

b. Religious Responses

Cunninghame Graham reverts, here and there in his works, to judgements on responses to life's pressures which bear a specifically religious character. The chief of those which command his attention are assurance, faith, prayer and penitence.

Religious assurance appears to him most often as self-assurance - as a way of arrogating status to oneself on the basis of security which is unassailable. Scotsmen especially have this as a characteristic vice. They "...have no doubt on any subject, either in heaven above or in the earth below"¹. The "sour-faced North British dogmatist"² is one of "a race of men who knew no shadows, either in life or in belief. If they believed, they held each letter of "the Book" inspired, and would have burned the man who sought to change a comma or a semi-colon....."³.

He gives no approval to such narrow-minded certainty. But the basis of this assurance, predestination, he describes with comical awareness and sympathy in one of his Prefaces: "We Caledonians who took our faith from Hippos (name o' yer Peters, gie me Paul), perhaps stand up against the stabs of Fate better than those nurtured in the most damnable doctrine of free-will. Once allow it and life becomes a drunken whirligig on which sit grave and reverent citizens playing on penny whistles, all attired in black"⁴.

He regrets a dogmatism in politics which he describes as the intruded legacy of "...the spirit of the deceased dammers" of a religion of earlier days⁵.

Faith appears to him in two guises.

a) In one it is a yoking of the human spirit to life, a dimension of human experience, allergic to reason and enquiry⁶, with which some are endowed at birth and of which others are deprived. It is a capacity of perceiving what is seen by others yet not perceived. The words of a Sheriff may most appropriately illustrate what he meant. He speaks to a Westerner:

"Ships, aeroplanes, cannons of monstrous size, and little instruments by which you see minutest specks as if they were great rocks; all these you have, and yet you doubt His power....."

To us he has vouchsafed gifts which he either has withheld from you, or that you have neglected in your pride.

Thus we still keep our faith..... Faith in the God who sets the planets in their courses, bridled the tides and caused the palm to grow beside the river so that the traveller may rest beneath the shade, and, resting, praise His name"⁷.

¹ "Thirteen Stories", p.9.

² "A Vanished Arcadia", p.60.

³ "Hope", p.65.

⁴ Preface to "Queens of Old Spain", by Martin Hume.

⁵ Article on "Odium Theologicum" in "People's Press", 13th December 1890.

⁶ He speaks ironically of his holding the dogmas of our faith in entirety "neither inquiring into what they mean nor reasoning upon their nature for fear of heresy": Preface to "John Lavery and his Work", by Walter Shaw-Sparrow.

⁷ "Brought Forward", p.160.

In the same category he classes the deliverance experienced by a Spanish fleet sailing to South America, when a cricket's singing woke the watch in time to save the ships from disaster: "miracles take place in hundreds hourly that are never chronicled"¹. Elsewhere he speaks of instances of faith "fit to remove the highest of all mountains, reason, from her foundations"², of a faith made "impervious to reason" by being soundly "whipped-in in infancy"³, and of a faith which surmounts "all the puny hills of common-sense"⁴. Faith is not a constituent element of any reasonable human life. Two very significant things are said in the Preface to the 1907 edition of his wife's magnum opus:

"Faith, as I take it, cannot be compassed, but either comes into existence with us at birth, or else we never find it....." and

".....love, I take it, at the day when each receives his reward, will outworth faith a hundredfold"⁵.

Love is the quality open to all, and self-abnegation, love's nature, is "the true spirituality"⁶.

Faith bereft of real concern for others he cannot away with, revelling as he does in the humanity and realism of Spanish mysticism, and frowning upon those whose faith has no outlet in good deeds. Yet when good deeds are evidenced, they should issue naturally from faith or they become "materialistic and soul-numbing" claims on heaven⁷.

I find quite amazing the humility of Cunninghame Graham before any honest, single-minded manifestation of faith, which he himself could not share. He is as sensitive to what is real and genuine in other people's responses as he is firm in his own profession of agnosticism. If we call him an agnostic we must also remember he had that humility by which the blind in the end receive sight. He writes:

"It may be that all of us are kings born blind, and that the guiding star is shining brightly in the sky, whilst we sit sightless, with our dim orbits fixed upon the mud"⁸.

b) It was to be understood in one way as sheer human credulity. So he speaks of the Spaniards belief that Santiago had appeared on a white horse to assist them in battle (".....portents and signs have appeared to those who looked for them - upon the winning side!"); and of belief in the existence of miraculous springs which restored one's youth (".....the presence of a misbeliever is often fatal to the materialisation.....as at a séance!"⁹).

He is never sure of the ecstasy of faith into which some Spanish people easily seem to fall. Is it faith? It ".....may be brought about by faith, or yet again may come from a mind not occupied with other things"¹⁰. Of a peasant at Burgos Cathedral he writes:

¹ "The Conquest of the River Plate", p.114.

² "Pedro de Valdivia", pp. 37 and 38.

³ A comparison made with the "Hodge School" of education in "Jose Antonio Paez", p.2.

⁴ "Pedro de Valdivia", Preface.

⁵ Preface to "Santa Teresa", by Gabrielle Cunninghame Graham.

⁶ See "Hernando de Soto", Preface, p. viii; and "The Conquest of New Granada", p.5.

⁷ "Cartagena and the Banks of the Simu", p.150.

⁸ "Faith", p.131.

