

Part 4

Religions other than Christianity

BUDDHISM

Buddha . . . belongs to that class of philosophical mystics for whom what we commonly call religion was really only symbolical, and the main matter was a metaphysical unification. He may have had some of the virtues of a saint, but he was in reality a sage. He may have been what we call an idealist; he was also something very like a pessimist. But anyhow he was not a Church and did not found a Church. . . . Buddhism is certainly the very opposite of nature-worship. It would be true to call it an iconoclasm directed to destroy the idol called nature.

Blackfriars, March 1923

Buddha . . . proposed a way of escaping from all this recurrent sorrow; and that was simply by getting rid of the delusion that is called desire. . . . If once a man realised that there is really no reality, that everything, including his soul, is in dissolution at every instant, he would anticipate disappointment and be intangible to change, existing . . . in a sort of ecstasy of indifference. The Buddhists call this beatitude; . . . to us it is indistinguishable from despair. I do not see, for instance, why the disappointment of desire should not apply as much to the most benevolent desires as to the most selfish ones. Indeed the Lord of Compassion seems to pity people for living rather than for dying.

The Everlasting Man, Part 1, ch. 6

The Christian pities men because they are dying, and the Buddhist pities them because they are living. The Christian is sorry for what damages the life of a man; but the Buddhist is sorry for him because he is himself. . . . When a Christian hospital cures a sick man, it assumes that life is a potential pleasure. I cannot see . . . why a Buddhist saint or hospital should help a man to anything – except perhaps to Buddhism.

'On Buddhism', in Generally Speaking

To the Buddhists was given a conception of God of extraordinary intellectual purity; but in growing familiar with the featureless splendour, they have lost their heads; . . . they say that everything is nothing and nothing is everything, that black is white because white is black. We fancy that the frightful universal negatives at which they have at last arrived, are really little more than the final mental collapse of men trying always to find an abstraction big enough for all things. . . . Buddhism stands for a simplification of the mind and a reliance on the most indestructible ideas; Christianity stands for a simplification of the heart and a reliance on the most indestructible sentiments. The greater Christian insistence upon personal deity and immortality is not, we fancy, the cause so much as the effect of this essential trend towards an ancient passion and pathos as the power that most nearly rends the veil from the nature of things. Both creeds grope after the same secret sun, but Buddhism dreams of its light and Christianity of its heat. Buddhism seeks after God with the largest conception it can find, the all-producing and all-absorbing One; Christianity seeks after God with the most elementary passion it can find – the craving for a Father, the hunger that is as old as the hills. It turns the whole cry of a lost universe into the cry of a lost child.

The Speaker, 17 Nov. 1900

The more we really appreciate the noble revulsion and renunciation of Buddha, the more we see that intellectually it was the converse and almost the contrary of the salvation of the world by Christ. The Christian would escape from the world into the universe; the Buddhist wishes to escape from the universe even more than from the world. One would uncreate himself; the other would return to his Creation: to his Creator. . . . And he who will not climb the mountain of Christ does indeed fall into the abyss of Buddha.

St. Thomas Aquinas, ch. 4

Christ said 'Seek first the kingdom, and all these things shall be added unto you.' Buddha said 'Seek first the kingdom, and then you will need none of these things.'

The Everlasting Man, Part 2, ch. 3

No two ideals could be more opposite than a Christian saint in a Gothic cathedral and a Buddhist saint in a Chinese temple. . . . The Buddhist saint always has his eyes shut, while the Christian saint always has them very wide open. The Buddhist saint has a sleek and harmonious body, but his eyes are heavy and sealed with sleep. The mediaeval saint's body is wasted, . . . but his eyes are frightfully alive. . . . The Buddhist is looking with a peculiar intentness inwards. The Christian is staring with a frantic intentness outwards. . . . For the Buddhist or Theosophist personality is the fall of man, for the Christian it is the purpose of God, the whole point of his cosmic idea. The world-soul

of the Theosophists asks man to love it only in order that man may throw himself into it. But the divine centre of Christianity actually threw man out of it in order that he might love it. . . . The Christian saint is happy because he has verily been cut off from the world; he is separate from things and is staring at them in astonishment. But why should the Buddhist saint be astonished at things? since there is really only one thing, and that being impersonal can hardly be astonished at itself.

