

A Mild Remonstrance

G. K. CHESTERTON

I HOPE I shall not appear to pick a quarrel, when I think it only fair to answer a challenge, in the case of an organ with which I sympathize so much as I do with *THE AMERICAN REVIEW*. An organ so much concerned for justice, and in which neglected forms of justice like Distributism have often been expounded by Catholic writers, may perhaps allow a Catholic to protest against so very provocative a description of a Catholic social doctrine as that given by Mr. Robert Shafer in his second article on Dean Inge. Mr. Shafer mentions Birth-Prevention (absurdly called Birth-Control) and goes out of his way to say, "Certain of the Roman Catholic arguments against it — e.g., 'it is contrary to nature' — reach the height of absurdity and merit only derision." This is strong language about an ethical tradition that stretches from Aquinas to Maritain, and long before and after; and I think that one who has, by fairly hard thinking, reached the same height of absurdity as these thinkers, may be allowed to point out that the strong language is supported by very weak logic.

As this challenge, or rather taunt, is offered in the middle of an interesting and even enlightening eulogy of Dr. Inge, it is impossible not to pause first for a moment upon that justly celebrated name. It is not necessary here, however, to enter into all the perplexities of Mr. Shafer; for I think they are very easily resolved. He is slightly puzzled because Dr. Inge invokes

the mystics, and even the ascetics, to prove that Christians should not concern themselves too much with corporal works of mercy, or practical charity and justice to the poor; and yet (strangely enough) Dr. Inge invokes the materialists and the most medical moderns to prove that practical philanthropy, in the form of various mutilations or enslavements, must prevail over all the old Christian scruples about delicacy or dignity. In short, it is only fair to say that if Dr. Inge supported sanctity against Christian charity, he was always ready to support utility against Christian decency. But I do not propose to dwell on this problem; for I think it has a perfectly simple solution. What is the matter with Dr. Inge, otherwise a most distinguished and luminous thinker, is that he has a fundamental hatred, not of Catholicism, but of Christianity. Of course he does not put it to himself in that form, and is, therefore, in good faith; but that is the only form which has any relation to the fact. He is not a Modernist, in the modern sense; the vague and rather vulgar sense which means misunderstanding this or that doctrine, and therefore calling it a dogma. His heresy is not anything so silly as discovering with a start that the Trinity is a mystery, or that the Sacraments are materialized mysteries. His heresy is quite simply this; that he thinks Pride is a virtue and Humility is a vice. And as the one great difference made in the morals of a good Pagan, when he became a good Christian, was the discovery that the humility of Christ was higher than the pride of Cato, Dr. Inge has remained a good Pagan. That explains with one word all the inconsistencies that trouble Mr. Shafer; and makes them consistent. It furnishes the same simple

motive for following the mystics who would escape from the mob, and for following the materialists who would control the mob. Such a man would willingly talk with Buddha in a cave or with Galton in a laboratory; for both are obviously superior to somebody slaving among filthy Negroes, like Peter Claver, or (for that matter) among tolerably filthy Jews, like Jesus Christ. Nobody has hated more than I the pacifist heresy, "Nothing is worse than death"; but if anybody will apply the real original pagan heresy, "Nothing is worse than humiliation", he will completely understand the whole career of Dr. Inge, and apologize to that lucid and sincere man for any charges of inconsistency.

As the next step in approaching the question, let me quote only one example of Mr. Shafer's quotations. He seems seriously impressed with Dr. Inge's grotesque remark that Eugenics is Christian, or almost that Eugenics is Christianity, because the Dean quoted the text about the impossibility of gathering grapes from thorns or figs from thistles. Now to me this seems a specially shallow example of the old sectarian trick, of sniping out texts and blacking out contexts. Obviously, to anyone who has read the Gospel as one reads a book, this is merely an extension of the repeated advice about action; "He that heareth my words and doeth them". If it is controversial at all, it asserts the Catholic doctrine of Faith and Good Works against the Protestant doctrine of Faith even without Works. But if there is one thing which Christ quite obviously and glaringly did *not* believe, it is the grape-and-thorn argument in the only sense which could possibly be connected with Eugenics. For that

could only mean that if you are born a thorn, you cannot become a vine; in other words, that men have no more choice than vegetables. If anybody says *that* is in the Gospels, he is incapable of reading any ordinary book. The whole subject of these books is Repentance; the idea that the sinner may yet be the saint and the superior of the ordinary righteous man. Harlots and thieves were obviously thorns and thistles, in Dr. Inge's survey of nature; and if the Gospel story does not mean that harlots can become saints, and thieves go straight to Paradise, it has no possible meaning of any sort. But, on the principle I have suggested, there is no difficulty in explaining why Dr. Inge should search the Scriptures till he finds one text that can be twisted into a Calvinistic notion that nobody can alter himself from a thistle to a fig-tree. In short, there is nothing the matter with Dr. Inge, except that it has never even crossed his mind that he might be a thistle.

These things being so, there is no reason to be surprised at Dr. Inge supporting Birth-Prevention (absurdly called Birth-Control); for he was always quite incapable of imagining himself as one of the people whose birth might have been prevented. But there is some cause for mild and reasonable surprise, when a writer in *THE AMERICAN REVIEW* dismisses with "derision", his own phrase, the objection to Birth-Prevention (absurdly called Birth-Control) which was once common to all Christians, and is now common to all Catholics. Perhaps the world is divided into those who laugh first and think afterwards, and those who think first and laugh afterwards. But about the actual Catholic argument, it is clear that Mr. Shafer has

laughed first and not (so far) thought at all. He really seems to suppose that when we call Birth-Prevention (absurdly called Birth-Control) anti-natural, we only mean an action modifying or diverting natural forces, as do all the actions of men. He actually uses the parallel, "it is no more contrary to nature, in any legitimate sense of that word, than is artificial illumination". A little hard on us, whose cathedrals crowded with flaming candles have always been a scandal and a reproach to us, because such illumination is so very artificial.

