

II Church, Book, Tradition

a. Church and Churches

The larger part of Cunninghame Graham's life was lived in a century in which the church abroad was on the offensive in its missionary enterprise, and at home was on the defensive against revolutionary theories and Biblical Criticism - or raised a wall against these behind which to carry on business as usual. It made little attempt to grapple with the economic and social threats to human's life. That declaration of human worth which had to relate to the structure of society and employ economic enlightenment and compassion as its terms was missing, except in the mouths of a few prophets. Instead of facing the new knowledge, and being instructed by it about the scope of the Atonement and the perspective of God's work in history, the Church tended to plunder truth for those elements which supported its orthodoxy. Divisiveness was strong, especially in Scotland.

Cunninghame Graham did not so much speak in condemnation as simply leave the Church out of the reckoning. It might stand for one part of human life which had to be asserted, but

the 'things to be about' were the things which it ignored or against which it opposed its dead weight. He did not live to see the flowering of the ecumenical movement in the twentieth century and the balance being redressed. He did not live to hear Dr William Temple, Professor Reinhold Niebuhr and Dr George Macleod expound the place of nature and society in the whole redemptive scheme.

Cunninghame Graham knew that doctrine can challenge the foundations of society¹. But in practice it formed a sort of extra economic police force², putting the stress on order, undervaluing justice. In the confusion of motive which is represented in churchgoing, he distinguishes this element:

"Some went to pray, others resorted to the fane from custom, and again, some from a vague feeling that their religion was a bulwark reared in defence of property...."³
Too often then is class-distinction behind the erection of churches - at the instance of "...those who thought the gospel should be brought home to the poor"⁴.

There is no onslaught, however. The Church's disapproval cannot long hinder, any more than its approval can much advance the reform of society towards justice and equality. It is adaptable - but on grounds of expediency:

"The Church, we know, adapts itself to every form of government, seeing at once that if it can bend or enslave (according to the reader's point of view) the mind, all the rest is merely leather and prunella, and that the republican can contribute to the offertory as freely as the best believer in the divine right of kings"⁵.

¹ The doctrine of the Brazilian Mystic did, he notes in the book of that title, p.196.

² Article "Patriotism" in "The People's Press", 27th September 1890.

³ "Charity", p.74. In a comment preserved in a Scrap-Book he describes a Church Defence Association as "a Tory caucus".

⁴ "Success", p.82.

⁵ "A Brazilian Mystic", p.47.

This is not genuine flexibility derived from vitality, but a concern for self-preservation at all costs. It conveys:

"The familiar, mouldy smell, preserved, no doubt, just as miraculously as the orders of the bishops who rule over it"¹.

Of such a church, not much social righteousness can be expected.

He has a strange, niggling distaste for the offertory, going out of his way to deride "...the circulation of the hat, - that awful mystery which makes all sects kin"². But the scattered charges which he makes otherwise have much more substance. Faith without works always raises his bristles. Of Selvagia he writes:

"Going to church with us replaces charity - that is, it covers a multitude of things. A man may cheat and drink, be cruel to animals, avaricious, anything you please, so that he goes to church he still remains a Christian, and enters heaven by his faith alone"³.

Churches should always be open⁴; the market woman should be able to put down her wares and be at home in them⁵; God should not be laid up in lavender six days of the week⁶. A sense of humour was wanting in them; it would be a saving thing⁷.

"God-boxes" he called churches in letters, managing to suggest by the word at once distaste for uncomely church architecture, and a sense of the restriction on the Deity which churches, by their life, seemed to impose⁸.

For the straightforward, sincere worshipper, he always had respect. A "Christian on all four sides" he would call him, in the Spanish idiom. But it is notable that his admiration was reserved chiefly for a Spaniard, "the great and really Christian Alvar Nunez"⁹, whose life was not associated in his mind with church-going, but with humble and healing contacts with the American Indians, and with practical policies of integrity and justice for administering the new colonies of Spain.

He himself was an occasional church-goer, attending the ministrations of Mr McLean at Gartmore, and, sometimes, it would appear, being present at Anglican services. He was attracted by the mystery and colour of the Roman Catholic ritual, and by its blending of Christianity and paganism, which ministered to his preference for the gentle relating of past to present. Nonconformist worship consisted of "howling in conventicles" - but them, "Nonconformist" was a word of emotional prejudice, a swear-word to him.

¹ "Cartagena and the Banks of the Siris", p.120.

² "A Vanished Arcadia", p.131; see also in "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.92 and "Jose Antonio Paez", p.270, and often elsewhere.

³ "The Ipane", p.197; cf. "Progress", pp. 201, 211.

⁴ "Father Archangel of Scotland", p.121.

⁵ "Cartagena and the Banks of the Siris", pp. 133 - 134.

⁶ "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.127.

⁷ "Conquest of the River Plate", p.225.

⁸ He suggests that God is restricted by the kind of worship He receives in "The Ipane", p.228 and "A Hatchment", p.80.