Orthodoxy, ch. 8

JUDAISM

With all their fine apprehensions, the Jews suffer from one heavy calamity; that of being a Chosen Race. It is the vicē of any patriotism or religion depending on race that the individual is himself the thing to be worshipped; the individual is his own ideal, and even his own idol.

The New Jerusalem (1920), p.29

Humanly speaking, . . . the world owes God to the Jews. It owes that truth to much that is blamed in the Jews. . . . Through all their wanderings, . . . they did indeed carry the fate of the world in that wooden tabernacle. . . . Much as we may prefer that creative liberty which the Christian culture has declared . . . we must not underrate the determining importance at the time of the Hebrew inhibition of images. It is a typical example of one of those limitations that did in fact preserve and perpetuate enlargement, like a wall built round a wide open space. The God who could not have a statue remained a spirit. . . . It is often said with a sneer that the God of Israel was only a God of Battles, . . . pitted in rivalry against the other gods only as their envious foe. Well it is for the world that he was a God of Battles . . . [that] he was to all the rest only a rival and a foe. . . . It would have been easy enough for his worshippers to follow the enlightened course of Syncretism and the pooling of all the pagan traditions. . . . It required the almost demoniac energy of certain inspired demagogues [to testify] to the divine unity in words that are still like winds of inspiration and ruin. . . . The world's destiny would have been distorted still more fatally if monotheism had failed in the Mosaic tradition. . . . That we do preserve something of that primary simplicity, that poets and philosophers can still indeed in some sense say an Universal Prayer, . . . that philosophy and philanthropy are truisms in a religion of reasonable men, all that we do most truly owe, under heaven, to a . . . nomadic people; who bestowed on men the supreme and serene blessing of a jealous God.

The Everlasting Man, Part 1, ch. 4

ISLAM

Some six hundred years after Christianity sprang up in the East and swept westwards, another great faith arose in almost the same eastern lands and followed it like its gigantic shadow. Like a shadow, it was at once a copy and a contrary . . . [Islam] . . . was the final flaming up of the accumulated Orientalisms, perhaps of the accumulated Hebraisms, gradually rejected as the Church grew more European, or as Christianity turned into Christendom. Its highest motive was a hatred of idols, and in its view Incarnation was itself an idolatry. The two things it persecuted were the idea of God being made flesh and of His being afterwards made wood or stone. . . . This fanaticism against art or mythology was at once a development and a reaction from that [Christian] conversion, a sort of minority report of the Hebraists. In this sense Islam was something like a Christian heresy. The early heresies had been full of mad reversals and evasions of the Incarnation, rescuing their Jesus from the reality of his body even at the expense of the sincerity of his soul. And the Greek Iconoclasts had poured into Italy, breaking the popular statues and denouncing the idolatry of the Pope. . . . It was all these disappointed negations that took fire from the genius of Mahomet, and launched out of the burning lands a cavalry charge that nearly conquered the world. . . . This Semite god haunted Christianity like a ghost.

A Short History of England, ch. 6

Islam was the ultimate fulfilment of the Iconoclasts.

St. Thomas Aquinas, ch. 3

The Moslem is the nearest approach to a militant Christian; . . . he is . . . an envoy from western civilisation. . . . Islam . . . owed something to the quite isolated and unique individuality of Israel; but it owed more to Byzantium and the theological enthusiasm of Christendom.

The Everlasting Man, Part 2, ch. 5

The more we know of the great Moslem movement, the more we see that it was really a post-Christian revision, or subsequent simplification rather like the Arian movement. . . . Islam would never have existed without Christianity. . . . Nor was the Muslim movement in the modern sense anti-Christian. It gave to Christ as high a moral position as is given Him by most Unitarians, and indeed a more supernatural status than is given by some Broad Churchmen.

