

## IS HUMANISM A RELIGION?

by G. K. Chesterton

I HAVE just been reading Mr. Norman Foerster's book on *American Criticism* and I hope it is no disrespect to the bulk of the book, a series of very thoughtful studies on American thinkers, if I say that the whole point of it is in the last chapter; which propounds a certain problem or challenge to modern thought. It is the problem of whether what he calls Humanism can satisfy humanity. Of his other topics it would be easy to talk forever. He generally says the right thing; he sometimes says the last word in that suggestive or provocative style that tempts somebody to say one word more. In my own estimate of his subjects, Whitman would be very much larger and Lowell very much smaller. About Emerson he seems both sensitive and just; and Emerson certainly had distinction; but just that dry sort of distinction to which I should always be afraid of being unfair.

A Puritan tried to be pagan and succeeded in being a pagan who hesitated about whether he ought to go and see a girl dancing. But all these things are stimulating but secondary to the question which I will take the liberty of attacking separately and attempting to answer seriously. I fear that answering it seriously must mean answering it personally. The question really is whether Humanism can perform all the functions of religion; and I cannot but regard it in relation to my own religion. It is only just to say that Humanism is quite different from Humanitarianism. It

means, as explained here, a very right realization that modern science and organization are in a sense only too natural. They herd us like the beasts along lines of heredity or tribal doom; they melt us into the mud of materialism or sink us in the sea of subconsciousness. We need a rally of the really *human* things; will which is morals, memory which is tradition, culture which is the mental thrift of our fathers. Nevertheless, my first duty is to answer the question put to me; and I must answer it in the negative.

I do not believe that Humanism can be a complete substitute for Superhumanism. I do not believe it because of a certain truth, to me so concrete as to-be-called-a fact. I know it sounds very like something that has often been said in conventional or superficial apologetics. But I do not mean it in that vague sense; so far from inheriting it as a convention, I have rather recently collided with it as a discovery. I have realized it relatively late in life, and realized that it is indeed the whole story and moral of my own lifetime. But even a few years ago, when most of my moral and religious views were pretty finally formed, I should not have seen it quite sharply and clearly; as I see it now.

The fact is this: that the modern world, with its modern movements, is living on its Catholic capital. It is using, and using up, the truths that remain to it out of the old treasury of Christendom; including, of course, many truths known to pagan antiquity but

crystallized in Christendom. But it is *not* really starting new enthusiasms of its own. The novelty is a matter of names and labels, like modern advertisement; in almost every other way the novelty is merely negative. It is not starting fresh things that it can really carry on far into the future. On the contrary, it is picking up old things that it cannot carry on at all. For these are the two marks of modern moral ideals. First, that they were borrowed or snatched out of ancient or mediæval hands. Second, that they wither very quickly in modern hands. That is, very briefly, the thesis I maintain; and it so happens that the book called *American Criticism* might almost have been meant for a textbook to prove my point.

I will begin with a particular example with which the book also deals. My whole youth was filled, as with a sunrise, with the glory of Walt Whitman. He seemed to me something like a crowd turned to a giant, or like Adam the First Man. It thrilled me to hear of somebody who had heard of somebody, who saw him in the street; it was as if Christ were still alive. I did not care about whether his unmetrical poetry were a wise form or no, any more than whether a true Gospel of Jesus were scrawled on parchment or stone. I never had a hint of the evil some enemies have attributed to him; if it was there, it was not there for me. What I saluted was a new equality, which was not a dull levelling but an enthusiastic lifting; a shouting exultation in the mere fact that men were men. Real men were greater than unreal gods; and each remained as mystic and majestic as a god, while he became as frank and comforting as a comrade. The point can be put most compactly in one of Whitman's own phrases; he says somewhere that old artists painted crowds, in which one head had a nimbus of gold-colored light; "but I paint hundreds of heads, but paint no head without its nimbus of gold-colored light". A glory was to cling about men as men; a mutual worship was to take the form of fellowship; and the least and

lowest of men must be included in this fellowship; a hump-backed Negro half-wit, with one eye and homicidal mania, must not be painted without his nimbus of gold-colored light. This might seem only the final expansion of the movement begun a century before with Rousseau and the Revolutionists; and I was brought up to believe, and did believe, that the movement was the beginning of bigger and better things. But these were songs before sunrise; and there is no comparison between even sunrise and the sun. Whitman was brotherhood in broad daylight, showing endless varieties of radiant and wonderful creatures, all the more sacred for being solid. Shelley had adored Man, but Whitman adored Men. Every human face, every human feature, was a matter of mystical poetry, such as lit like chance torchlight, hitherto, a face here and there in the crowd. A king was a man treated as all men should be treated. A god was a man worshipped as all men should be worshipped. What could they do against a race of gods and a republic of kings; not verbally but veritably the New World?

