

### III The Religious Attitude

#### a. Mysticism and Fanaticism

When Cunninghame Graham, dealing with mysticism, speaks favourably of an irrational attitude of life, this must be immediately related to his desire to preserve the sense of mystery and grace in life. Arid dialectics, which subject everything to reason's scrutiny and put everything in its due place, empties life of its miraculous nature, and chills the sense of wonder:

"Religion, once made understandable to all, loses its authenticity, and soon degenerates into the arid dialectics of the self-righteous nonconformist. What so consoling to a religious man, as in a building (with the entry free) to join in singing praises to and Unknown God, in an uncomprehended tongue"<sup>1</sup>.

Gabrielle was a mystic. Her mysticism must partly account for her husband's continual respect for an interior illumination to which he could not lay claim to his own experience. He was very prepared to believe that there were people who had access to realm of knowledge to which he had denied the key, and that this was a realm of genuine knowledge<sup>2</sup>. Speaking of the fairies, described by the author of "The Secret Commonwealth", he says:

"He saw them, for what we are convinced we see exists for us as certainly as if we touched it..... - with the interior vision, that vision a thousand times more vivid than the exterior eye"<sup>3</sup>.

Yet he must also speak for himself. His own attitude to mysticism is one of tonic distrust. The following quotations may sufficiently represent the feeling that it is unreliable and not to be compared with the claim of simple duty:

".....mankind, who always have from the first ages sought relief from facts and theories in rhapsodies, in mysticism, striving to build a wall of cobwebs up between that which they knew and that which they wished to be the case"<sup>4</sup>, and:

"How many men before the Rev. Arthur Bannerman have failed to see that there is nothing so materialistic as the mystic and supernatural, and that the dullest duties of the dreariest parish in reality are more transcendental than the dreams of the theologian?"<sup>5</sup>.

The other side of irrationality in religion, fanaticism and madness, also met him in his experience. He contents himself with setting down his impressions of it, with little more judgement than his descriptions in themselves contain. He approved the practice in the East of keeping madmen and eccentrics in community with others (madness, being abnormal, was akin to divinity; ".....madness and faith are the same thing.....")<sup>6</sup>. But of the religious fanatic he writes in cold irony:

<sup>1</sup> Preface to "Mogreb-el-Acksa"; cf. "The Conquest of New Granada", p.43.

<sup>2</sup> He detested G B Shaw's "St Joan". If one has not inherited the gift of mystic illumination, that does not prove it non-existent or invalid, he would assert.

<sup>3</sup> Introduction to the book.

<sup>4</sup> "Success", p.122.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.118.

<sup>6</sup> "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.8: cf. "Charity", p.215 and "A Brazilian Mystic", p.69.

"When once a man is well convinced that all he does comes from the Holy Ghost, there is but little that he cannot do with satisfaction to himself".

His main study of fanaticism was of Antonio Conselheiro, a Brazilian Gnostic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who led a whole tribe of disciples and renegades into the scrub country of the Sertao, and defeated two Brazilian government expeditions before being wiped out with all his crew. His millenarian doctrines both threatened the foundations of the existent state and encouraged the sexual licence which accompanied the religious upsurge. Cunninghame Graham speaks of an earlier manifestation of fanaticism under an Illuminado in Serra Talhada in 1831 where women sacrificed their children in a fury of religious ecstasy. It was a land and a people which was easily set alight. When Conselheiro spoke, "a thrill as of religious erotomania....."<sup>1</sup> went through his hearers: they ".....trilled and shivered in an orgasm of faith"<sup>2</sup>; "Orgasms of piety", "wild intensity of faith"<sup>3</sup>, marked their life. Cunninghame Graham recognises this irrational element in life as one to be found all over the world. It is seen as:

".....the mysterious agitation which in such cases, whether at revivals in Port Glasgow, camp meetings in the United States or pilgrimages to holy places in Calabria, seems to transform them, making them just as irresponsible as the Bacchantes of the older world"<sup>4</sup>.

