

## WHAT IS RIGHT WITH THE WORLD

“HEAVY volumes of commentary and exegesis,” we are told of Lord Melbourne in a fascinating book,\* “he examined with scrupulous diligence; and at any odd moment he might be found turning over the pages of the Bible. To the ladies whom he most liked he would lend some learned work on the Revelation, crammed with marginal notes in his own hand.” *The Revelation of Saint John, with introduction and notes by William Lamb, Viscount Melbourne*, would not be lacking in interest; it would at least be curious to see what one whom Mr. Strachey describes as a man of perpetual compromises, an autumn rose, a sceptical believer, ambiguous in everything, could make of a book of such intense faith, flaming certitudes, and crashing decisions. The seeming chaos of the Apocalypse has left many a man floundering for his reason. No book in the world has been more commented on than this last of the books of the Bible, and none has had a greater variety of commentators. And we may add the remark—due, I think, to Mr. Chesterton—that, despite all the wild and weird things John saw in his visions, he saw nothing so wild and weird as some of his own commentators. The insanely fantastic interpretations of Abbot Joachim (1202) and of the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra (1329) furnished the Reformers with arms in their anti-papal campaign. (It is at least in Calvin’s favour, as some one has remarked, that he had the sense to leave the book alone.) The extravagant absurdities and the anti-papalism of the continental commentators were pushed still farther by their English co-religionists—witness the works of Brightman (1616) and Mede (1627), and,

\* Lytton Strachey: *Queen Victoria*, p. 61.

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with tears be it said, of Sir Isaac Newton, on whom the book's most recent interpreter\* sadly pronounces judgment with a touch of David's lament over Saul : "Ce grand homme a eu la faiblesse de commenter l'Apocalypse à la façon de Mede et des autres." The Scarlet Woman has coloured English Protestant controversialists.

Of recent works on the Apocalypse the two best belong to an Englishman and a Frenchman : *The Apocalypse of St. John*, by the late Dr. Swete, and the work just published, *L'Apocalypse*, by Père Allo. Concerning Dr. Swete and his work Père Allo himself remarks : "A profound, learned, and pious commentator with a true idea of John's mind and aim, he is perhaps the author who has made best use of recent discoveries and of tradition in order to penetrate the meaning of the sealed book. His work, which might almost be by a Catholic, is the one to which we owe most for our own commentary." But over Dr. Swete Père Allo has several advantages. First of all he comes after him. Secondly, he has a clearer and more penetrating mind, the habit of distinguishing and defining ideas, the natural appanage of a mind nourished on the *Summa*. Lastly, he has the advantage of belonging to precisely the same religion as St. John himself ; his book *is* by a Catholic. It is difficult to speak of it except in superlatives ; suffice it to say that whoever would appreciate better the literary and spiritual greatness of the Apocalypse, whoever would reach the mind of St. John and thereby "see Jesus," will find it invaluable.

The Gospels paint the life of Jesus in Palestine, the Apocalypse reveals His life in glory. Jesus, sitting at the right hand of God, yesterday, to-day, and the same for ever, is the sitter that appears on John's

\* *L'Apocalypse*, par le P. E.—B. Allo des Frères Prêcheurs. Paris : J. Gabalda, 1921. pp. cclxviii, 375. 45 francs.

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canvas. Recently a reviewer\* of what, we are told, is meant to be essentially a preacher's Life of Christ (note the word), remarked that "in days gone by men found in the Epistles, and especially in St. Paul's writings, the sources of that presentation of the faith which appealed most directly to their contemporaries; to-day the chief centre of interest is found in the four Gospels." And a little later the same reviewer speaks of "the great things in the life of Christ, the things that have permanent significance"—among which, we doubt not, he would not reckon the Church, Militant or Triumphant, or the Sacraments. St. Paul and the Apocalypse—for the latter treats of the same subjects as the later epistles of St. Paul—are not preached outside the Church, because they are no longer believed in. The Synoptics seem to submit more easily to the Procrustean bed. For them, too, it is true, the event of events was the Death and the resulting Life after Death, but yet the glory of the Risen Christ has left unchanged the figure of the Sage (pardon the word!) of Nazareth. Superficially, therefore, in them it is not too difficult to make of Him merely the religious genius, a unique teacher of the highest ethics. But the Apocalypse is supernatural (the critics would say, mythological) beyond all recovery. It is still studied of course, but curiously, as for instance—if we may compare great things with small—the *Dream of Gerontius* is studied, which R. Hutton called the poem of all the poems of the nineteenth century "which is in every sense the least in sympathy with the temper of the century, indeed the most completely independent of the *Zeitgeist*." And different as the two men were in other respects, we may say of the Apocalypse what Hutton says of the poem, that it is the work of "a man to whom the

\* Reviewing *The Life of Christ*, by Rev. R. J. Campbell, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, August 4.

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vision of the Christian revelation has at all times been more real, more potent to influence action, and more powerful to pre-occupy the imagination, than all worldly interests put together.”\*

John the Seer is a Catholic. Though the book is not one destined for doctrinal instruction, in it he does touch all his beliefs and hopes, and therein supposes and confirms the whole Creed of the Early Church. To John's Catholicism the critics testify in their own perverse way, when they attempt to prove that the dogmatic system which runs through the whole, and which, they are obliged to recognize, goes back at least to St. Paul, is the pure teaching of Jesus overlaid with the religious ideas of contemporary Hellenism. The book's full-blown Catholicism is at bottom the real reason why they refuse to attribute it to John, the son of Zebedee, the daily companion of Jesus of Nazareth. Among the points of his theology which give coherence and substance to his visions, we may, with Père Allo (p. ix), note the following :

His theology in the strict sense, his doctrine of God, is what was to be expected from a Jew become Christian. Like the good philosopher that he was, John in dealing with the last things thought also of the first. God is Alpha and Omega, the Beginning as well as the End. Like the good Jew that he was, his mind went back to that great truth of the story of Creation : “ In the beginning God created Heaven and Earth. . . . And God saw all the things that he had made, and they were very good.” What is right with the world is God. His was a very living God (cf. iv. 9 ; vii. 2, etc.)—not the finite and weakling God of William James or Mr. Wells, but Almighty, Creator and Lord of all things, Judge of mankind, and Avenger of all wrong. Of the ten occurrences in the New Testament of the word Παντοκράτωρ,

\* R. Hutton : *Cardinal Newman* p. 244.

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“almighty, ruler of all,” nine are found in the Apocalypse. For the author wished to inspire Christian hope, and of that hope the omnipotence of God, the infallible “*divinum auxilium*,” is the formal motive. St. Paul’s cry, “If God be for us, who is against us?” is his theme. The truth is that for moderns the book is too full of hope, of a God irresistible either to save or to punish, of this notion of life as a great adventure with live issues. They would prefer a less living God, and an existence of greyer hue. For, like Guthrum of the Danes in Mr. Chesterton’s ballad, they sing

of a wheel returning,  
And the mire trod back to mire,  
And how red hells and golden heavens  
Are castles in the fire.

In the matter of his Christology John would hardly have been at ease in a Modern Churchmen’s Congress. The Divinity of Christ is taught in his book in a thousand different ways. The epithets reserved for God—Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, *the Living One* (i. 18)—are given unreservedly to Jesus. His dress denotes Him as King and Priest; the Sword issuing from His mouth as Him whose word is irresistible; His white head and hair symbolize His divine eternity resembling that of the Ancient of Days in Daniel. In all His heavenly activity He ever acts in a manner indivisibly one with God the Father.

It is Christ in His glorious life who appears to John, but the mortal life in Palestine is presupposed; His glory as man is the result of His obedience unto death. His character of Redeemer, and that by His blood, is expressed by the figure of the slain Lamb.

Reigning as He does in Heaven, at the same time He is equally present on earth as King of kings and Lord of lords. At His glorious coming He will destroy all His enemies; meanwhile He is ever ruling His

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Churches and the world, even now into the souls that open to Him He is ever coming, entering and eating with them. The doctrine of the life of grace runs through the whole book.