Well . . . here is what Mr. Foerster says about the present position of the founder of the new world of democracy:

Our present science lends little support to an inherent "dignity of man" or to his "perfectibility". It is wholly possible that the science of the future will lead us away from democracy towards some form of aristocracy. The millennial expectations that Whitman built upon science and democracy, we are now well aware, rested upon insecure foundations. . . The perfection of nature, the natural goodness of man, "the great pride of man in himself" offset with an emotional humanitarianism—these are the materials of a structure only slightly colored with modernity. His politics, his ethics, his religion belong to the past, even that facile "religiousness" which he hoped would suffuse and complete the work of science and democracy. . . In the essentials of his prophecy, Whitman, we must conclude, has been falsified by the event.

This is a very moderate and fair statement; it would be easy to find the same thing in a much fiercer statement. Here is a monumental remark by Mr. H. L. Mencken:

They [he means certain liberal or ex-liberal thinkers] have come to realize that the morons whom they sweated to save do not want to be saved, and are not worth saving.

That is the New Spirit, if there is any New Spirit. "I will make unconquerable cities, with their arms about each other's necks," cried Walt Whitman, "by the love of comrades, by the lifelong love of comrades." I like to think of the face of Mr. Mencken of Baltimore if some casual comrade from Pittsburgh tried to make him unconquerable by putting an arm around his neck. But the idea is dead for much less ferocious people than Mr. Mencken. It is dead in a man like Aldous Huxley, who complained recently of the "gratuitous" romancing of the old republican view of human nature. It is dead in the most humane and humorous of our recent critics. It is dead in so many wise and good men today, that I cannot help wondering whether, under modern conditions of his favorite "science", it would not be dead in Whitman himself.

It is not dead in me. It remains real for me, not by any merit of mine, but by the fact that this mystical idea, while it has evaporated as a mood, still exists as a creed. I am perfectly prepared to assert, as firmly as I should have asserted in my boyhood, that the humpbacked and half-witted Negro is decorated with a nimbus of gold-colored light. The truth is that Whitman's wild picture, or what he thought was a wild picture, is in fact a very old and orthodox picture. There are, as a matter of fact, any number of old pictures in which whole crowds are crowned with haloes, to indicate that they have all attained Beatitude. But for Catholics it is a fundamental dogma of the Faith that all human beings, without any exception whatever, were specially made, were shaped and pointed like

shining arrows, for the end of hitting the mark of Beatitude. It is true that the shafts are feathered with free will, and therefore throw the shadow of all the tragic possibilities of free will; and that the Church (having also been aware for ages of that other and darker side of truth, which the new sceptics have just discovered) does also draw attention to the darkness of that potential tragedy. But that does not make any difference to the gloriousness of the potential glory. In one aspect it is even a part of it; since the freedom is itself a glory. In that sense, they would still wear their haloes even in hell.

But the point is that anyone believing that all these beings were made to be blessed, and multitudes of them probably well on their way to be blessed, really has a sound philosophic reason for regarding them all as radiant and wonderful creatures, or seeing all their heads in haloes. That conviction does make every human face, every human feature, a matter of mystical poetry. But it is not at all like modern poetry. The most modern of modern poetry is not the poetry of reception but of rejection, or rather of repulsion. The spirit that inhabits the most recent work might be called a fury of fastidiousness. The new man of letters does not get his effect by saying that for him a humpbacked Negro has a halo. He gets his effect by saying that, just as he was about to embrace finally the fairest of women, he was nauseated by a pimple above her eyebrow or a stain of grease on her left thumb. Whitman tried to prove that dirty things were really clean, as when he glorified manure as the matrix of the purity of grass. His followers in free verse try to prove that clean things are really dirty; to suggest something leprous and loathsome about the thick whiteness of milk, or something prickly and plague-stricken about the unaccountable growth of hair. In short, the whole mood has changed, as a matter of poetry. But it has not changed as a matter of theology; and that is the argument for having an unchanging theology. The Catholic

theology has nothing to do with democracy, for or against, in the sense of a machinery of voting or a criticism of particular political privileges. It is not committed to support what Whitman said for democracy, or even what Jefferson or Lincoln said for democracy. But it is absolutely committed to contradict what Mr. Mencken says against democracy. There will be Diocletian persecutions, there will be Dominican crusades, there will be rending of all religious peace and compromise, or even the end of civilization and the world, before the Catholic Church will admit that one single moron, or one single man, "is not worth saving".

I have therefore found in my middle age this curious fact about the lesson of my life, and that of all my generation. We all grew up with a common conviction, lit by the flames of the literary genius of Rousseau, of Shelley, of Victor Hugo, finding its final flare-up and conflagration in the universalism of Walt Whitman. And we all took it for granted that all our descendants would take it for granted. I said the discovery of brotherhood seemed like the discovery of broad daylight; of something that men could never grow tired of. Yet even in my own short lifetime, men have already grown tired of it. We cannot now appeal to the love of equality as an *emotion*. We cannot now open a new book of poems, and expect it to be about the lifelong love of comrades, or "Love, the beloved Republic, that feeds upon freedom and lives". We realize that in most men it has died, because it was a mood and not a doctrine. And we begin to wonder too late, in the wise fashion of the aged, how we could ever have expected it to last as a mood, if it was not strong enough to last as a doctrine. And we also begin to realize that all the real strength there was in it, which is the only strength that remains in it, was the original strength of the doctrine. What really happened was this: that the men of the Eighteenth Century, many of them in a just impatience with corrupt and cynical priests, turned on those

priests and said in effect, "Well, I suppose you call yourselves Christians; so you can't actually *deny* that men are brothers or that it is our duty to help the poor". The very confidence of their challenge, the very ringing note in the revolutionary voice, came from the fact that the Christian reactionaries were in a false position as Christians. The democratic demand won because it seemed unanswerable. And it seemed unanswerable, not in the least because it is unanswerable, but because even decadent Christians dared not give the answer. Mr. H. L. Mencken will always be happy to oblige with the answer.

Now it was just here that, for me, the business began to be odd and interesting. For, looking back on older religious crises, I seem to see a certain coincidence; or rather a set of things too coincident to be called a coincidence. After all, when I come to think of it, all the other revolts against the Church, before the Revolution and especially since the Reformation, had told the same strange story. Every great heretic had always exhibited three remarkable characteristics in combination. First, he picked out some mystical idea. Second, he used that one mystical idea against all the other mystical ideas. Third (and most singular), he seems generally to have had no notion that his own favorite mystical idea was a mystical idea, at least in the sense of a mysterious or dubious or dogmatic idea. With a queer uncanny innocence, he seems always to have taken this one thing for granted. He assumed it to be unassailable, even when he was using it to assail all sorts of similar things. The most popular and obvious example is the Bible. To an impartial pagan or sceptical observer, it must always seem the strangest story in the world, that men, rushing in to wreck a temple, overturning the altar and driving out the priest, found there certain sacred volumes inscribed "Psalms" or "Gospels"; and (instead of throwing them on the fire with the rest), began to use them as infallible oracles rebuking all the other arrangements. If the sacred high

altar was all wrong, why were the secondary sacred documents necessarily all right? If the priest had faked his Sacraments, why could he not have faked his Scriptures? Yet it was long before it even occurred, to those who brandished this one piece of Church furniture to break up all the other Church furniture, that anybody could be so profane as to examine this one fragment of furniture itself. People were quite surprised, and in some parts of the world are still surprised, that anybody should dare to do so.

Again, the Calvinists took the Catholic idea of the absolute knowledge and power of God; and treated it as a rocky irreducible truism so solid that anything could be built on it, however crushing or cruel. They were so confident in their logic, and its one first principle of predestination, that they tortured the intellect and imagination with dreadful deductions about God, that seemed to turn Him into a demon. But it never seems to have struck them that somebody might suddenly say that he did not believe in the demon. They were quite surprised when people called "infidels" here and there began to say it. They had assumed the Divine foreknowledge as so fixed, that it must, if necessary, fulfill itself by destroying the Divine mercy. They never thought anybody would deny the knowledge exactly as they denied the mercy. Then came Wesley and the reaction against Calvinism; and Evangelicals seized on the quite Catholic idea that mankind has a sense of sin; and they wandered about offering everybody release from his mysterious burden of sin. It is a proverb, and almost a joke, that they address a stranger in the street and offer to relax his secret agony of sin. But it seldom seemed to strike them, until much later, that the man in the street might possibly answer that he did not want to be saved from sin, any more than from spotted fever or St. Vitus' dance; because these things were not in fact causing him any suffering at all. They, in their turn, were quite surprised when the result of Rousseau

and the revolutionary optimism began to express itself in men claiming a purely human happiness and dignity; a contentment with the comradeship of their kind; ending with the happy yawp of Whitman that he would not "lie awake and weep for his sins".

