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Atheist Delusions

**The Christian
Revolution
and its
Fashionable
Enemies**

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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK IS IN NO SENSE an impartial work of history. Perfect detachment is impossible for even the soberest of historians, since the writing of history necessarily demands some sort of narrative of causes and effects, and is thus necessarily an act of interpretation, which by its nature can never be wholly free of prejudice. But I am not really a historian, in any event, and I do not even aspire to detachment. In what follows, my prejudices are transparent and unreserved, and my argument is in some respects willfully extreme (or so it might seem). I think it prudent to admit this from the outset, if only to avoid being accused later of having made some pretense of perfect objectivity or neutrality so as to lull the reader into a state of pliant credulity. What I have written is at most a “historical essay,” at no point free of bias, and intended principally as an apologia for a particular understanding of the effect of Christianity upon the development of Western civilization.

This is not to say, I hasten to add, that I am in any way forswearing claims of objective truth: to acknowledge that one’s historical judgments can never be absolutely pure of preconceptions or personal convictions is scarcely to surrender to a thoroughgoing relativism. It may be impossible to provide perfectly irrefutable evidence for one’s conclusions, but it is certainly possible to amass evidence sufficient to confirm them beyond plausible doubt, just as it is possible to discern when a particular line

of interpretation has exceeded or contradicted the evidence altogether and become little better than a vehicle for the writer's own predilections, interests, or allegiances. I can, moreover, vouch for the honesty of my argument: I have not consciously distorted any aspect of the history I discuss or striven to conceal any of its more disheartening elements. Such honesty costs me little, as it happens. Since the case I wish to make is *not* that the Christian gospel can magically transform whole societies in an instant, or summon the charity it enjoins out of the depths of every soul, or entirely extirpate cruelty and violence from human nature, or miraculously lift men and women out of their historical contexts, I feel no need to evade or excuse the innumerable failures of many Christians through the ages to live lives of charity or peace. Where I come to the defense of historical Christianity, it is only in order to raise objections to certain popular calumnies of the church, or to demur from what I take to be disingenuous or inane arraignments of Christian belief or history, or to call attention to achievements and virtues that writers of a devoutly anti-Christian bent tend to ignore, dissemble, or dismiss.

Beyond that, my ambitions are small; I make no attempt here to convert anyone to anything. Indeed, the issue of my personal belief or disbelief is quite irrelevant to—and would be surprisingly unilluminating of—my argument. Some of the early parts of this book, for instance, concern the Roman Catholic Church; but whatever I say in its defense ought not to be construed as advocacy for the institution itself (to which I do not belong), but only for historical accuracy. To be honest, my affection for institutional Christianity as a whole is rarely more than tepid; and there are numerous forms of Christian belief and practice for which I would be hard pressed to muster a kind word from the depths of my heart, and the rejection of which by the atheist or skeptic strikes me as perfectly laudable. In a larger sense, moreover, nothing I argue below—even if all of it is granted—implies that the Christian vision of reality is true. And yet, even so, the case I wish to make is intended to be provocative, and its more apologetic moments are meant to clear the way for a number of much stronger, and even perhaps somewhat immoderate, assertions.

This book chiefly—or at least centrally—concerns the history of the early church, of roughly the first four or five centuries, and the story of how Christendom was born out of the culture of late antiquity. My chief ambition in writing it is to call attention to the peculiar and radical na-

ture of the new faith in that setting: how enormous a transformation of thought, sensibility, culture, morality, and spiritual imagination Christianity constituted in the age of pagan Rome; the liberation it offered from fatalism, cosmic despair, and the terror of occult agencies; the immense dignity it conferred upon the human person; its subversion of the cruelest aspects of pagan society; its (alas, only partial) demystification of political power; its ability to create moral community where none had existed before; and its elevation of active charity above all other virtues. Stated in its most elementary and most buoyantly positive form, my argument is, first of all, that among all the many great transitions that have marked the evolution of Western civilization, whether convulsive or gradual, political or philosophical, social or scientific, material or spiritual, there has been only one—the triumph of Christianity—that can be called in the fullest sense a “revolution”: a truly massive and epochal revision of humanity’s prevailing vision of reality, so pervasive in its influence and so vast in its consequences as actually to have created a new conception of the world, of history, of human nature, of time, and of the moral good. To my mind, I should add, it was an event immeasurably more impressive in its cultural creativity and more ennobling in its moral power than any other movement of spirit, will, imagination, aspiration, or accomplishment in the history of the West. And I am convinced that, given how radically at variance Christianity was with the culture it slowly and relentlessly displaced, its eventual victory was an event of such improbability as to strain the very limits of our understanding of historical causality.