⁹ "Cartagena and the Banks of the Simu", p.80.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.76.

¹¹ "Progress", p.278.

"Perhaps, with the interior vision, he had seen the Crucifixion, and had felt and suffered with his Lord. Again, it may be that he had felt nothing, and been but hypnotised by gazing on the Christ"¹.

How can 'man, who looketh on the outward appearance', tell where faith ends and something of much less substance moves credulous humanity? Cunninghame Graham always distinguished belief, by which he meant assent to dogmas, from faith.

Prayer as he sees it is a human activity. A sense of proportion prompts him to this conclusion, when he judges a staunch horse of more value than "all the prayers of all the good men of the world" when danger threatened on the Southern Pampa²; or when he speaks of lands where man pray "naturally as birds" and yet are not at all influenced in their life by their prayer³. Yet this is also an absolute judgement. The Lord of Hosts cannot give the factionaries of different sides what they want in battle. God cannot possibly intervene, take sides, show favouritism in human life⁴. Of one poor woman, soon to be bereaved, he writes:

".....the poor Vestal must have wearied heaven by her entreaties; but even heaven is impotent in cases of that sort, though prayer, no doubt, is useful to the man who prays"⁵. So he calls this purely human activity, ".....that smoke the human mind gives off under the fires of cares"⁶, and writes of an Indian praying:

"Prayer is to the soul what most divine tobacco is to the senses, deadening and comforting. For after all it is but giving up oneself to one-self, and waiting dumbly for something that may come from nothing, or again, may never come"⁷

For penitence he reserves his unqualified contempt. It is nothing but a cowardly attempt to escape the consequences of one's actions. Whatever these might be, they ought to be faced bravely and without regrets. This is the only manly thing to do:

"How much more dignified than some cold-hearted scoundrel who, as solicitor, banker or confidential agent, swindles for years, and in the dock recants, and calls upon God to pardon him"⁸.

Regarding one penitent he points out that men can die as easily as they live, with lies upon their lips. Penitence is a way of becoming apostate to oneself. In the description of the status of a Moorish convert to Christianity he speaks of ".....the stain of being a traitor to the faith in which he had been bred"⁹, and expands elsewhere where he notes the inclination to penitence when warnings of age and weakness are felt:

".....forsake your former naughty life, and straight turn traitor on your friends, ideas, beliefs and prejudices, and stand confessed apostate to yourself. For the mere bettering of your spiritual fortunes leaves you a turncoat still. It is mean, unreasonable, and shows a

¹ "His People", p.54.

² "A Hatchment", p.19.

³ "Hernando de Soto", p.204.

⁴ "Progress", p.163.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.281.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.165.

⁷ Preface to "Adventures in Bolivia", by C H Proddgers.

⁸ "Success", p.171.

⁹ "Faith", p.233.

caitiff spirit or impaired intellect in the poor penitent who, to save his soul, denies his life¹.

Saving one's soul by denying one's life is to him the characteristic feature of penitence. So he applauds Montezuma's refusal to change from his faith ("whatever that faith was")² and regrets that the Wolfe of Badenoch recanted from his sins and "died a sad good Christian at the heart"³. On three occasions he calls repentance a moral fire insurance of which one hopes to be beneficiary without having attended to the important matter of sending in the yearly premiums⁴; in one of those he expresses exactly his mind:

"Repentance, retrospection and remorse, the furies which beset mankind, making them sure of nothing, conscious of actions, feeling that they are eternal, and that no miracle can wipe them out. They know they forge and carry their own hell about with them, too weak to sin and fear not, and too irrational not to think a minute of repentance can blot out the actions of a life"⁵.

I find only one occasion when he speaks of forgiveness as a significant act. It relates to the Conquistadors. He says we, who have not their excuse, should forget their crimes and ask forgiveness for our modern sins⁶. But this is a departure from his characteristic attitude, which is better expressed by the assertion that ".....time and toleration are the only solvents nature has placed at our disposal"⁷.

He makes a point, on several occasions, of defending the impenitent thief upon the cross: "At any rate, one of the two died game.

Passion o' me, I hate your penitents"⁸,

he concludes, reversing the customary judgement. ".....sa sympathie fut toujours plus grande pour un pecheur endurei que pour un Calvinists penitent. Il n'aimait ni les renegats, ni les repentis"⁹. It is a true observation.

Two things seem clear to me from such a view of penitence.

He found the act a selfish, skin-saving one, encouraged by a church which seemed to concentrate on rewards in a future life and urge people to seek them as a matter of enlightened self-interest.

He never really came to grips with the Christian conception of forgiveness, which is free of cowardice and enlightened self-interest - which sees the debts of others as readily cancelled, in the light of one's immense debt to God: which sees the world's hope in a changed relationship, a reconciliation with all things, which God has effected through Christ.

¹ "Success", p.170.

² "Bernal Diaz del Castillo", p.126.

³ Preface to "The Wolfe of Badenoch", by Thomas Dick Lauder.

⁴ "Hernando de Soto", p.268; "A Benzilian Mystic", p.110; "Success", p.174.

⁵ "Success", pp. 173 and 174.

⁶ "Bernal Diaz del Castillo", Preface, p. xi.

⁷ "Redeemed", p.10. cf. "Doughty Deeds", p.130.

⁸ "Success", p.169.

⁹ "Don Roberto, Coureur d'Aventures", p.288 of the extract.