

EASTERN TRADITIONS IN CHRISTIANITY

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WHEN I agreed to speak this afternoon I thought it would be more useful if I spoke to you personally and informally, rather than if I attempted to give a set lecture on so vast a subject. Besides, I would like to begin by making my own standpoint clear, and I can do that more easily if you will let me be personal.

I have great sympathy and great respect for many of those who are working towards reunion. But I have never classed myself among them, partly this is because 'reunion' has never seemed to me an immediate and practical problem. Perhaps because, all my life, so many of my closest friends have belonged to different communions and religions from my own, I can realise what a gulf still remains of mutual misapprehension, and how unlikely it is that that will be done away with within a space of time measurable by the historian. And then I have always consciously avoided the use of the term 'reunion' since it has seemed to me ambiguous in modern English. Possibly I am here influenced by the fact that, when I was a young man, 'reunion' was commonly used in England in the sense of 'reunion of the Church', and that as a phrase is incompatible with either the Catholic or the Orthodox conception of the Church's indivisibility. But the need of mutual charity will always be an immediate and practical problem. All through history in every religion and in every Christian communion there have been members who have been infected by the spirit of religious intolerance. That spirit of intolerance has been always a father of lies leading to calumnies of individuals and to distorted travesties of the doctrines of others. It has had its roots deep down in the spirit of hatred and has flowered in season into acts of gross physical cruelty. To me therefore it has always seemed to be the spirit of Antichrist. Of its nature it is disruptive, violating the law of justice by denying to others the respect we owe them as a debt, denying ultimately those fundamental unities which link us to each other. For underlying them all there is the unity of nature that

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exists between all men and women, all equally sons and daughters of the same Father, equally brothers and sisters, the children of God. Within that single human family there are yet closer groups, closer units, and the first is the unity between all the children of God who are God-conscious.

By chance I have had some first-hand experience of Islamic countries and I find it hard to understand how any God-conscious Christian of any communion can ignore the inner brotherhood which links us and the Mahommedan world. 'Blessed is Allah the merciful and the compassionate'. Any Christian who can care for St John of the Cross can surely understand the great Sufi mystics, and far beyond the mystical tradition of Islam there is the strength of popular Islamic religion; the sense of God in whom they too live and move and have their being, the practical charity, the realisation of man's individual dignity, yet common brotherhood. Again, surely, both Christendom and Islam are linked with the old traditions of orthodox Judaism, and with the belief in the transcendence and omnipotence of Adonai. While the traditions of contemplation in the further East apparently so far more alien from our own than those of Israel and Islam still witness in the beauty of a serene tranquility to the chasm between the contingent and the necessary and to the unique, absolute reality of God.

Again, within that family unity of the God-conscious there is a closer group: those who are not only God-conscious but conscious of Christ. Among them there are so many different links forged in such different centuries. But nowhere is there so much in common as is found between the Catholic and the Orthodox. It is only gradually that I have come to realise this. I was brought up, as so many Byzantinists have been, on the emphasis of the difference between East and West. So many years ago my master in Byzantine archaeology said to me that I could never understand Byzantine civilisation unless I realised that it was something as different from our own as that of Classical China. 'As different from our own'—that depends on what we consider to be our own. If by our own we mean the world of the modern universities I believe it to be true. But the difference between Haghia Sophia and modern Oxford is no greater than that between modern Oxford and Chartres. But if by our own we mean Chartres, then Haghia Sophia is closely linked with it on the same plane. I began to see that first in my few glimpses of the great Eastern monasteries,

taking notes of the mosaics in the abbey church at Hosios-Loukas under Parnassus, or of the paintings in the Vatopedi monastery on Mount Athos. Perhaps that provides a clue, perhaps the first profound meeting point of the two traditions lies in the monastic life. I would no more idealise Orthodox monasticism than I would Latin. Both have had their failures and their misfits, but in both the same fruition is being sought, within the framework of the same laws. With the Carthusians and with the monks at Athos there is the same conception of the organised contemplative life, the use of the religious vows, the position of the abbot, the use of the same psalms for the same end, even the similar use of silence. And at a deeper level not only the same liturgy but the same sacraments, the same Christ received in the same Eucharist on Athos and at Parkminster.

