

## Religious Outlook

### The Background

Around 1895 there is a change in Cunninghame Graham's life. He ceases to be a British political figure, and only more occasionally do we hear him expound his social outlook. He takes up writing more seriously - though as an amateur in the real sense, (like Robert Burns: "I rhyme for fun") - and his religious or philosophical outlook emerges much more explicitly between the interstices in his written works. We turn now to examine this aspect of his thought.

Before he settled down (insofar as he settled down) as the heir of Gartmore, he had been in touch with many different traditions. He came into contact with the Roman Catholic faith during childhood visits to his Spanish grandmother. In South America he found Roman Catholicism again: uncovered the work of the Jesuits in the Paraguayan missions, taking some of the lichens from the stone which marked their burial place and re-assessing their worth<sup>1</sup>; and offered a re-evaluation of the faith and works of the Spanish conquistadors, as one who could look on these as a Spaniard would, and could put them in a fuller setting than Prescott. He married a Roman Catholic, though a somewhat unorthodox one. In South America, too, he became imbued with the pagan outlook of the gauchos - that almost animal attitude, which meant men took as they came, not only sun or frost, but life or death - killing and being killed unconcernedly. His travels in Morocco and the Middle East brought him into direct touch with Islam (he had met its indirect influence in the impact of the Moors on the Spanish way of life). In Scotland, he attended the United Presbyterian Church. In England, he seems to have attended the Anglican Communion, at least occasionally. Besides coming in contact with main religious manifestations, he had also come in contact with many religious customs of different tribes and races during his travels and in his historical investigations, and had studied some of the forms of fanaticism<sup>2</sup>.

Just as Livingstone is said more readily to have understood the native point of view than the white, so Cunninghame Graham had a readier appreciation of those religious responses which were often dismissed out of hand as "queer, foreign", than of those which were familiar. He had an intensity of sympathetic understanding, which meant that he was to a limited extent the convert of every expression of religion which seemed to have something valid in it. Just as he understood the way of life of people of other races as if he were one of themselves, so he could appreciate their faith or philosophy as if it were his own. I would say that he thus became the residuary legate of many different traditions; and that it is in his personality, not in any logical expression of thought, that these elements are fused.

He came into contact with the working class movement when it was a mixture of:

1. the explicit atheism and anti-clericalism which derived from Tom Paine;

<sup>1</sup> In "A Vanished Arcadia", and in frequent reference elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> Especially in "A Brazilian Mystic". The fanaticism in this case was Gnostic in character.

2. a form of evangelical agnosticism, represented in Britain by such as T H Huxley that is, evangelical in its intense protagonism of the truth as it was seen, and strongly imbued with a sense of moral integrity;
3. a more positive protest, such as was made by the Christian Socialists and Keir Hardie, that true religion made an immediate demand in terms of social righteousness. At times he is strongly anti-clerical, though not atheistic. His outlook shows kinship with the attitude of the late Victorian agnostics. His language is very often that of Christian protest<sup>1</sup>.

The general situation of the church in Britain at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries requires some consideration. The Victorian age was an enquiring age. In the second part of it there was considerable religious and philosophical speculation and discussion, carried on in an atmosphere of tolerance. People were disembarassing themselves of other-worldly assumptions. In Scotland, the churches were distracted by their divisions (the grim picture of religious intolerance in a village, given in the sketch "Selvagia", exaggerates, but yet gives genuine insight into the time). In England, and to a lesser extent in Scotland, the working-classes by and large, were outside the church. The church-going classes were the middle classes. A proportion of these burst the wineskins of evangelical piety, the fermenting wine of the Gospel for them requiring a social amplitude. The Nonconformist conscience drove some to ameliorative action against vice, drunkenness and poverty. But the emphasis of the church was more on personal devotion and faith in face of all the assaults of reason and the devil; and heaven was a place of compensation for those whose lot on earth was irremediably hard. It is not too harsh to describe this as a time when the master or the mistress of the house took prayers for the servants, and saw to it that their commercial advantage had to meet no challenge from the churches in general on behalf of those whose dignity as human beings suffered. The social concern of the world church, whose main impetus was given by the COPEC Conference of 1925, was a recovery of a context for the faith which Cunninghame Graham in his lifetime did not see acknowledged.

Cunninghame Graham's own final attitude to religion seems to be given, beyond question, in the death-bed scene, as Tschiffely records it. The doctor in attendance at his bedside was asked by him concerning his religious beliefs, and returned the non-committal comment: "I preserve the beliefs my mother taught me".

"Well I do not", Don Roberto replied, "for long ago I have even discarded these. Some people need religion like a wall to lean against, but I have never needed it"<sup>2</sup>.

We might say "That is that!" - but that we would have to ask if this might not be his famous courtesy coming to the fore, after he had injudiciously put the doctor in an awkward spot; but that he drew a clear distinction of his own between beliefs and faith;

<sup>1</sup> This is almost always the note in working-class periodicals at this time: not "Here is Christianity in operation; be rid of it" but "This is un-Christian". The starving wretches of Cradley Heath (q.v.) called irreligious irresponsibles, marched to their meeting hall singing a hymn, their meeting was opened with prayer and closed with the words "We pray God to help us in our extremity". As far as I can find out, these things happened in complete disrelation from the churches.

<sup>2</sup> "Don Roberto", p. 437.

but that we would have to enquire whether religion had ever been presented to him as other than "a wall to lean against"; but that his character and utterances had the "infinite variety" of Shakespeare's Cleopatra, and we could not be certain that this was the definitive one!

Professor West comes down on the side of his being a "pagan materialist", who yet "loves with all his heart the simplicity of the teachings of Christ although he has no illusions concerning their practice by men". Paul Bloomfield describes in him some form of covert faith, likening him to his own homecoming Spaniard:

"Half furtively he dipped his hand into the holy water-spout and crossed himself muttering it was a superstitious act, yet glad to yield to it, for a true Christian ought to testify, even though God, for some mysterious purpose of His own, has not vouchsafed him faith"<sup>1</sup>.

He says it would only be the very careless reader who would take him for irreligious<sup>3</sup>. Sir Angus Cunninghame Graham, his nephew and heir, believes he could be called a committed Christian. The parable of the Last Judgement would concur.

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<sup>1</sup> p.235.

<sup>2</sup> From the title sketch of the book "His People".

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