

for the following reason. As the term is generally understood, to be a materialist is to disbelieve in the existence of a God. Now according to the first sort of realism, according to which the criterion of existence is sense-perception, God certainly does not exist, but neither do positrons, black holes, or the contents of other people's consciousness. The second sort of realism would appear to accommodate positrons and black holes and other minds, but does not by any means so obviously exclude the existence of God.²³ And in what sense would a materialism remain a materialism if it were found to be quite consistent with belief in God?

The Last Laugh of a Humane Faith:

Dr. Alexander Geddes 1737–1801

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“This unaccountable, heterodox, bad priest” was the accepted verdict of Catholic scholarship on Alexander Geddes almost seventy years ago.¹ Amid the modernist crisis that view was understandable particularly in the British Catholic Church which had struggled for respectability and acceptance during the previous half century. Geddes seemed a disturbing unmannerly radical. But today in a Church more concerned with social justice and freedom, with ecumenism and scholarly integrity, we can come to a more charitable balanced conclusion. For Geddes was undoubtedly a talented scholarly priest of liberal imagination and provocative manner. Persistent ill health especially some severe form of

23 The way in which a ‘materialist’ argument for the existence of God might well be developed is suggested in effect by Barry Hindess’s recent and brilliant book on *Philosophy and Methodology in the Social Sciences* (Harvester Press, 1976). Hindess rejects the correspondence theory of truth, on the grounds that it involves a ‘pre-established harmony’ between the nature of the human mind and the structure of reality; and that this leads straight to theism. But the correspondence theory of truth—that there is a world prior to and independent of our theorising, by virtue of correct description and explanation of which our theories are true—does seem more or less inseparable from the ‘objectivism’ characteristic of most forms of Marxism (cf. Collier, art. cit. p. 9). In fact, if the denial of this is not idealism—implying as it does that pulsars and alpha particles are products of the human mind, rather than existing prior to and independently of it—it is difficult to see what idealism would be. Thus if one accepted Hindess’s argument, but found oneself unable to reject the correspondence theory of truth, one would be driven to belief in God.

1 Bernard Ward, *The Dawn of the Catholic Revival in England, 1781-1803*, 2 vols. London, 1909, ii. 247. On Geddes see John Mason Good, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Alexander Geddes, LL.D.*, London, 1803; A. Geddes to Miss Howard, 12 Oct. 1792, *National Library of Scotland, Mss. 10999* in which he writes of “deluging my poor stomach with laudanum.”

rheumatism, gave his wit a bitterness which he effectively employed against any species of privilege, political or religious intolerance. In his desire for conciliatory dialogue between Churches, authentic local liturgies, and a more responsible and responsive ecclesiastical authority, he was a thoroughly modern churchman.

The life of Geddes may be briefly recounted.² Born into a poor Catholic family in Banffshire in 1737, educated at Scalan and in Paris, he was ordained in 1764. Following a brief chequered career in Scotland, during which he acquired an LL.D from the University of Aberdeen, he lived in London from 1780 to his death in 1801. Free from pastoral demands he was able to devote himself to the intellectual life. His cosmopolitan life and training made him very much a child of the Enlightenment. His extended visits to France, 1758-64, 1766-69 and 1783, together with his continuous reliance on aristocratic patronage ensured that result. Well acquainted with Presbyterianism and educated within the Gallican tradition in the Paris of the *philosophes*, Geddes was associated with several leading figures in the Scottish Enlightenment. By nature gregarious, he freely associated with all denominations; Presbyterians, Anglicans, Unitarians and Quakers. He delighted in charming feminine company, though on one occasion in Scotland he had to flee from embarrassing emotional entanglement at the home of one of his noble patrons. With some claim to literary fame he was known to Dr Johnson and Mrs Barbauld. But unfortunately his wide interests and apparent idiosyncratic behaviour did not contribute to good relations with episcopal superiors in Scotland or England.