Now I do my best, but I have very great difficulty in believing that a man like Mr. Shafer thinks that all Catholics are half-witted. And they would have to have less than half their natural wits not to see that cutting down a tree or lighting a torch is against nature, in the sense that something else would have happened if men had done something else. In that sense, we are really capable of realizing that light is artificial and that night is natural. In short, we have in two thousand years of thought got as far in Biblical Criticism as to know the answer to the great sceptical question, "Where was Moses when the light went out?" But when we say that Birth-Prevention (absurdly called Birth-Control) is "against nature", we mean something quite different, in the language of a moral philosophy of which Mr. Shafer seems never to have heard. We mean that it is against what Catholics call the Natural Law; that is the right reason in things which man with his unaided reason can see to be right. And the chief reason for saying so, though there are several others, is that the right reason of man in any case rebels against the idea of taking something that

has a purpose, and a great purpose, and twisting it to serve a smaller purpose. For a short explanation of the principle, I could ask nothing better than Mr. Shafer's extraordinary parallel of artificial illumination. Birth-Prevention (absurdly called Birth-Control) is exactly the opposite of a thing like lighting torches or candles or street-lamps. It is not having a large and luminous purpose, and then inventing engines to serve that purpose. It is taking a gigantic engine, that does already serve a large and luminous purpose, and twisting and wrecking it so that it shall only serve a smaller and more selfish purpose. If he wants a parallel between light and this freak of darkness, I can easily give it to him. Catholics, like other people, are in the habit of setting up lamp-posts along the streets of modern towns. It has not yet dawned on their feeble minds that they are interfering with nature, by interfering with night. Now suppose somebody were to say, "Cut off all the electricity or gas from all these lamps; there are pleasanter uses for lamp-posts." A drunkard can embrace a lamp-post, in a dream of joy in which he seems to be in a forest of lamp-posts. There are towns in which the lamp-posts are painted pink or pea-green with elvish artistry; and some in which they are picked out with such complicated stripes and spots, for a guide to motorists, that they look as if they were gigantic sugar-sticks invented by insane children. If somebody said that lamp-posts only exist for the lunatic to paint or for the drunkard to dream under — *that* would be a parallel to Birth-Prevention (absurdly called Birth-Control). If somebody said that lamp-posts do not exist for lamps, or that lamps do not exist for light — *that* would be a parallel to Birth-Preven-

tion (absurdly called Birth-Control). For there is no reason why there should not be other legitimate pleasures connected with the main purpose; and not merely provided for drunkards or lunatics. I am all in favour of painting lamp-posts with pretty colours, and even fantastic colours; I am all in favour of leaning against lamp-posts and dreaming dreams; and I have often done it. But if anybody says that lamp-posts are to be deprived of their main function, and altered to serve these merely subjective functions; then I say it is "against nature", in the sense of being against the natural sequence of cause and effect and the right reason of things.

Now there is one word which everybody seems to have blankly forgotten, in incessantly talking about Birth-Prevention (absurdly called Birth-Control); and that word is Birth. It is notable that we never hear from any one of the reformers any word of wonder or appreciation or adequate reaction towards the most stupendous incident of human experience. It is from any point of view, but especially from the Humanist, the heroic, the classic, or the objective point of view, an immeasurably grander thing to add a life to the universe than to add a love-affair to the life of a rather irresponsible and self-indulgent free-lover. To this great triumph God has added a great joy; and it is absolutely and wholly right that this joy should be enjoyed. But it is not in the least ridiculous or irrational to say that there is something unnatural, to our instincts and our intellect, in filching the joy while carefully shirking the triumph. It rests upon exactly the same sort of natural law, in the common conscience, which makes sexual perversion act on the sane

imagination like an emetic. What makes the city of Sodom still stink under the Dead Sea is, ultimately, that it is a contradiction in terms. It denies sex in the act of pursuing sexuality. What is meant by calling this other perversion unnatural is that it is in the same really fundamental sense irrational. It preserves the songs and feasting of the harvest-home by arranging that there shall be no harvest. It brings more presents to the birthday-party by arranging that there shall be no birth. There are, of course, all sorts of practical arguments and counter-arguments with which I am not concerned here; though I am quite ready to deal with them anywhere. I only write here to point out that there is a principle involved that rises rather higher than the height of absurdity; and if Mr. Shafer is still content merely to "deride" it, we can only suggest that it also goes rather deeper than his derision.

The Vitality of George Gissing

ROBERT SHAFER

GISSING'S fiction indisputably possesses a vitality which has given the man a secure position amongst the nine or ten English novelists of the nineteenth century who wrote not alone for their own time or place. Interest in Gissing has been very active continuously since his death in December, 1903, and has, indeed, notably increased in recent years. This is attested not only by animated critical discussion but, more impressively, by a steady growing demand for his books. About seventeen of these either have been kept in print continuously since their first publication or have been reprinted, some of them in more than one edition and on both sides of the Atlantic, during the last ten or fifteen years. Such a fact speaks plainly enough for itself; though it does not mean that Gissing, never in his lifetime a popular writer, is at all likely now or in the future to become the object of extremely widespread eager acclamation.

When *Workers in the Dawn* appeared in 1880 — the first of Gissing's novels to achieve publication, although not the first to be written — it found certainly less than fifty readers, including the reviewers. These gentlemen found little in it worthy of their attention, some condemning it severely for its crudity, others for subversive tendencies they discovered in it. Amongst readers, however, there were at least two, Frederic Harrison and John Morley, who thought it extraordinarily powerful despite all artistic shortcom-