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The New Attack on Christmas
Pages 585-589

The old Puritans attacked Christmas in its totality; the new Puritans attack it in detail, and bit by bit. Moderns have not the moral courage, as a rule, to avow the sincere spiritual bias behind their fads; they become insincere even about their sincerity. Most modern liberality consists of finding irreligious excuses for religious bigotry. The earlier type of bigot pretended to be more religious than he really was. The later type pretends to be less religious than he really is. He does not wear a mask of piety, but rather a mask of impiety—or, at any rate, of indifference. He is in a double sense in masquerade, for his mummery follows a fashion of merriment. He wears a coloured domino over his black Puritan dress. He adopts all sorts of mundane and merely utilitarian arguments to support his sombre traditions. Sabbatarianism is defended as merely part of the problem of labour and leisure. Gambling is discouraged because it involves the danger of losing. The only honourable case against gambling is that it involves the danger of winning. Wine is not frankly condemned because it is festive, as by a sincere asceticism; it is analysed as "alcoholic" by a cheap and very changeable popular science. Even war has been condemned not as wicked, but as unremunerative, for Mr. Norman Angell's¹ argument against arms rested rather on the latter than the former objection. To some of us the argument will seem insufficient, since it only proves to be unproductive the fights that would in any case be unjustifiable, and does not even affect the only fights that could ever be justifiable. We are not concerned to learn that it does not pay to be a pirate; and we always knew that it does not pay to be a patriot. But in any case all these arguments are alike in avoiding the old direct religious challenge of right and wrong; and falling back on certain particular and practical objections, which vary with the various cases. They are all alike in waging with secular weapons what is still really a spiritual war. For its motive is still as moral and religious as in that earlier century when the iconoclasts led what we may almost call a crusade against the Cross.

In the special case of Christmas, at any rate, it is true to say that the modern attack is made on separate items seriatim. It is obvious enough that if we take a collection of the actual Christmas customs, as practised by our fathers or as practised when we ourselves were children, we shall find that modern ingenuity has made up a new objection to each of these old things. It is unnecessary to point out that the wassail-bowl is an object of disapproval to the Prohibitionist, or that the turkey is an object of compassion to the vegetarian. The spread of such sensibility has not yet, perhaps, induced any vegetarian to shed tears over the fate of the plum-pudding; but it would certainly lead a Prohibitionist to desire to shed on it something different from burning brandy. All that was regarded very recently as humanity has thus been condemned by humanitarianism. The moral tales of our immediate ancestors might well now have exactly the opposite moral. Some of our more advanced ethical teachers might well write a new version of "The Christmas Carol"—a sort of Anti-Christmas Carol. For the drama of Dickens might well appear to them not a comedy of conversion, but a tragedy of apostasy. The story would start with Scrooge as a lofty and idealistic vegetarian, partaking of a pure and hygienic diet of gruel. It would end with the same Scrooge, now degraded by superstition, and engaged in a cannibal conspiracy for the assassination of a turkey. It would exhibit that maniac as so morally depraved as to entrap even a small boy out of the streets and make him a tool in the consummation of the crime. It would represent him as driving his very employees deeper into the mire of such immorality, and making the cannibal family of Cratchit more cannibalistic than before. Eugenics, which often form a part of such ethics, might here suggest a thoughtful passage about the mistake made in the birth of Tiny Tim, and the desirability of correcting that mistake with all speed in some quiet and painless fashion. Anyhow, a large number of highly modern morals might be drawn from the new story.

Moreover, it would end miserably; which would also suit the bright, progressive spirit of the future.

It is equally clear that this detailed destruction can be carried into almost every detail. It is not only true, for instance, that the whole legend about Santa Claus coming down the chimney and the child hanging up the stocking raises the whole question which moderns least understand. It is that which Matthew Arnold called by a rather clumsy German word for "extra-belief"²— all that fringe of mere fancy that is attached to faith, and yet is detachable from it. It also involves the same truth by a test that is material, apart from that other test which some would call mystical, and others only mythical. Whether or not the saint exists, there is no doubt that the stocking exists. Somebody fills the stocking; and the critic could learn something here if he merely emptied the stocking. For it is not only to the stocking itself, but to almost everything in the stocking, that the priggish and progressive person might raise an objection. Suppose, for instance, that the child has received as a Christmas present a box of tin soldiers or a toy cannon. Many modern intellectuals would instantly tear it away from the screaming infant, on the ground that it was an incitement to militarism. I do not know whether they would or would not be careful to replace it by a box of little tin figures representing conscientious objectors in conspicuous mufti. I cannot say whether the child would be adequately consoled even with a working model of tin Quakers rebuilding tin houses in Belgium, or even with a pageant confined to ambulance and medical services. But, as some pacifists not only refused to inflict wounds, but refused to bind them up, not only refused to kill men, but refused to cure them—and that simply and solely because it involved working with a military unit—it would seem that they objected not so much to war as to wearing uniforms. In that case, they might well maintain that tin soldiers are as alarming as living ones.

All this is obvious enough, and could be applied to most things in turn. The next thing in the stocking might be a Noah's Ark, which would raise in a painful fashion the question of religious education, of the Bible or the Priest in the schools. But all these obvious things are worth noting for the sake of one very simple question. It is not wonderful, whether or not it is wise, that men should rebel periodically against the dogmas and disciplines of mankind. But surely there is something wrong when they rebel against its liberties and relaxations. These Christmas customs were created and combined by men not to defend ideal doctrines or necessary distinctions, but to express their broadest brotherhood and their most boisterous exultation. Something is wrong with a trend of thought that hates even the holidays of man. Something is wrong when the Saturnalia is more condemned than the Slavery. And I suspect that the vanguard of progress has managed somehow to lose its way, and only hears faintly and afar off the songs and music of the real march of mankind - a din in the distance, going down the King's highway.

¹ Norman Angell (1873—1967) was a journalist who argued in his book *The Great Illusion* (1910) that war was futile and best prevented by the mutual economic interest of nations.

² The word is *Aberglaube*, which Arnold discussed most fully in *Literature and Dogma* (1873); he defines it as "belief beyond what is certain and verifiable".