The Bible was the centre of his life. Brought up on the Protestant version of the scriptures, he was to spend the whole of his priestly life collating manuscripts in London, Oxford and Glasgow, with the help of various universities and a variety of supporters, Catholics, Evangelicals and Unitarians, he was able to publish a critical translation of the historical books of the Bible in 1792 and 1797. To that extent his decision to abandon his pastoral ministry in 1787 to concentrate on research was richly rewarded. But his essay into early higher criticism did not endear him to his co-religionists nor to many other Christians.

² A. Geddes, *Prospectus of a New Translation of the Holy Bible*, Glasgow, 1786; *General Answer to the Queries, Counsels and Criticism*, London, 1790; *Radical Remarks on the Hebrew Scriptures*, London, 1800; his pamphlets included *Letter to Dr. Priestley*, London, 1787 and *Cursory Remarks on a Late Fanatical Publication entitled a Full Detection of Popery*, London, 1783. A brief survey is J. Lawrie Symington, "Alexander Geddes; an early Scots Higher Critic," *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, v. 9, 1945-47, pp. 19-36, Geddes described Milner as "that wrongheaded and I fear worse hearted man. Milner continues to abuse me in the most outrageous manner. God pity the poor Christian priest!" A. Geddes to Mis Howard, n. d. *National Library of Scotland, Mss. 10999*. On the wider issues see John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850*, London, 1975.

To his enlightened mind, the work was a prelude to a radically regenerated social and political order. Once Christians honestly understood the Bible and its genesis, then there would be an end to futile sectarian controversy and political discrimination. For within a scholarly ecumenical framework, informed argument would overcome irrational vulgar prejudice. Purified, informed local expressions of faith had considerable implications for the existing arrangements of the Catholic Church: for the role and function of the Papacy: for liturgy, devotions and discipline. In the British context that meant the elimination of religious barriers, improved social and political prospects for Catholics and general support for humanitarian reform movements.

These views and his need for patronage firmly placed Geddes in the traditional aristocratic Catholic camp. His emphasis on sober analysis and calm reflection stood in marked contrast to the more strident emotional and argumentative approach of Bishop Milner. The antagonism between these two men was part of that larger conflict for the heart of British Catholicism which John Bossy has so well described. More than a scholarly dispute was involved.

In spite of overwork, rheumatism and petty persecution, Geddes saw his translation as of enormous importance. In religion it would pave the way for a truly comprehensive and socially conscious Christianity: "I believe as much as I can find sufficient motives of credibility for believing: and without sufficient motives of credibility, there can be no rational belief. The vulgar Papist and vulgar Protestant are here almost on equal terms, for few, very few of either class ever think of seriously examining the primary foundations of their faith."³

Geddes was well acquainted with leading Anglican scholars through his work in collating manuscripts.⁴ In his meticulous researches, he was far in advance of his contemporaries. He was an unusual Catholic member of that remarkable community of scholars which flourished in the late eighteenth century. Principal Robertson of Edinburgh, perhaps the epitome of the Scottish Enlightenment, Dr Reid of Glasgow, the apostle of the philosophy of Common Sense, and Dr Joseph Priestley the renowned Unitarian preacher, scientist and political radical were among his friends. In all his activities, Geddes had little doubt about his own Catholic position. He wanted a return to "the simple unadorned form of

³ *Radical Remarks* p. v. (introduction)

⁴ Benjamin Kennicott, 1718-83, b. Totnes, ed., Wadham, Oxford, F.R.S. Radcliffe librarian, 1767-83, collated manuscripts in Rome and Paris.

Robert Louth, 1710-87, Bishop of London, b. Winchester, ed. New College, Oxford, 1741, Professor of Poetry, Oxford, 1766, Bishop of St. David's, 1766, London, 1777. On Robertson and Reid see Anand Chitnes, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, London, 1976. Also Geddes' *Prospectus* pp. 38 n. III 145.

PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANITY”⁵ Far from being a freethinker as scurrilous critics then and later maintained, he never doubted the divinity of Christ and the essential articles of the faith; “Christian is my name and Catholic my surname. Rather than renounce these glorious titles I would shed my blood: but I would not shed a drop of it for what is neither Catholic nor Christian.”⁶ Far too often the faithful failed to see the adjective ‘Catholic’ did not guarantee the authenticity of the noun: “to conciseness and simplicity succeeded verbosity and splendour.”⁷ That was a conviction in which he never faltered to the day he died:

“A genuine *Catholic* you see:
A Catholic without *praenomen*
Of *English, Irish, Greek* or *Roman*.”⁸

A similar inscription adorned his tombstone in Paddington churchyard.

Starved of affection, Geddes, affectionate personally, wished to promote a world of loving relationships. To that end scholarship by providing a generally agreed version of the Bible, by removing mythical class and racial distinctions based on deception and wrong-headed interpretation of tradition and development, would be a vitally important ingredient:

“Or had I been a man of gold,
And in a gilded chariot roll’d;
I should have passed the lonesome plain,
Regardless of the falling rain.”⁹

Personal experience and involvement were important for a true Catholic understanding. The liturgy should realise the faith and devotion of the community “in the language of her own country, unaccompanied with any ceremony that has the least semblance of farcical exhibitionism.”¹⁰ The rediscovery of personal and ecclesiastical simplicity was crucial, for to contemporaries “our external worship has too many useless and even cumbersome trappings; and many of the ceremonies must appear puerile and ridiculous to those who are not strongly predisposed in their favour.”¹¹ The Church must have a lively interaction with the contemporary culture in order to maintain its credibility: it must be dynamic not static.

To Geddes the Church was Catholic, differing slightly in emphasis and expression in various areas and in various times: it was a

5 A. Geddes, *Letter to the Rt. Rev. John Douglass, Bishop of Centurae and Vicar Apostolic in the London District*, London, 1794, p. II.

6 A. Geddes, *Radical Remarks* p. vi.

7 A. Geddes, *A Modest Apology for the Roman Catholics of Great Britain*, London, 1800, p. 166.

8 A. Geddes, *A Norfolk Tale, or A Journal from London to Norwich*, London, 1792, p. 43. 9 *ibid.*, p. 28

10 quoted in J. Mason Good, *Memoirs* p. 5. *Letter to Rt. Rev. John Douglass*, p. 1709

11 *Letter to the Rt. Rev. John Douglass*, p. 11

continually evolving universal faith. As a convocation or convention in one faith and love, at once one and a holy society of particular places, where a group of faithful congregate, "it should be granted that the whole Church of Christ, that is the aggregate of all Christians is in some sense *infallible* or, to speak more properly *indefectible*; it by no means follows that any particular Church or partial collection of Churches is that indefectible Catholic Church, *against which the gates of Hell shall not prevail.*"¹² For "the only Church to which Indefectibility, or whatever else be contained in the promise of Christ, belongs is the collective body of Christians throughout the world."¹³ All Churches had invariably claimed to be infallible, whether the Synod of Dort, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland or the Convocation of the Church of England: all demanded obedience as much as Catholicism. In the eighteenth century the exact location of infallibility was difficult to determine. Faith and discipline were too often inextricably entwined: "we ourselves are not agreed about the seat of infallibility any more than the psychologists are about the seat of the soul."¹⁴ At best "it was a moral certainty."

It was a view based on scholarship and political considerations. The extreme notions of infallibility propagated by some Catholic apologists and widely held by some prejudiced Protestants were a serious barrier to Catholic Emancipation. The fear of the dispensing power of the Pope was deeply entrenched. Not surprisingly Geddes countered his coreligionists' extravagant ideas and tried to remove by calm rational analysis the worst Protestant phobias. The Church did not claim the right to dispense subjects from their constitutional allegiance. If these notions had ever been advanced they were based on forgery and disgraceful ambition. The primacy of Rome was not of "*Divine Right*" nor "an absolute autocracy and concentrating in one person the right of a whole community."¹⁵ He accepted the pre-eminence of Rome by usage and custom but he still demanded that authority should operate within a sound historical tradition and correct procedures. For example, in the final analysis, the tacit acceptance of the faithful rather than a Papal Bull made an individual the effective bishop of a particular locality: "Indeed the Council of Trent is not the only Council that has given too much power to the Roman pontiff. For in this Councils may err, as well as other assemblies; and in my opinion, have erred egregiously by transferring so large a share of their own power (or rather of a power they had not themselves) to a single man, who has so often and so enormously abused it."¹⁶ In the

¹² *A Modest Apology* p. 54. Also pp. 55-71.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 58,

¹⁴ J. Mason Good, *Memoirs* p. 487.