Now the plain truth is that Shelley and Whitman and the revolutionary optimists were themselves doing exactly the same thing, all over again. They also, though less consciously because of the chaos of their times, had really taken out of the old Catholic tradition one particular transcendental idea; the idea that there is a spiritual dignity in man as man, and a universal duty to love men as men. And they acted in exactly the same extraordinary fashion as their prototypes, the Wesleyans and the Calvinists. They took it for granted that this spiritual idea was absolutely self-evident like the sun and moon; that nobody could ever destroy that, though in the name of it they destroyed everything else. They perpetually hammered away at their human divinity and human dignity, and inevitable love for all human beings; as if these things were naked, natural facts. And now they are quite surprised, when new and restless realists suddenly explode, and begin to say that a pork-butcher with red whiskers and a wart on his nose does not strike them as particularly divine or dignified, that they are not conscious of the smallest sincere impulse to love him, that they could not love him if they tried, or that they do not recognize any particular obligation to try.

I do not therefore believe that Humanism and Religion are rivals on equal terms. I believe it is a rivalry between the pools and the fountain; or between the firebrands and the fire. Each of these old intellectuals snatched one firebrand out of the undying fire; but the point is that though he waved the torch to burn down half the world, the torch really went out very soon. The Puritans did not really perpetuate their sublime exultation in helplessness; they only made it

unpopular. We did not go on indefinitely looking at the Brooklyn crowds with the eye of Whitman; we have come with singular rapidity to regard them with the eye of Dreiser.

In short, I distrust spiritual experiments outside the central spiritual tradition for the simple reason that I think they do not last, even if they manage to spread. At the most they stand for one generation; at the commonest for one fashion; at the lowest for one clique. I do not think they have the secret of continuity; certainly not of corporate continuity. For an antiquated, doddering old democrat like myself may be excused for attaching some slight importance to that last question; that of covering the common life of mankind. How many Humanists are there supposed to be among the inferior crowd of human beings? Are there to be, for instance, no more than there were Greek philosophers in an ordinary rabble of jolly pagan polytheistic Greeks? Are there to be no more than there were men concentrated on the Culture of Matthew Arnold, among the mobs who followed Cardinal Manning or General Booth? I do not in the least intend to sneer at Humanism; I think I understand the intellectual distinction it draws, and I have tried to understand it in a spirit of humility; but I feel a faint interest in how many people out of the battered and bewildered human race are actually expected to understand it. And I ask with a certain personal interest; for there are three hundred million people in the world who accept the mysteries that I accept and live by the faith I hold. I really want to know whether it is anticipated that there will be three hundred million Humanists in Humanity. The sanguine may say that Humanism will be the religion of the next generation, just as Comte said that Humanity would be the God of the next generation. And the question is what will be the religion of the next generation

after that, or all the other generations (as a certain ancient promise ran) even unto the end of the world.

Humanism, in Mr. Foerster's sense, has one very wise and worthy character. It is really trying to pick up the pieces; that is, to pick up all the pieces. All that was done before was first blind destruction and then random and scrappy selection; as if boys had broken up a stained-glass window and then made a few scraps into colored spectacles, the rose-colored spectacles of the republican or the green or yellow spectacles of the pessimist and the decadent. But Humanism as here professed will stoop to gather all it can; for instance, it is great enough to stoop and pick up the jewel of humility. Mr. Foerster does understand, as the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries did not understand, the case for humility. Matthew Arnold, who made something of the same stand for what he called Culture in the mid-Nineteenth Century, attempted something of the same preservation of chastity; which he would call, in a rather irritating manner, "pureness". But before we call either Culture or Humanism a substitute for religion, there is a very plain question that can be asked in the form of a very homely metaphor. Humanism may try to pick up the pieces; but can it stick them together?

Where is the *cement* which made religion corporate and popular, which can prevent it falling to pieces in a débris of individualistic tastes and degrees? What is to prevent one Humanist wanting chastity without humility, and another, humility without chastity, and another, truth or beauty without either? The problem of an enduring ethic and culture consists in finding an arrangement of the pieces by which they remain related, as do the stones arranged in an arch. And I know only one scheme that has thus proved its solidity, bestriding lands and ages with its gigantic arches, and carrying everywhere the high power of baptism upon an aqueduct of Rome.

## FOUR EPITAPHS

*by Mark Van Doren*

### FOR TWO MEN

When these were idle shouting boys  
Their mouths could make an equal noise.

When these were young and earnest men  
One managed all the talking then.

When he grew famous he forgot  
The other one that here doth rot.

But which is now the louder dust  
The eyeless worms have not discussed.

### FOR TWO BROTHERS

Let no man say that either mind  
Heard willingly the scythe behind.

The edge was on them ere they knew,  
With that undone which words could do,

And now is done upon a stone  
That time has not come back and mown.

Until it tumbles, brother and brother  
Understand they loved each other.