



## Orwell: Religion and Ethical Values

March to May 2008

Peter Davison



'Till the age of about fourteen I believed in God, and believed the accounts given of him were true'; 'Broadly, you were bidden to be at once a Christian and a social success, which is impossible'; 'The good and the possible never seemed to coincide', so Orwell in 'Such, Such Were the Joys' (XIX/375 and 379) [ii](#) Orwell was writing towards the end of his life, perhaps 25 to 30 years after the time when he lost that faith. Towards the end of that essay he describes the horrific treatment of a small girl who continued to wet the bed. (In passing, it is intriguing that he begins 'Such, Such Were the Joys', not as might be expected with a description of the school – 'St Cyprian's was an expensive and snobbish school which was in the process of becoming more snobbish' which opens part two of the essay (XIX/360) – but with the cruel beating he received from Sambo, the headmaster, for wetting the bed (XIX/359). That he did not wet the bed but that he has assumed the role of a boy who did is another story but it might just lead to a momentary thought that perhaps the little child is also the product of Orwell's creative mind. The description of the treatment meted out to the child is singularly cruel: 'to punish her for this dreadful deed, her father took her to a large garden party and there introduced her to the whole company as a little girl who wetted the bed: and to underline her wickedness he had previously painted her face black'. As if to stress how inhuman this was he adds that he does not suggest that the head of St Cyprian's and his wife 'would actually have done a thing like this,' but he doubts whether it would have much surprised them. What I have deliberately excluded from this retelling is that the little girl's father was a clergyman (XIX/383).

That clergyman brings to mind another, one definitely fictional, the Revd Charles Hare, Rector of St Athelstan's Church and father of Dorothy, heroine of *A Clergyman's Daughter*, written in

1934. Both display a meanness and spite that might be thought to reflect Orwell's response to the orthodox Christianity he claims to have lost around 1917, that year of appalling losses in France, piled as they were on those of the Somme in 1916, a time when many people, including front-line chaplains, understandably gave up on Christianity. As a Church of England study of soldiers' beliefs put it in 1919, 'The soldier has got Religion; I am not so sure that he has got Christianity'.<sup>[iii]</sup> But Orwell's story is more complex, even though its eventual outcome – Orwell's loss of Christian faith – is no different.

In 1932, writing to Eleanor Jaques on 19 October he says, 'I take in the *Church Times* regularly now & like it more every week. I do like to see that there is life in the old dog yet – I mean the poor old C. of E. I shall have to go to Holy Communion soon, hypocritical tho' it is, because my curate friend is bound to think it funny if I always go to Church but never communicate. . . . It seems rather mean to go to H.C. when one doesn't believe, but I have passed myself off for pious & there is nothing for it but to keep up the deception'(X/271). By 6 June, however, the *Church Times* is increasingly annoying him: 'It is poor satisfaction even to see them walloping the Romans' (X/317) and at the end of December 1936 he is drawing parallels between the editorial staff of the *Church Times* and a Communist critic, who, he says, is 'hardly more honest' (X/533).

How serious, how jokey, is Orwell when writing to Eleanor Jaques? Sir Bernard Crick carefully evaluates Orwell's attitude in his letters to Eleanor (who was 'firmly Humanist') and his friendship with the curate – 'High Anglican but not a creeping Jesus & a very good fellow' – and his attendance at church, where he claimed to be lost in the intricacies of the services (X/249).<sup>[iii]</sup> However, as Sir Bernard's interview with the Rev. Ernest Parker's widow, Madge Parker, makes plain she was 'indignant at the idea that [Orwell] was not a genuine believer'. He not only attended services twice weekly but 'on several occasions went ahead to prepare the sick to receive the sacraments'. He even helped with many domestic arrangements. What also drew them together was a shared concern for the plight of the unemployed. The Rev. Parker was to spend the rest of his working life in industrial chaplaincies and Orwell 'asked him a lot about industrial conditions'. Sir Bernard appositely asks, 'But which friend was he deceiving? Or was he uncertain himself?'<sup>[iv]</sup> As D.J. Taylor puts it, 'Was the satirical tone of his remarks to Eleanor merely a way of distancing himself from a series of inner confusions and affiliations that he could not yet rationalise?'<sup>[v]</sup>