If John believed with all the strength of his powerful personality that Jesus, the Son of God, was sitting at the right hand of God, still with His human nature, still "like unto a son of man," he believed no less intensely that the same ascended Christ was really present in the Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament of perfect faith. For him God incarnate on earth was—to borrow a phrase, I know not whose—not an event, but an institution. And here, as in the sixth chapter of the Fourth Gospel, it is unnecessary, and indeed impossible, to distinguish sharply between the Incarnation and the Eucharist, because for the author the one passes over so naturally into the other (cf. ii. 7, 17; iii. 20). The book ends, as it began, on that note: "In the midst of the street thereof and on both sides of the river is a tree of life, bearing fruits twelve times, in every month yielding its fruits, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (xxii. 2). The tree is the Word made flesh; it gives its fruit the whole year through, that is to say, for all time and eternity, and that fruit is the life of the dwellers in the heavenly Jerusalem, while its leaves are for the healing of the Church Militant—the Eucharistic Christ our food, the glorified Christ our reward.

We can but refer to his teaching on the Holy Spirit, to the traces of an organized Church so clear in the seven letters of the early chapters, and to the profound teaching on the Universal Church contained in chapters vii. and xxi.-xxii.

Such for John were the things, or rather such was the one thing that was right with the world—God, God the Father, God the Son made man and remaining

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man, and God the Holy Ghost. "And he showed me a river of water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street thereof and on both sides of the river is a tree of life . . . and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (xxii. 1, 2). The tree with its fruits and leaves represents Christ in His glory and in the Eucharist, the river baptism in this life and the Holy Ghost in heaven (cf. John iii. 38, 39). Thus throughout this book of Revelation the reader

Heareth between star and other star  
Through the door of the darkness fallen ajar,  
The council, eldest of things that are,  
The talk of the Three in One.

But what urged the author to consign these things to writing? And, more especially, why did he give to his manifesto so thunderous a note, so "apocalyptic" a form, to use the current phrase?

The term "apocalyptic" is really borrowed from John's book itself. The author in the opening words of his volume describes it as an "apocalypse" (revelation). "Many other books, of Jewish or Christian origin, are nowadays called Apocalypses. They are the works which belong to the same literary class as the Johannine Revelation. But the latter was the first to have that name; it was afterwards taken by other writings which aspired to imitate it, or extended by critics to writings, earlier or later than it, which in matter or form resembled this Apocalypse *κατ' ἐξοχήν*. They have this in common that they intend to unveil to men what God alone or heavenly beings knew up till then, in the past, the present or the future, and that they unveil it in a style which differs sharply from that of the old prophecy. For it is essentially allegorical, mysterious by choice, and ever stands in need of interpretation, often of a key. It is always strained, grandiose, aiming at effect, and constitutes

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in literature a class apart. Nowadays by an 'apocalyptic' style is meant one which combines grandiloquence with obscurity in metaphors and pictures. It must be admitted that this kind of literature hardly suits our taste\*; it was just as little in keeping with the old forms of Hebrew prophecy, or with the sober and luminous character of classical Greek art. But if God gave to John visions for the expressions of which this style was fitted, the reason is that the apocalyptic manner was at that epoch the most suitable to the Jewish mentality, nor was it repugnant to the 'Hellenes' of the time. . . . The Apocalypse of John approximates, in its object and style, to that group of writings to which its name has been extended ; but in spirit it is as distant from them as possible" (Allo, pp. xviii, xix, xxvi). The "apocalyptic" form, then, was certainly excellently adapted for impressing deeply on the minds of the end of the first century the truths the Seer had to teach. Again, though "we must not hesitate to believe with all the Fathers that John simply repeats what has been shown to him in real divine ecstasies" (Allo, p. clxviii) it is certain also that he has drawn for a number of his images on the stock-in-trade common to apocalyptic writers in general. "When he wished to transmit what he had seen, it was natural for him . . . to make use of the style and of the images that had become current in his world for communications of that kind."