¹⁵ A. Geddes, *A Modest Apology* p. 126

¹⁶ A. Geddes, *A Letter to the Rt. Rev. John Douglass* p. 17

absence of a clear definition of infallibility Geddes was worried about the practical results within Britain: the assertion of clerical power and the threat to legitimate Catholic political ambitions.

In confessing Catholic faults, Geddes hoped that Protestants likewise would realise their past mistakes. He was even prepared to recognise the validity of Anglican orders. In this conciliatory atmosphere, he hoped that Catholics might reassess their discipline, forms of worship and devotion. Somewhat sceptical about the spiritual value of enforced Friday abstinence and the Latin Mass in England, Geddes with his natural delight in feminine charm, was opposed to clerical celibacy. He believed that the result was "selfish alienation" from domestic life. Similarly there was a failure to develop a Christian theology of marriage and a predictable insensitivity in most aspects of ecclesiastical authority: "those ought to have been chosen bishops who from the proper care of their own families, have learned to govern the whole Church."¹⁷ Bishops should be elected as in the past: they should be caring, compassionate men rather than the authoritarian imposition of some alien power. They should emphasise the pure word of God rather than play upon the simple faith, or credulity of their flocks, which in many instances degenerated into the grossest ignorance and superstition.

He was in effect demanding British constitutional liberties within the Church. An English liturgy, freed from "cumbersome trappings", suitable to a freeborn people, a confident faith in free discussion rather than a ridiculous inconsistent censorship, allied to respect for the correct Church procedures, would enhance the faith and remove many objections.¹⁸ The decrees of the Council of Trent had not been publicly admitted into England and so "I think myself authorised to object to it wherever I find it objectionable."¹⁹ Clearly, Geddes was apprehensive that ignorant neglect of correct procedures could only result in the destruction of Catholic liberty. The autocratic response of the Vicars Apostolic merely confirmed their inadequacy. Indeed, his hostility came through in a bitter remark in 1791. When a friend asked what the cross before an episcopal signature to a pastoral meant, he replied "their MARKS, Sir!"²⁰

Political activity drew Geddes away from many of his co-religionists. Active in the Protestant Catholic Dissenters Committee in which his patron, Lord Petre played a leading role, Geddes carried his liberal ideas further in support of the French Revolution. For far too long Catholic historians accepted the Burke-Barruel view that the revolution was a satanic outburst. Geddes,

¹⁷ A. Geddes, *A Modest Apology* p. 196. Also pp. 193-4, p. 206.

¹⁸ A. Geddes, *Letter to Rt. Rev. John Douglass* p. 11.

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 26. Most of the material contained in this passage is in this tract.

²⁰ A. Geddes *Encyclical Letter of the Bishops of Rama, Acanthus and Centura*, London, 1791, p. 27.

like a recent Catholic scholar had no such ideas.²¹ He was an enthusiastic supporter of the revolution abroad and the radical Whigs at home. Perhaps he had imbibed the radical ideas of the French cures of the Third Estate. Be that as it may, he was a friend and admirer of Fox. A Foxite, he declared “next to those of Christian and Catholic, I consider as the most glorious one I can bear.”²² He contributed to the Whig *Morning Chronicle*, *The Sunday Review*, and the *Analytical Review*, as well as writing two pamphlets favouring the French cause. Much of his other writing at this time, was likewise of radical hue, as well as two other pamphlets which were not published until 1800. He likewise endorsed the abolition of slavery. His social democratic views drew him into conflict with Bishop Douglass. His relations with leading Protestant Dissenters increased. In particular his association with leading Unitarians, from Joseph Priestley to William Smith, M.P. from 1787 to 1829, forms part of an important and neglected aspect of Catholic Emancipation.²³