Confused Orwell may have been at that time, but he quickly developed an antipathy to religious practice, not solely Christianity, especially 'political Catholicism' which he likened to

Communism as a form of nationalism (XVII/144), but also to Buddhism as represented by its young priests who 'were the worst of all. There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans'. Whilst regarding 'the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny' he simultaneously thought 'the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist's priest's guts' (X/501, 502). It was one thing to wallop the Romans and to see 'Prose literature as we know it as the product of rationalism, of the Protestant centuries, of the autonomous individual'(XVII/378) [vi] but there was a much more deep-seated problem to be resolved, perhaps summed up in 1944 in his essay on Arthur Koestler, 'few thinking people now believe in life after death . . . . The real problem is how to restore the religious attitude while accepting death as final' (XVI/398) and again, in 1945, reviewing Jacques Maritain's *Christianity and Democracy*, 'Somehow the religious attitude to life must be restored' (XVII/176).

Orwell, despite his being married according to the rites of the Church of England (following a careful perusal of the 'obscenities of the wedding service' as he wrote that same day to Denys King-Farlow, X/485), an ability and willingness, according to Mulk Raj Anand, to quote the Book of Common Prayer from memory, [vii] an enjoyment of hymns, which he told George Woodcock in 1948 he'd 'always been meaning to write something about' (XIX/342), ordaining that he should be buried (not cremated) according to the rites of the Church of England (XX/237, belief in an after-life or no), and having Richard baptised, nevertheless rejected Christian observance and did not believe in life after death. If belief in life after death and the outward trappings of religion were to be jettisoned how could the religious *attitude* be restored whilst accepting death as final? Orwell's problem and possibly his solution, is suggested by someone writing a year or two before *A Clergyman's Daughter*. In one of his last novels, *Flowering Wilderness* (1932), John Galsworthy deals with the religious problems of two of his characters: William Desert (the surname is deliberately chosen) and the Rev Hilary Charwell, Vicar of St. Augustine's-in-the-Meads (which, despite the name, is a slum area of London). The former has been forced to convert to Islam or face death (curiously for us today in Darfur); the latter had lost his faith even though a practising priest. To himself Charwell 'thought: "I serve an idea, with a superstructure which doesn't bear examination". Still, the good of mankind is worth fighting for. . . . One used forms in which one didn't believe, and even exhorted others to believe in them. Life was a practical matter of compromise'. And, comforting a little child whose dearest wish is to see pictures as she slips into death, he says over her dead body, 'Now, God, *if your are* – give her pictures!' [viii] The 'good' that Charwell is fighting for is his General Slum Conversion Fund, a scheme to rehouse slum dwellers not in 'barracky' blocks of flats but in small houses without increasing rents and with the aim 'of not displacing the present inhabitant' (principles which

post-war governments might have adopted to advantage).<sup>[ix]</sup> Orwell's resolution of his inner confusions and outward rejection of Christian forms, is not, I would suggest, dissimilar from Galsworthy's. Compare for example, the conclusion to his novel, *A Clergyman's Daughter*: As Dorothy gets on with her preparations for the pageant with (and the choice of adjective is interesting) 'pious concentration' in the last line of the novel (II/297), she reflects that 'the solution to her difficulty lay in accepting the fact that there was no solution . . . that faith and no faith are very much the same provided that one is doing what is customary, useful and acceptable' (III/295).