⁹ "Pedro de Valdivia", p.98.

The sacraments are rarely mentioned. Cunninghame Graham's sense of humour is uppermost when he tells how a Spanish expedition, deprived in the end of the vestments and elements for celebrating Mass, resorted to a "maimed" ritual after the kind advocated by the infamous Calvin¹. Baptism more frequently claims his attention. It appears to him to be a ceremony meaningless in itself, adopted for superstitious reasons², or used in the sheep-making process of proselytism, in which case the inducement of bribes is very often a necessary accompaniment³. What he chiefly girds at is the practice of making baptism a compensation for life⁴ as it is to be lived now. The Jesuit missionary takes Wood Indians from their own environment to a mission station, where the unaccustomed heat of the sun soon kills them off - and thinks he has done well, since the guarantee of heaven given thereby makes the continuance of their earthly life of small import.

His incapacity to give any rational or significant place to baptism is probably best expressed in these words:

"If it were necessary, it surely might have taken place in their own home, and the patients might then have been left to chance, to see how the reception of the holy rite acted on their lives"⁵.

Like inoculation, it "takes", or it has no effect. He noted the practice of "de-baptism" where, by a ritual soiling of the hair and scraping of the tongue, the baptised status may be abrogated by natives.

In a letter home, dated June 17th, 1879, Cunninghame Graham asks if Mala (Malise, his brother) is turning into a "mealy-mouthed vicar". Although he was on good personal terms with his brother and a number of other clergymen, as a class he found them wanting.

In an article written on the Trade Union Congress of 1890, he describes as among those present:

".....a clergymen or two, wandering, addle-pated, hard-working blind guides of the blind"⁶.

The irrelevance of their acknowledged energy to the real plight of humanity is pointed up in another article entitled "Happy Christmas". The master reduces wages, and the colliery proprietor or coal merchant puts up the price of coal....

"Goodwill among men!" murmurs the parson, as he bites the end of his pen, and thinks of a taking title for his charitable appeal....

The parson will spread and sun himself in the warmth of his own goodness in being the medium of the benevolence of the charitable - in other words, being the dealer in celestial salve for scratched consciences"⁷.

¹ "Hernando de Soto", p.151.

² Shielding people from evil spirits: "Progress", p.85.

³ "Down the Orinoco in a Canoe". S Perez Trisna. Preface.

⁴ As in "A Vanished Arcadia", p.72.

⁵ "A Vanished Arcadia", p.73.

⁶ Article "After the Congress" in "The People's Press", September 13th, 1890.

⁷ "The People's Press", January 3rd, 1891.

".....not that they are all conscious humbugs", he adds, in fairness. But their ambulance work afforded no relief to people oppressed by the system itself. The very awkwardness of the Rev Arthur Bannerman, priest-convert to Romanism from Anglicanism arouses his pity. He describes him as:

".....of a mean presence, with the fair hair, blue eyes and freckled skin which, with a stutter and a shamle, fit a man for ministration to his fellows..... Good and ridiculous, but loveable....."¹.

Pity seems to be all he has to give as an alternative to scorn. Eloquent only when death has taken the risk from approval, the clergy are shown up in their full timidity by Keir Hardie's funeral, where Cunninghame Graham listens to:

".....long exordiums passed upon the man who in his life had been the target for the abuse of Press and pulpit"².

As he sees it (on the subject of ill-treatment of animals):

"Popes and Archbishops of Canterbury, of Paris, York, Toledo and the rest, are dumber than dumb dogs, fearing to offend, fearing it may be said that animals have souls, or daring not to speak because of the stronger brethren. For which priest, tub-thumper, bishop, Pope or minister of any sect, takes thought about the feelings of the brethren who are weak....."³.

The traditions of the anti-clericalism of Radical Liberalism and the working-class movement were inherited by him, and he added something of his own. Isolation from reality, lack of vision and lack of courage kept clergymen from being a force to be reckoned with in society, in his judgement.

The Church and its ministers, by and large, he left out of the picture. But one aspect of church life merits the full impetus of Cunninghame Graham's condemnation - its divided sectarian character. It is a mark of his discernment that this should be the scandal on which he fastens. He gives it more attention than any other feature of church life. To him it appeared to make the church incredible as a truth-bearer. He speaks in scorn of:

".....the multitudinous sects of Nonconformists, who, scattered over two hemispheres, yet hate one another with enough intensity to enable mankind to perceive that they had comprehended to the full the doctrines of the New Testament"⁴.

He found this affront in the contending mission work of different churches:

"the way of the neophyte even today is hard, with many priests of different, jarring sects disputing for his soul as hotly as if it were a preference stock, which they had private information was about to rise"⁵.

But more clearly than anywhere else he found it so in Scotland. He writes of the village Selvagie or Gart-na-Cloich:

"In every house a picture of Dr Chalmers flanked by one of Bunyan, and a Bible ever ready on the table for advertisement.

¹ "Success", p.117.

² "Brought Forward", p.56.

³ "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.200.