The author's aim in writing is clear. His manifesto appears as a circular letter sent "to the seven churches which are in Asia" (i. 4). Early Christian tradition is almost unanimous in assigning it to the last years of Domitian, say, A.D. 94 or 95, a date which, as Père Allo well shows (pp. ccvi-ccx), is corroborated by the evidence of the book itself. At this period a

\* We might, however, class Mr. Chesterton's *The Man Who was Thursday* as "apocalyptic."



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seer who scanned the near future would see that everywhere throughout the Roman Empire was being welded a politico-religious system absolutely incompatible with the existence of the Catholic Church. "The Roman Emperor, whose power was practically unlimited, was about to set himself up over against Christ, like a kind of Antichrist, himself demanding as Lord, as Saviour, and as God, the worship that the Christians reserved to the Son of God, the only Lord and Saviour" (p. ii). The Senate had long deified the Emperors after their death; by the second century the adoration of the living Cæsar will have become the test of loyalty to Rome. Now it was precisely in Asia Minor that on the one hand the Church had made most progress, and on the other the imperial cult was most advanced and most popular. Once therefore this polytheism, at once official and popular, had fully grasped the fact that of the two religions one must go, a storm of blood could not but deluge the world. Again the converts of Asia Minor, as we see from those of St. Paul's epistles addressed to them, were not all perfect in faith or morals; they lived in a land where sensuality was a part of religion and religious syncretism the fashion. What wonder if the fear of persecution strengthened their leaning to compromise. It was when the atmosphere was heavy with the storm that was about to break, that John sounded his trumpet-blast of hope. "To know by Divine revelation the positive strategy of the Enemy; to foresee the form of future trials, in order not to be surprised or disconcerted by them; to know finally what would become of that political world power which had actually turned openly against the Gospel—all this was calculated to guide and strengthen the faithful in the terrible war that had been declared against them. Such was the aim of the Revelation of Patmos; it rendered more precise the prophecies of the Gospels

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and St. Paul, by determining the historical form of the perpetual combat between Satan and Christ, and by announcing, in a manner sufficiently clear, the issue of the struggle actually proceeding, the type of all those that might follow it in a long future" (p. cxxv). Hence three main divisions: (1) Revelation to the seven churches on their actual spiritual state (i. 9—iii.); (2) Prophetic revelation of the whole future of the world and of the Church, from the glorification of Christ to the Last Judgment (iv.—xxi. 8); (iii) Vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem, Spouse of the Lamb (xxi. 9—xxii. 5). (Allo, p. lxxxvi.)

The sum is this: Christ, with His humanity, sitteth at the right hand of God since the day He redeemed men by His death. To John—and there can be no reasonable doubt that this John is the son of Zebedee, the companion of Jesus—His life in heaven is not less real than His life in Galilee. The "Last Days," foretold and ardently desired by the Prophets, the days of God's victory, have actually begun; they open with the Incarnation. Here on earth, though the power of the Beasts seems to hold sway, it is really Christ who reigns; and His reign will last a thousand years. And this reign of a thousand years (a round number for an indefinite period) is simply the figure of the spiritual domination of the Church Militant, united to the Church Triumphant, from Jesus' entry into glory until the end of the world. The New Jerusalem is already an actual reality; of those who have washed their garments in the blood of the Lamb, the dead are already there without having to wait for the Second Coming (xiv. 13), while those living in this world are there by their interior life. "Our conversation (*Πολίτευμα*) is in Heaven" (Phil. iii. 20). By those infinitely precious things called Faith, Hope, and Charity their heads and hearts are already in the New Jerusalem. Against

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those who “ have on as a breastplate faith and charity,  
and as a helmet hope ” what can the Enemy do ?  
“ He that will, let him take freely of the water of life ”  
(xxii. 17), of the river of the Heavenly Jerusalem.  
What is right with this world is the other world.

LUKE WALKER, O.P.