Blackfriars, Mar. 1923

Islam . . . was a . . . reaction against that very humane complexity that is really a Christian character; that idea of balance in the deity, as of balance in the family, that makes that creed a sort of sanity, and that sanity the soul of civilisation.

The Everlasting Man, Part 2, ch. 4

The Moslem had one thought, and that a most vital one; the greatness of God which levels all men. But the Moslem had not one thought to rub against another, because he really had not another. It is the friction of two spiritual things, of tradition and invention, or of substance and symbol, from which the mind takes fire. The creeds condemned as complex have something like the secret of sex; they can breed thoughts.

The New Jerusalem (1920), pp. 34-5

PAGANISM AND PANTHEISM

Nature-worship is more morally dangerous than the most vulgar man-worship of the cities; since it can easily be perverted into the worship of an impersonal mystery, carelessness or cruelty.

'The Surrender of a Cockney', in *Alarms and Discursions*

The direct appeal to Nature is utterly unnatural. . . . We must descend from God down to God's Nature. Nature is only right when seen in the light of the highest right; whether it be, as some Humanists would say, in the mind of Man, or as Christians would say, in the mind of God.

'The End of the Moderns', in *The Common Man*

The only objection to Natural Religion is that somehow it always becomes unnatural. A man loves Nature in the morning for her innocence and amiability, and at nightfall, if he is loving her still, it is for her darkness and cruelty. . . . The mere pursuit of health always leads to something unhealthy. Physical nature must not be made the direct object of obedience; it must be enjoyed, not worshipped. Stars and mountains must not be taken seriously. If they are, we end where the pagan nature worship ended. Because the earth is kind, we can imitate all her cruelties. Because sexuality is sane, we can all go mad about sexuality.

Orthodoxy, ch. 5

The Church will be facing once more her first and most formidable enemy; a thing more attractive because more human than any of the heresies. . . . [Paganism] may be called practical materialism. . . . The Pagan looks for his pleasures to the natural forces of this world. . . . The natural forces, when they are turned into gods, betray mankind by something that is in the very nature of nature-worship. We can already see men becoming unhealthy by the worship of health; becoming hateful by the worship of love; becoming paradoxically solemn and overstrained even by the idolatry of sport. . . . Unless all these things are subject to a more centralised and

well-balanced conception of the universe, the local god becomes too vivid, we might say too visible, and strikes his worshippers with madness. The pantheist is always too near to the polytheist and the polytheist to the idolater; the idolater to the man offering human sacrifice. There is nothing in Paganism to check its own exaggerations.

'A Century of Emancipation', in *The Well and the Shallows*

Since Christianity broke the heart of the world and mended it, one cannot really be a Pagan; one can only be an anti-Christian. . . . The Pagan felt that there was a sort of easy and equable force pressing upon us from Nature; that this force was breezy and beneficent, though not specially just or loving; in other words, that there was, as the strength in wine or trees or the ocean, the energy of kindly but careless gods. This Paganism is now impossible, either to the Christian or the sceptic. We believe so much less than that – and we desire so much more.

'The Moral Philosophy of Meredith', in *A Handful of Authors*

The pantheist cannot wonder, for he cannot praise God or praise anything as really distinct from himself. . . . There is no real possibility of getting out of pantheism any special impulse to moral action. For pantheism implies in its nature that one thing is as good as another; whereas action implies in its nature that one thing is greatly preferable to another.

Orthodoxy, ch. 8

Paganism is better than pantheism, for paganism is free to imagine divinities, while pantheism is forced to pretend, in a priggish way, that all things are equally divine.