There is also, however, a negative side to my argument. It is what I suppose I should call my rejection of modernity—or, rather, my rejection of the ideology of “the modern” and my rejection, especially, of the myth of “the Enlightenment.” By modernity, I should explain, I certainly do not mean modern medicine or air travel or space exploration or any of the genuinely useful or estimable aspects of life today; I do not even mean modern philosophical method or social ideology or political thought. Rather, I mean the modern age’s grand narrative of itself: its story of the triumph of critical reason over “irrational” faith, of the progress of social morality toward greater justice and freedom, of the “tolerance” of the secular state, and of the unquestioned ethical primacy of either individualism or collectivism (as the case may be). Indeed, I want in part to argue that what many of us are still in the habit of calling the “Age of Reason” was in

many significant ways the beginning of the eclipse of reason's authority as a cultural value; that the modern age is notable in large measure for the triumph of inflexible and unthinking dogmatism in every sphere of human endeavor (including the sciences) and for a flight from rationality to any number of soothing fundamentalisms, religious and secular; that the Enlightenment ideology of modernity *as such* does not even deserve any particular credit for the advance of modern science; that the modern secular state's capacity for barbarism exceeds any of the evils for which Christendom might justly be indicted, not solely by virtue of the superior technology at its disposal, but by its very nature; that among the chief accomplishments of modern culture have been a massive retreat to superstition and the gestation of especially pitiless forms of nihilism; and that, by comparison to the Christian revolution it succeeded, modernity is little more than an aftereffect, or even a counterrevolution—a reactionary flight back toward a comfortable, but dehumanizing, mental and moral servitude to elemental nature. In fact, this is where my story both begins and ends. The central concern of what follows is the early centuries of the church, but I approach those centuries very much from the perspective of the present, and I return from them only to consider what the true nature of a post-Christian culture must be. Needless to say, perhaps, my prognostications tend toward the bleak.

Summary is always perilous. I know that—reduced thus to its barest elements—the argument I propose lacks a certain refinement. I must leave it to the reader to judge whether, in filling in the details below, I in fact achieve any greater degree of subtlety. What, however, animates this project is a powerful sense of how great a distance of historical forgetfulness and cultural alienation separates us from the early centuries of the Christian era, and how often our familiarity with the Christianity we know today can render us insensible to the novelty and uncanniness of the gospel as it was first proclaimed—or even as it was received by succeeding generations of ancient and mediaeval Christians. And this is more than merely unfortunate. Our normal sense of the continuity of history, though it can accommodate ruptures and upheavals of a certain magnitude, still makes it difficult for us to comprehend the sheer immensity of what I want to call the Western tradition's "Christian interruption." But it is something we must comprehend if we are properly to understand who we have been and what we have become, or to understand both the happy

fortuity and poignant fragility of many of those moral “truths” upon which our sense of our humanity rests, or even to understand what defenses we possess against the eventual cultural demise of those truths. And, after all, given how enormous the force of this Christian interruption was in shaping the reality all of us inhabit, it is nothing less than our obligation to our own past to attempt to grasp its true nature.

I have called this book an essay, and that description should be kept in mind as one reads it. What follows is not a history at all, really, if by that one means a minutely exhaustive, sequential chronicle of social, political, and economic events. In large part, this is because I simply lack many of the special skills required of genuinely proficient historians and am acutely conscious of how much my efforts in that direction would suffer by comparison to their work. What I have written is an extended meditation upon certain facts of history, and no more. Its arrangement is largely thematic rather than chronological, and it does not pretend to address most of the more contentious debates in modern historical scholarship regarding the early church (except where necessary). So my narrative will move at the pace my argument dictates. As this is an essay, I would have preferred to do without scholarly apparatus altogether, in order to make it as concise and fluid as possible; but I found I could not entirely dispense with notes, and so I had to satisfy myself by making them as few and as chastely minimal as common sense and my conscience would allow. The arrangement of my argument is simple and comprises four “movements”: I begin, in part 1, from the current state of popular antireligious and anti-Christian polemic, and attempt to identify certain of the common assumptions informing it; in part 2, I consider, in a somewhat desultory fashion, the view of the Christian past that the ideology of modernity has taught us to embrace; in part 3, the heart of the book, I attempt to illuminate (thematically, as I say) what happened during the early centuries of the church and the slow conversion of the Roman Empire to the new faith; and in part 4 I return to the present to consider the consequences of the decline of Christendom.

What I have tried to describe in this book, I should finally note, is very much a personal vision of Christian history, and I acknowledge that it is perhaps slightly eccentric in certain of its emphases, in its shape, even occasionally in its tone. This is not to say that it is merely a collection of

subjective impressions; I am keen to score as many telling blows as I can against what I take to be false histories and against dishonest or incompetent historians, and that requires some quantity of substantive evidence. I think one must grant, though, that to communicate a personal vision one must do more than prove or refute certain claims regarding facts; one must invite others to see what one sees, and must attempt to draw others into the world that vision describes. At a particular moment in history, I believe, something happened to Western humanity that changed it at the deepest levels of consciousness and at the highest levels of culture. It was something of such strange and radiant vastness that it is almost inexplicable that the memory of it should have so largely faded from our minds, to be reduced to a few old habits of thought and desire whose origins we no longer know, or to be displaced altogether by a few recent habits of thought and desire that render us oblivious to what we have forsaken. But perhaps the veil that time draws between us and the distant past in some sense protects us from the burden of too much memory. It often proves debilitating to dwell too entirely in the shadows of vanished epochs, and our capacity to forget is (as Friedrich Nietzsche noted) very much a part of our capacity to live in the present. That said, every natural strength can become also an innate weakness; to live entirely in the present, without any of the wisdom that a broad perspective upon the past provides, is to live a life of idiocy and vapid distraction and ingratitude. Over time, our capacity to forget can make everything come to seem unexceptional and predictable, even things that are actually quite remarkable and implausible. The most important function of historical reflection is to wake us from too complacent a forgetfulness and to recall us to a knowledge of things that should never be lost to memory. And the most important function of Christian history is to remind us not only of how we came to be modern men and women, or of how Western civilization was shaped, but also of something of incalculable wonder and inexpressible beauty, the knowledge of which can still haunt, delight, torment, and transfigure us.