From a Presbyterian country, educated in Scottish and French Enlightenment—Aberdeen and St Andrews University had both been prepared to give him an LL.D—Geddes showed his liberal sentiments in his *Epistola Macaronica ad Fratrem*, 1790, *Carmen Saeculare*, 1790, and *L’Avocat du Diable*, 1792. They may also demonstrate his resentment at his dependence on patronage and his inability to establish his career on the basis of his obvious merit. The literati of the time, Dr Johnson, Mrs Barbauld, Miss Howard and others, recognised him, but he was undoubtedly scornful of inherited position and exulted in talent. Even in Britain equality before the law was not in reality strictly observed:

For who will affirm that the fame of a Peer
And the fame of a peasant are equally dear?
Ought a libel on Withers or Walter or Tooke
To be punished like that on an Earl or a DUKE?”²⁴

Class distinctions far from being divine may be more accurately described as satanic:

The DEVIL was a PEER before Adam was made
Nay the premier peer of th’angelical host!
Can Norfolk himself such a privilege boast?
And had he not dallied with fair Lady Sin
He still had remained the first peer of his kin
Even when MICHAEL had gotten his place

²¹ On this aspect see E. Duffy, “Ecclesiastical Democracy Detected” 1779-87; ii, 1787-96 *Recusant History*, v.x., pp. 193-209, 309-31; B. Ward, *The Dawn* vol 1 John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community*, pp. 330-35.

²² J. Mason Good, *Memoirs* p. 263.

²³ e.g. A. Geddes, *Carmen Saeculare*, London, 1790; *Epistola Macaronica*, London, 1790; *L’Avocat du Diable*, London, 1792; *An Apology for Slavery*, London, 1792

²⁴ *L’Avocat du Diable*, p. 15. Also see his correspondence with Miss Howard, *Mss. 10999*, National Library of Scotland.

He bore his attainder with wonderful grace
And a PRINCE, tho' a fugitive, still is a PRINCE
At Brussels, Vienna, Worms, Cologne or Lintz."²⁵

Warring monarchies were the curse of civilisation. Only when individual kings had to fight each other in single combat would peace ensue.

As a warm supporter of the Foxite Whigs, he attended the famous Crown and Anchor meeting which Burke later savaged in his *Reflections*.²⁶ Intimately associated with Joseph Priestley, Richard Price, and Tom Paine, he was a member of the society for Constitutional Information, an influential reforming pressure group.²⁷ A friend of the famous Catholic, Dr Maxwell, he attended several meetings of the society in July as well as the autumn of 1792. It is worth noting that he was there when the society discussed Joel Barlow's "Address to the National Convention of France". That included the statement, "to suppose that the people of France are to learn the mode of worshipping God from the decrees of the Council of Trent, is certainly absurd, as it would be to appeal to such a council to learn how to breathe, or to open the eyes."²⁸ If as later suggested Barlow was not the only author, Geddes seems a likely candidate for these sentiments coincided with his apparent endorsement of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in France. In his realistic assessment of the revolution he had few romantic illusions about the necessity of force to secure and consolidate popular power.

Geddes then was an extremely influential and active character. His scholarly ability and enterprise gave him and his faith entree where a ghetto Catholic could not penetrate. Irascible and much maligned, Geddes had no time for a limited self-contained community of faith, but demanded positive involvement in the progress of mankind; in securing more enlightened views and legislation, in promoting liberty and justice, and in recognising man as equal in whatever condition he might be found. As he said "I will laugh at what I think ridiculous, either in a priest or in a Bishop or in a Pope: and many priests, Popes and Bishops have done ridiculous deeds: but I will never laugh at *holy things*."²⁹ Confident in the humanity and scholarship of his faith, Geddes, on the eve of the ascendancy of ultramontaniam in Catholicism and Evangelicism in Protestantism, was the last laugh of a humane genteel faith. The faithful of the nineteenth century churches seem to have been too earnest, too serious to be able to laugh at their own occasional lapses into pompous extravagance or ridiculous mawkishness. The church was the poorer.