The Catholic Church and Conversion, ch. 4

It is . . . the greatest glory of the Christian tradition that it has incorporated so many Pagan traditions. . . . And the best and most obvious example is the way in which Christianity did incorporate . . . the old human and heathen conception of the Winter Feast. . . . What was then heathen was still human; that is, it was both mystical and material; it expressed itself in sacred substances and sacramental acts; it understood the mystery of trees and waters and the holy flame. . . . The Pagan element in Christmas came quite natural to Christians, because it was not in fact very far from Christianity. Take, for example, the whole fundamental idea of the Winter Feast. There is a perfectly natural parallel between a religion that defies the world and a ritual that defies the weather. . . . In winter even a rich man receives some faint hint of the problem of a poor man; he may avoid being hungry, but he cannot always avoid being cold. To choose that moment of common freezing for the assertion of common fraternity is, in its own intrinsic

nature, a foreshadowing of what we call the Christian idea. It involves the suggestion that joy comes from within and not from without. It involves the suggestion that peril and the potentiality of pain are themselves a ground of gratitude and rejoicing. It involves the suggestion that even when we are merely Pagans we are not merely Pantheists.

'The Winter Feast', in *G.K. Chesterton: The Apostle and the Wild Ducks*

OTHERS

The modern European seeking his religion in Asia is reading his religion into Asia. Religion there is something different.

The Everlasting Man, Part 2, ch. 5

The Caste System of ancient India . . . contrasts . . . with . . . Christian democracy . . . in the fact that it does really conceive the social superiority as a spiritual superiority. This . . . divides it fundamentally from the fraternity of Christendom.

The Everlasting Man, Part 1, ch. 6

Reincarnation is not really a mystical idea. It is not really a transcendental idea, or in that sense a religious idea. Mysticism conceives something transcending experience; religion seeks glimpses of a better good or a worse evil than experience can give. Reincarnation need only extend experiences in the sense of repeating them. It is no more transcendental for a man to remember what he did in Babylon before he was born than to remember what he did in Brixton before he had a knock on the head. . . . It has nothing to do with seeing God or even conjuring up the devil.

The Everlasting Man, Part 1, ch. 6

The difference between having a real religion and having a mere curiosity about psychic marvels is really very like the difference between drinking beer and drinking brandy, between drinking wine and drinking gin. Beer is a food as well as a stimulant; so a positive religion is a comfort as well as an adventure. A man drinks his wine because it is his favourite wine, the pleasure of his palate or the vintage of his valley. A man drinks alcohol merely because it is alcoholic. So a man calls upon his gods because they are good or at any rate good to him, because they are the idols that protect his tribe or the saints that have blessed his birthday. But spiritualists call upon spirits merely because they are spirits; they ask for ghosts merely because they are ghosts.

William Blake (1920), p. 98

. . . the religion of Comte,¹ generally known as Positivism, or the worship of humanity. . . . It is surely unreasonable to attack the doctrine of the Trinity as a piece of bewildering mysticism, and then to ask men to worship a being who is ninety million persons in one God, neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.

Heretics, ch. 6

The question really is whether Humanism can perform all the functions of religion. . . . I do not believe that Humanism can be a complete substitute for Superhumanism. . . . The [Humanist] discovery of brotherhood seemed like the discovery of broad daylight; of something that men could never grow tired of. Yet even in my own short lifetime, men have already grown tired of it. We cannot now appeal to the love of equality as an *emotion*. . . . In most men it has died, because it was a mood and not a doctrine. . . .

I do not therefore believe that Humanism and Religion are rivals on equal terms. I believe it is a rivalry between the pools and the fountain; or between the firebrands and the fire. [The Humanists] snatched one firebrand out of the undying fire; but . . . the torch went out very soon. . . . In short, I distrust spiritual experiments outside the central spiritual tradition; for the simple reason that I think they do not last. . . . Humanism may try to pick up the pieces; but can it stick them together? Where is the *cement* which made religion corporate and popular, which can prevent it falling to pieces in a *débris* of individualistic tastes and degrees. What is to prevent one Humanist wanting chastity without humility, and another humility without chastity, and another truth or beauty without either? The problem of an enduring ethic and culture consists in finding an arrangement of the pieces by which they remain related, as do the stones in an arch.

'Is Humanism a Religion?', in *The Thing*

1. Auguste Comte was a humanist who believed that society was progressing towards the domination of science ('positivism' being his word for the scientific approach), but in need of the good qualities of the Middle Ages, so that his pseudo-religion was called 'Catholicism plus Science'.