The details vary and with the centuries grow more divergent. The chant at Athos is now far more different from the Gregorian than it was four hundred years ago. It is at Athos that it has changed. The custom as to the reception of the Sacrament now common among Greek Orthodox is different from that common in the twentieth-century West. It is in the West that reception has become more frequent. But East and West, the fundamentals of religious life are still derived from that close spiritual brotherhood that linked St Basil and St Benedict. And from that time there has descended to our own the common patristic heritage. No Thomist should forget the debt of St Thomas to the Greek Fathers. St John Damascene was his forerunner and, through the version of Burgundius of Pisa, lies as primary source behind much of the *Summa*. It has been calculated that St Thomas quotes the Pseudo-Dionysius 1,760 times. He once said that that he would rather have St John Chrysostom on St Matthew than the whole town of Paris. And as long as the *Summa* is studied, thoughts from Basil and Nazianzen and Nemesios will be part of the Western theological inheritance.

But the links between Catholic and Orthodox go far beyond religious life and the conception of hierarchy and priesthood and a common patristic past. They extend to every detail of popular religion. The invocation of saints, often in the most matter-of-fact fashion, the veneration of relics, the popularity of pilgrimage shrines, and then transcending them all, that essentially popular devotion of all the East, the worship of the Mother of God. The

Mother of God, always invoked, always so close at hand. Mother to each one of us, as well as Mother of Christ; *Panaghia Glyco-philousa*.

It is the consciousness of the common Motherhood which forms the closest bonds between all Eastern Christians and those of our own communion in the West. For the Greeks, in spite of the glory of their many saints, are only a part of Eastern Christianity. We should never forget the heroic traditions of the Christians in Ethiopia who preserved Christianity in Africa through so many centuries. Or the Copts in Egypt, or the few relics that are left of the once great Nestorian Christianity in Mesopotamia and the further East. They were divided from the Greeks as from ourselves by the rejection of Chalcedon. But in the Ethiopian monasteries at Debra Libanos or Debra Damo the same religious life survives and the same unchanging trust in the care and protection of the Mother of God. 'Our Lady Maryam, the Merciful, the Preserver, the Covenant of Mercy.'

I have stressed all these links and similarities between Catholicism and the traditions of Eastern Christianity. Of course there are differences, contrasts and contradictions. Yet in so far as these are differences in spirituality and in the life of prayer, I believe they are exaggerated unduly in modern England. I have read that there are two notes of Eastern spirituality which are not paralleled in the West; one is the conception of Sobornost, and the other is the Kenotic Christ, the humiliated Christ. Is that really true? To me at least the doctrine of Sobornost in all its beauty and strength and validity is surely the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ which is one of the greatest of our common heritages. And the Sobor has received its most perfect literary expression in *Piers Plowman*, in the vision of the Common Barn. While the 'Kenotic Christ' seems a curiously ill-chosen word transferred from Lutheran German scriptural theories of the late nineteenth century, and applied to a conception as old as Christianity itself. It is perhaps significant that the first known icon of the humiliated Christ in Russian painting comes from early fifteenth-century Novgorod and is most probably derived, through the medium of the Hansa painters, from the wounded battered Christ on the wall-paintings of fourteenth-century East Anglia. Again it is the doctrine of *Piers Plowman*:

‘Piers the Plowman came in all bloody
Bearing his cross before the common people
Like in all limbs to the Lord Jesu’.

By chance I have had to combine two kinds of study, working as a Byzantinist and working as a Western medievalist. They are two kinds of study not very often combined. And if I were to take the two periods on which I have worked most, the fourteenth century in England and the fourteenth century in Greece and Constantinople, I think I would note that these two spheres were then quite remote from contact, and that the economic factors were quite different in each. Because the economic factors are different the social structure is different. Because the social structure is different the social ideals are different. We shall not find in fourteenth-century England any of that cult for the statesman as the wise man, or the zest for the conscious dominance of cool and temperate mind. We shall find very little of the ideal of knight-hood and chivalry in fourteenth-century Constantinople; the whole of the attitude towards women is fundamentally divergent. So much can be affected by the economic factor in history, but not religious truth. The social structure is different, the purely spiritual ideals are still the same. Notice how easily we could translate back *The Cloud of Unknowing* into medieval Greek, or how easily much of *Piers Plowman* can pass into Slavonic.

Because the spiritual ideals were then so similar in both traditions, both traditions are still linked because both are conservative of their past. In seventeenth-century Russia the priest Avakkum was to write of the form of making the sign of the Cross: ‘I hold this even unto death as I have received it. It has been laid down before us. Let it lie thus unto the age of ages.’ The most subtle scholar in the Byzantine renaissance wrote: ‘Even the smallest neglect of the traditions leads to complete contempt for dogma.’ He had formulated the essential note of Eastern Christianity.