Orwell like Hilary Charwell, strongly believed that "the good of mankind is worth fighting for". As he wrote in 'Reflections on Gandhi', published just twelve months before he died, 'our job is to make life worth living on this earth, which is the only earth we have' (XX/7, the first eight words of which I used as a title for Volume XX of *The Complete Works* because I thought then, and still think, it sums up Orwell's 'belief' and practice). Writing on 'The Christian Reformers' in 1946, Orwell said, 'Christian thinkers . . . have to face an unsolved problem. They claim, rightly, that if our civilisation does not regenerate itself morally it is likely to perish – and they may be right in adding that, at least in Europe, its moral code must be based on Christian principles' (XVIII/66). Did a remnant of his Christian heritage underlie that fight? Well, possibly, though I do not wish to push his argument too far. When Orwell was at St Cyprian's, Wellington (Lent Term 1917) and Eton, on his return to school after each Christmas he would have heard in the first week or two of term the Epistles for the second and third Sundays after Epiphany, St Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 12, verses 6-21. (In those days the Church of England had more confidence in Cranmer's work than does the hierarchy today and readings were not drawn from all over the place but were firmly set.) I am inclined to think that, whatever he came to believe or not believe, these powerful lessons were a permanent influence on his fighting for the good of mankind. A few sentences might suggest what I have in mind: 'Abhor that which is evil, cleave to that which is good . . . [be] not slothful . . . fervent in spirit . . . patient in tribulation . . . given to hospitality. . . . Mind not high things but condescend to men of low degree. . . . Be not wise in your own conceits. . . . overcome evil with good'. Possibly the last three injunctions might be clearer to a modern reader in another translation of the Greek: 'Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Do not claim to be wiser than you are [*think of Orwell's strictures on the intelligentsia*]. Conquer evil with good'. As injunctions to humane behaviour these might well have lodged permanently in Orwell's mind, surviving even 1917. There is one little incident he describes that, perhaps from a reverse point of view, sums up the attempt and the failure to so respond. In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, he castigates the jeering brutal response of 'a hundred hostile tramps' to the few old men and women who had out of their goodness of heart,

offered them hospitality and were attempting to worship: 'It was a queer, rather disgusting scene. . . . It was our revenge upon them for having humiliated us by feeding us' (I/185).

© Peter Davison

- i. Such references are to The Complete Works of George Orwell (1998) by volume and page.
- ii. The History of Christianity, ed. Jonathan Hill (2007), p. 423.
- iii. Bernard Crick, George Orwell: A Life, 1992 edition, pp. 226-8 (from which I have drawn the ensuing references to Rev. Ernest and Mrs Madge Parker) and Sir Bernard's analysis; see also the Appendix to this edition, p.585).
- iv. One delightful touch Sir Bernard includes is that the Parkers kept a goat, which they called, 'the Holy Goat', indicating that they were not over-solemn, and that it was they who taught Orwell to milk a goat.
- v. See his Orwell: The Life (2003), p.123. For a new critique of Orwell's novels, see Lorraine Saunders, The Unsung Artistry of George Orwell: The Novels from Burmese Days to Nineteen Eighty-Four (Ashgate, due April, 2008).
- vi. And compare 'The Catholic and Communist are alike in assuming that an opponent cannot be both honest and intelligent', XVII/372.
- vii. See my George Orwell: A Literary Life (1996), p. 78; information given me by W.J. West on 22 July 1994. West had interviewed Anand in India.
- viii. John Galsworthy, Flowering Wilderness (1932; 1969 edn.), ch. xiv, pp. 104, 106. Orwell's first literary essay was on Galsworthy and was published in French in Paris on 23 March 1929 (see X/138-42 for an English translation and X/168-72 in the original French). He obviously does not refer to Flowering Wilderness – or Swan Song, here or anywhere else in his writings.
- ix. John Galsworthy, Swan Song (1928; 1968 edn), ch. iv, pp. 99, 101-2.

---

To view more essays please visit us at [www.finlay-publisher.com](http://www.finlay-publisher.com) and don't forget to visit the forum to share your views on this and other articles!