

The Medieval Christian Synthesis

Christian virtue is not fundamentally different from Hebrew virtue, because not only Jews and Christians but nearly everyone innately knows what is right and wrong (religions do not differ much in their ethics, but in their theology) and because Jews and Christians believe in the same God, the author of the moral law.

But Christianity, unlike Judaism, is a proselytizing religion. It sent missionaries out into the Greco-Roman world convert it, and the "it" that was there to be converted included Greek notions of virtue.

There were from the beginning three different attitudes on the part of Christians to the pagan world in general to pagan notions of virtue in particular: (1) uncritical synthesis, (2) critical synthesis, and (3) criticism and anti-synthesis. Different Christian thinkers accepted either (1) all, (2) some, or (3) none of the Greek ideals of virtue. The greatest and mainstream Christians, like Augustine and Aquinas, took the second way and have been criticized by extremists of both wings right up to the present day. They are labeled fundamentalists by the modernists and modernists by the fundamentalists.

Perhaps synthesis is the wrong word for the great tradition forged in the thousand years of the Middle Ages. It is rather a profound Christian reinterpretation of Greek philosophy and Greek morality. It was not like gluing a rat onto a carrot but like a rabbit's eating and digesting a carrot.

The Renaissance and the Reformation: Two forces separated the strands of the rope that the Middle Ages tied together. We no longer live in the Middle Ages, mainly because of the Renaissance and the Reformation.

The Renaissance tried to return to the Greco-Roman classicism and humanism minus the medieval additions of scholastic philosophy and theology. The Reformation tried to return to a simpler, pre-medieval, New Testament Christianity, a Christianity minus the additions of Greek rationalism and Roman legalism and institutionalism which the reformers thought had corrupted the Catholic Church. From our vantage point today we call the Renaissance and the Reformation progressive movements because they led out of the Middle Ages into the modern world. However, thinkers in those times saw themselves as part of nostalgic or returning movements, purifying movements: the Renaissance returning to Hellenism, the Reformation to Hebraism.

The dichotomy is still with us. Hebraism and Hellenism, heart and head, will and reason, are still separated. Nietzsche's unsuccessful attempt to find the unifying center of these two forces (which he called the "Dionysian" and the "Apollonian" after the Greek gods of earth and sky, darkness and light, vegetation and the sun) drove him insane. Along the road to madness, brilliance was thrown off, like sparks from a destructive fire. All this is true of our whole civilization as well as for Nietzsche. I am not glorifying a madman, but Nietzsche was a prophet and mirror to the madness of our own civilization, and we can learn much from him.

The Enlightenment: The term is ironic; for spiritually the eighteenth century was the darkest ever. Scientism and rationalism replace faith; the human heart narrowed and hardened in conformity with its own gods, the inventions of its own. G. K. Chesterton was profoundly right about the three eras of our history—ancient, medieval, and modern (pre-Christian, Christian, and post-Christian) — when he summarized all of Western history in three sentences: "paganism was the biggest thing in the world; and Christianity was bigger; and everything since has been comparatively small."

Enlightenment rationalism cut the top off of Greek ideals and kept the bottom, cut off wisdom and kept logic, transformed reason into reasoning. With this new, streamlined tool, the world could be conquered. The scientific method became the tool for the new summum bonum, the new meaning of life: man's conquest of nature". Alexander Pope summarized the faith of the Enlightenment in two lines: Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night; God said, "Let Newton be!" and all was light.

Romanticism: Nineteenth-century Romanticism and its philosophical child, Existentialism, was the reaction against Enlightenment rationalism, the reaction of heart against head. But just as the Enlightenment's head was a trimmed-down and secularized head, Romanticism's heart was a trimmed-down and secularized heart. It was sentiment instead of will, and it was in relationship to nature rather than to God.

The Present: Where do we go from here? Nearly everyone agrees that we are standing at the end of an age, perhaps at a new axial period. We have left modernity behind almost as surely as we have left antiquity behind. We are "postmodern". But we do not yet know what that means.

From our unique experiment in living without a set of objective values, only two roads lie open: return or destruction. Once the sled is on the slippery slope leading

to the abyss, we either brake or break; and no amount of rhetoric about "progress" can alter that fact. Crying "progress" as we die will not raise us from death.

Yet our diagnosis gives us reason to hope. We came from a place closer to home; therefore it is possible to return. Our illness is not wholly hereditary. There is, of course, a far deeper illness in us that is hereditary. It is called "Original Sin", and for that a remedy far deeper than philosophy is needed, and in fact has been provided, and is "the greatest story ever told".

But there is also a cure, a hope, a home to return to on the natural level. It is our own human nature. The four cardinal virtues, which we shall explore in chapter four, are the heart of natural morality, and they lie embedded and ineradicable in our very nature. That nature is weakened and perverted by sin, but it is not obliterated. No virtue cannot save our souls, but it can save our civilization, and that is no mean feat. But it can save us only if both know it and practice it.

On the supernatural level there is also hope because there too is a home from which we came – Paradise - though the road back is only by grace. Since we were once home, there is home and thus a hope, a possibility of return even something better. The road to Paradise is supernatural virtue, the three theological virtues of faith, hope, charity and the blessedness, or beatitude, that flows from them.