartes had vanquished doubt with the evidence of the *cogito*, he made a great leap from his thought, thus grasped in and by itself, to the certainty of God's existence—to God the only ground of all our knowledge in such a way that an atheist could not, properly speaking, scientifically *know* anything, not even the clearest mathematical propositions. Thus his searching mind swept into its scope a Platonic and Augustinian movement of thought. Entering into himself in meditation, in a kind of philosophic prayer, he built up thence a metaphysic which seemed to him more Christian than the Aristotelian scholasticism, an angel's metaphysic, hymned by La Fontaine for its bold and fascinating spirituality, according to which all our ideas are innate, produced by the same divine act which created the soul, and the soul itself is distinguished from the body so sharply that all attempt to explain their union is given up. And now this reason, depending on an incomprehensible deity, has to decipher (with the aid of its ready-made equipment of clear ideas) a universe which should be quite transparent to it ; and its exigencies are such that it no longer consents to adapt itself to the mystery of being and, in a sense, to humanise this mystery, but claims the right to wipe out all mysteries from the world and from life. And again the tendency of this over-spiritualist metaphysic is not towards an intellectual repose in the apprehension of truths that transcend time ; it aims in its entirety at laying the foundations of physical science, it is only concerned with philosophy, in the last resort, in so far as it can use philosophy to justify the intellectual and practical conquest of nature by physico-mathematical knowledge, by mechanics, medicine, and scientific ethics.

This is a summary sketch, but it may help us to understand how the man who nobly declared that he had only concerned himself with the Infinite in order to submit to it, and whose purpose was once and for all to reconcile Faith and reason, could in fact be the father of modern rationalism. On the pretext of ensuring for philosophy and

the sciences an effective autonomy, this theologically-inspired philosopher, whose main ideas are theological, founded in fact a philosophy which was not only distinct but separated from Theology and separated from Faith; he managed, moreover, to convince the two centuries that followed him that the sciences of phenomena could be identified with this philosophy.

He was too hasty. This 'French cavalier,' as Péguy called him, tried to go too fast, he killed his horses under him. His mistake lay in trusting to quick solutions. He sought to reconcile the two French traditions of which I spoke at the outset; but his solution was dualist, separatist, involving reciprocal isolation and an agreement to disagree. It was typically a bourgeois solution and it could not endure: it went the way of the bourgeois world which it dominated. However forthright and vigorous the religion of Descartes, it was bound to weaken and perish in the currents of thought that carried him along. However manly and noble his conception of reason, it also was doomed, after claiming a boundless empire, to be dispersed by the same currents of thought. It was bound in the end to collide with the mystery of the real universe which it had ignored and which is now, apparently, taking a savage revenge. Witness the blind irrationalisms that distract us to-day.

Yet it is never right to reject reason; and a certain good example may be drawn from Descartes' enterprise, a lesson of confidence in human reason and liberty which France cannot ignore without forgetting her own self. For 'from the point of view of what I call the sociology of the mind, and taking into account the state of culture at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and especially the power of that narrow prejudice which was able so disastrously to check the development of metaphysics, binding it to an outworn conception of the sensible world,' 'the Cartesian revolution appears essentially as a work of *clearance*, and a historically necessary one' (*Le Songe de Descartes*, p. xi).

Descartes sought a good end with inadequate means. We must not think of renouncing his search, but of beginning it all over again; and with less impatience than he showed. Every great modern philosopher has dreamed, like Descartes, of reconciling the two traditions which already in his day divided our culture between them, though the division was then less acute than it has since become. Descartes thought this could be done by isolating reason from Faith so perfectly that no more conflict would be possible; whereas Auguste Comte erected a new faith and tried to found a new clericalism, the clericalism of scientists. Descartes' idea was the better; it might be expressed by saying that he desired a school and tradition of Chris-