He makes the same comparison to the Bacchanalia concerning the people of South Italy who "with staring eyes and mouths distorted in ecstasy"<sup>5</sup>, fell under a similar spell: and notices the mixture of Christianity and fetish worship which made up Negro worship, where, after religious services, they abandoned themselves to the Phallic dance at their Candombles<sup>6</sup>. He calls this "a state of excitation of the senses in which the mind ceases to work or works subservient to the nerves".

With such discernment as de Maupassant shows in his tale "La Maison de Madame Tellier", (Madame Tellier's Establishment), Cunninghame Graham understands the thin line which may be drawn between religious ecstasy and sexual abandonment. As does de Maupassant he describes and passes on, counting the record itself a sufficient means of judgement. But we have difficulty in distinguishing the double assertion he makes. He distrusts the stimulus to which people respond by throwing their minds to the wind<sup>7</sup>. He distrusts equally the rational approach, which would extract the wonder and elusiveness from life<sup>8</sup>. Life for him was to be taken lustily yet reverently. It had the unfathomableness of a good, lively woman who, when her being is not made simply subsidiary to one's own, continually eludes and delights, who harbours in her soul the inexhaustible multitudinous fire of cut diamond.

<sup>1</sup> "A Vanished Arcadia", p.117.

<sup>2</sup> "A Brazilian Mystic", p.111.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119 and 120.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43.

<sup>6</sup> "Writ on Sand", p.110.

<sup>7</sup> "A Brazilian Mystic", p.41; cf. "Cartagena and the Banks of the Sinnu", pp. 115 and 116.

<sup>8</sup> "Bowing the knee and huddling the mind into a nutshell", he calls it in "A Brazilian Mystic", p.101.

<sup>9</sup> He prefers people who do not try to square the circle of the globe, as he says in his Preface to "Down the Orinoco in a Canoe" by S Perez Triana.

Had religion any part to play in life?

"Courage, prudence and unalterable kindness", he describes as the things which count for most in life. But then he thinks religion a barrier against these, not their source. He is prepared to state a preference between religious attitudes:

"With us, religion is a personal thing, we take it, according to our individual temperament, in many different ways. Some, not the highest minds, look on it as a sort of mumbo-jumbo whereby to save their souls. Others, again, regard it as a means whereby life is ennobled, death's terror exorcised and the world improved"<sup>1</sup>.

He approves the second alternative. But would he really prefer to dispense with both?

Religion, I believe, in the end appears to Cunninghame Graham to offer no way out. In the end one had to deal with integrity with life as it presented itself to one, and shrug one's shoulders at questions too baffling to gain an answer from mere limited man:

"All principles to which men turn for assistance in their struggle with their lives seem greatly fallacious. Faith often leads straight to fanaticism, and to a disregard for works, plunging its votaries into an abyss of self-absorption, leaving their brethren starving in the mire whilst the believer saved his miserable soul. Good works, pursued for their own sake alone, induce arrogance and a self-satisfaction which shrivels up the soul....

When faith and works, philosophy, logic and the rest of the panaceas that have been preached, accepted and been found wanting during the past two thousand years or so, have failed, all that is left to reasonable men is to pay bootmaker's and tailor's bills with regularity, give alms to the deserving and undeserving poor, and then live humbly underneath the sun, taking example by other animals"<sup>2</sup>.

This mixture of agnosticism and integrity, I believe, reflects his true mind. "I can think of no secular writer who was constantly and sensitively preoccupied with the rights and wrongs of human behaviour than Graham", says Paul Bloomfield<sup>3</sup>, as was stated earlier. Yet for all his acute insights, religion remained to him an enigma.

<sup>1</sup> "A Brazilian Mystic", p.2.

<sup>2</sup> "A Brazilian Mystic", p.84. It is almost the "Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly" of Micah 6:8.

<sup>3</sup> "The Essential R B Cunninghame Graham", Introduction, p.21.