⁴ "The Ipane", p.188.

⁵ "A Vanished Arcadia", p.89.

.....Two churches and two public houses, and a feud between the congregations of each church as bitter as that between the clients of the rival inns. No whisky or no doctrine from the opposing tavern or conventicle could possibly be sound.....much faith and little charity"¹.

The intolerance this bred ("Only theologians are as intolerant as horseman" he says, speaking of the one way of salvation for faith and horsemanship)², and the crudity to which life was degraded by it, are memorably set out in this sketch. The contradiction of divisions to the very idea of worship is one to which he returns in a later work: "Just as the faithful were assembled in their conventicles adoring the same deity, all filled with rancour against one another because their methods of interpretation of the Creator's will were different....."³.

The warring divisions of the church provide an illustration to him to illuminate other bitter relationships, as that between Gaucho and Indian⁴, and politician and politician⁵.

All he does is to state his annoyance at the harrying of people by different sects, and the confusion this entails for them, especially on the mission field. He clearly sees that divisions reduce life to a low level. He does not discern any hope of the future development of harmonious relationships between the churches - he rather takes it that sectarian squabbles are bound to continue to be a mark of the church. In the end, it appears to me, he shrugs his shoulders and gives it up. About warring Republicans in Brazil, he wrote:

"They held the doctrine that all creeds should be allowed; which I once held myself, but now incline to the belief that a religion and a name should be bestowed at baptism, and that it should be constituted heresy of the worst kind, and punishable by a fine, to change or palter with either the name or the religion which our fathers have bestowed"⁶.

I do not think that this is said in jest. It is said in despair at making sense of a divided church.

Not so much in the church as in the world he found people who typified true human life, and yet represented some inaccessible quality of living, which meant that to the ordinary person they remained beings apart. These were the saints. The word is not used theologically, related to sanctification, but rather popularly, related to the idea of moral stature and integrity. Yet it is related to Christ. Christ represented the kind of life Cunninghame Graham could not distinguish in the church; truthful, just and sacrificial. Christ is the pattern for the true saints. The words of Nicanor in "The Fourth Magus", to the wandering fakir, draw a picture which was to serve the author as a guide to saintliness:

¹ "The Ipsos", p.191.

² "Futher Archangel of Scotland", p.126.

³ "Brought Forward", p.131.

⁴ "Success", p.12.

⁵ "Thirteen Stories", p.29.

⁶ "Thirteen Stories", p.29.

Nicanor: ".....he was to redress man's wrongs, lift up the downtrodden, to heal the halt, make the blind see, fight the oppressor, and be a shield unto the weak. Can it be then that in Jerusalem they execute a man for striving for such ends?"

Fakir: "Where have you lived.....and do not know that such a man since the beginning-of the world can have but such a fate"¹.

In his book, "Faith", he offers a developed picture of what constitutes sainthood. The saint of whom he writes is not a churchman:

"Our eyes are just as slow to mark them as were the eyes of those who slew and tortured them in days gone by.....

I knew one, though, that is, if stripes and prisons oft, the scorn of men, a life of poverty and a pure nature with a soul affre at all injustice, constitute a saint"².

He goes on to draw the general verdict:

"There can be no saintliness without revolt in some shape or other against the myriad meannesses that dwarf mankind..... Easier far it would have been to have sunk into mere resignation (by that sin men have fallen deeper than even angels fell by pride.....)"³.

A saint is one whose judgement is absolute, and who in deed, thought and life sets out that judgement. He is therefore "out of this world". Cunninghame Graham described his saint as ".....Quite unfitted for the world he lived in by his outrageous love of truth"⁴. Don Marino, another man "only fit for God" was also "a rank blasphemer against faith"⁵. It is something in the constitution of the man which makes a saint - he is a seeker who carries his goal within him from the day he sets out⁶, and this it would appear, is his only and sufficient reward.

Lack of belief in the world's redemption, in the relevance of the church, and in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit leaves as Cunninghame Graham's only hope the cry raised for truth against injustice by lonely human beings. Often this would seem to be without effect, for though the saints shine as bright lights in a naughty world, there is no path for ordinary people, constituted otherwise, which their lives may illumine. Yet Cunninghame Graham challenges his own philosophy in his recurring sense that they produce a more wholesome heritage, for which the inheritors should be thankful. Of Christian martyrs, he writes:

"I often wonder if the Christians of today.....know what they owe.....to such.....for martyrdom, no matter how obscure, forgotten by the people of the faith for which the martyr suffered, is a slur not only on the faithful, but on the faith itself"⁷.

Yet even in Christian martyrs, I think he would find the church loyalty secondary. They carry an inner goal, unrelated to church life. The church as he sees it is continents away from that "outrageous love of truth" and justice which marks the world's saints.

¹ "Hope", p.160.

² Ibid. p.42.

³ Ibid. p.43.

⁴ Ibid p.50.

⁵ "Progress", p.124.

⁶ "Hope", p.154.

⁷ "A Vanished Arcadia", p.91.