

THE END OF CHRISTIANITY IN EUROPE?

Religion is not dead in Western Europe, but is clearly moribund as the statistics about practice and belief show in the various countries concerned, not least Ireland (see endnote). It seems to endure more in Central and Eastern Europe, to some extent due to its previously symbolic quality in the hostility to Stalinist regimes. Although, the signs there of ongoing decline are already evident, particularly among young people. The latter phenomenon is possibly only the beginning of a pattern, which may come to match that of the West.

Levels of Religion

Religions typically have three main levels - magical, transcendental and ethical. These become manifest and develop in a number of ways. We consider Christianity here in these respects, because that is the religious tradition which is overwhelmingly predominant throughout Europe.

The magical is the most immediate and striking element of a religion. In Christianity, one has the virgin birth and the avatar Jesus who performs miracles ranging from walking on water to reviving corpses, and finally is himself resurrected and ascends into heaven.

Of course, there is nothing original in all this, taking account of tales such as those of Gilgamesh, Horus, Dionysus, Krishna and the mahayana Buddha. If you want to think of events that mark out the divine from the mundane, then beginning with parthenogenesis, incarnating the deity, proceeding through counternatural episodes and ending with rising from the dead, you have pretty much got what is needed. If you can then persuade people to actually believe these things, you're more or less there in having them accept your religion. And when initially dealing with the uneducated and fearful masses of two thousand years ago, that is not

all that difficult. But when you are gifted a possibly opportunistic 'convert' in the shape of a Roman Emperor, Constantine by name, you have really arrived.

Incarnation

And it has to be observed in particular that godly incarnation was especially important in winning over to Christianity, because it goes a long way towards bridging the gap between the omnipotent overlord in the sky and the ordinary human here on earth. Christianity was markedly adept at convincing people about this when the story was based on a real historical person. In other words, the process seemed to be that, instead of just envisaging god as a superhuman in the heavens, you bring him down to be a superhuman on terra firma and walk amongst us mere mortals. Rather than us just being a reverential extension of him, he becomes an idealistic extension of us.

Equality & Autocracy

Christianity also initially preached the equality of man, if not quite the person, and this was certainly attractive to the 'plebs', but it did not last long. Within a hundred years or so, and even before Christianity's official endorsement, class difference asserted itself and the ordinary believer often had to stand at the back of the ecclesial assembly, while their 'betters' occupied the forward positions. By the time of imperial establishment, the long journey had begun of Christian backing for the ruling class of the day and instruction of the masses to be duly obedient. Pristine democratic ethos had soon given way to autocratic alignment. And the initially attractive pax vobiscum quickly transmuted into inquisitorial persecution.

The Transcendental

The next step up from the magical is the transcendental. By definition, you cannot see



the dimensions of this. You are told that there is a supernatural with a heavenly father to start with and, in time, you come to discover that this other domain is populated with all sorts of posthumous souls, as well as angels - and demons, the acme of which is the devil. Of course, it is not just a case of celestial demography. There are distinctive attributes of these entities, notably the mercurial god who is both loving and punishing, depending on how you conduct yourself, in particular sexually. One interpretation also has him effectively evincing a multiple personality, known as the trinity. This is the divinity proffered as the object of adoration. While some people then worship a nonexistent god, there are eccentrics who alternatively worship the devil, i.e. the alter ego of nothingness. Such a perspective will of course be hotly contested, especially by salon theophiliacs who usually cannot understand each other and on recollecting their own disquisitions rarely understand themselves.

Immortality

And you're told that you yourself can have access to this other realm after death in which there is the possibility of blissful immortality. So, if your lot in the here and now personally disappoints, it will be compensated for in the hereafter. That also helps greatly in fatalistic acceptance of the hand you are dealt socially in life, no matter how unjust.

There has latterly been developed a refined version of Christianity which tends to put forward in some measure a metaphorical rather than a literal understanding of certain teachings, but it still holds to a supernatural explanation of cosmic origin and continues to promise spiritual perpetuity.

It is generally agreed that either the basic or revised version of Christianity cannot be proved or disproved; it is a matter of mystery and faith. Some would say that this 'faith' might otherwise be more appropriately and simply described as wishful thinking.

Christian Ethics

But Christianity does not only have us believe in the magical and transcendental. On the basis of this it also assumes authority to tell us how to behave, namely how to be ethical. It endorses some universally accepted principles such as 'thou shalt not kill'. Also, it seems to advocate pure benevolence in saying 'thou shalt love thy neighbour as

thyself' (Mark 12:31), but in practice Christian societies accepted a literal rereading of this as capable of describing the phenomenon of the altruistic narcissist.

It is when it gets into certain specifics that its neurotic and anti-human side fully comes out. Most of this is obsessed with the erotic and related. The following are deeply sinful: nudity, sexual fantasy, masturbation, premarital sex, contraception, abortion, divorce, and homosexuality, to start with. Then, there is the detail of exactly when and how sex is to be engaged in, even within marriage. Of course, it is to be always kept in mind that it is then for procreation rather than pleasure. Abstinence and denial are the orders of the day. In the Christian mind, copulation is associated with contamination. If some of this is difficult, it can be offered up as a penance and help to diminish the torture of purgatory.

Negativity of Christianity

Naturally, very few people, apart from desert-dwelling anchorites, can adhere to all these strictures. But if you can't be frightened into actually behaving properly, you will then be made to feel guilty and sullied. The result is prevention of tranquility and contentment. This is all consistent with the teachings about original sin, covering one's nakedness and us all being persistently sinners and in need of redemption. The flesh is corrupt, life is a valley of tears, the mental focus should be on the postmortal. It is a depressingly miserable, life-denying creed. The alleged joys of Christianity are akin to the euphoric episodes of the bipolar in what is otherwise made to be a wasteland of existence.

Retreat

Christianity began to retreat, notably from the 18th century onwards, with the vigorous assertion of scientific and philosophical rationalism. Today, in Western Europe anyway, it has been widely seen through as not only false, but absurd with its primitive superstitions concerning virgin birth, 'miraculous' happenings, and walking dead, et cetera. What has been gradually taking its place is a conscious or de facto secular humanism.

Religious involvement may still occur with the use of church rituals by some on occasions of birth, marriage and death as a matter of convenience. There may even be an amount of attendance at services for reason of social

contact or keeping up appearances. But religious belief is another thing. There is often just a quiet abandonment of the incredible.

From the Atlantic to the Urals, finality may at last be coming, at varied rates, to what is basically an unnatural and reactionary supercult. Christianity in the region seems to be gradually moving into the back room of history along with the euro-imperialism that it so brazenly fronted. In an altogether new

sense, it is perhaps a case of 'today Europe, tomorrow the world'.

ENDNOTE Those sure about existence of a god as percentages of population: Fin 23, Swed 14, Nor 19, Den 15, Ger 10, Neth 15, Bel 13, Fr 11, Br 12, Ir Rep 24, Sp 25, Port 44, It 26. The pattern in Central and Eastern Europe is mixed, rising from a low of 13% to a high of 66%, although in the majority of cases below 50%. (PEW RESEARCH CENTRE).

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh