

Chateaubriand's Romance with Christianity

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Francois Rene de Chateaubriand, 1768- 1848, figures prominently among the French romanticists of the preceding century. Belonging to the noblesse, his family was not spared the horrors of 1789; his brother, the Count of Chateaubriand, died on the scaffold. Indeed, *La Genie du Christianisme* alludes, in some places, to the horrors of the French Revolution. This particular book mirrors de Chateaubriand's familiarity with the great literary traditions — Greek and Roman, with the discoveries of his age, with the history of the Church and with the doctrines of its Fathers. At a time when access to the cultures of the Middle East and of the Orient was rendered difficult by transportation, communication difficulties, de Chateaubriand exhibits a profound insight into these cultures that modern scholars would not easily find fault with.

For one who delights in the style of "poetic prose" typical of the romanticists of this period, *The Genius of Christianity* is delightful reading. Some of its conclusions, in the light of contemporary scholarship have to be reformulated. On more counts, however, it remains informative and enlightening. Its pages bear references and quotations from sources little known to the reader who has little or no knowledge of the classical languages. What surprises the reader greatly, however, are the quotations from the sacred books of the Orient, e.g., his

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references to Upanishadic theism. Often, these quotations come from accounts or narratives of missionaries. Still it remains admirable that de Chateaubriand scholarly collated these citations for a more convincing presentation of his theme. At times, his conclusions are overdrawn; in this, he merely shares the usual fault of the apologist, and de Chateaubriand does attempt to present an apology for Christianity. At times, his style amuses, rather than involves, the reader of our times, but this is rather a question of relativism in literature. Anyway, it is conceivable that his presentation would have edified many a reader in his times.

We spoke of *La Genie du Christianisme* as some sort of an apology. De Chateaubriand, himself, bears us out. From an understanding of the current state of belief, de Chateaubriand establishes his purpose. Previous apologists stood in defence of particular tenets of faith. They thus started from the mission of Jesus Christ which all admitted, and from a series of logical deductions, proved the validity of the tenet in question. This, for de Chateaubriand, was no longer a valid method. It was the very groundwork on which previous generations grounded their arguments that was new in question. The issue was then one of laying the foundations. It then became necessary "not to prove that the Christian religion is excellent because it comes from God, but that it comes from God because it is excellent." This is the key to the whole literary enterprise; when it is not understood, much of what Chateaubriand says becomes merely rhetorical. His endeavour is made clear to us: that being a Christian is being the best human being possible. Nothing surpasses Christian morality, nothing equals Christian worship in solemnity and dignity, nothing parallels Christianity in the inspiration it has given politics, law, art and culture.

The whole work is divided into four parts: Dogma and Doctrine, Poetic of Christianity, Fine Arts and Literature and Cult or Worship. In all these areas, de Chateaubriand strives to prove the excellence of Christianity and the refinement of the Christian. This way, at the end of his work, he can argue quite pointedly:

Christianity is perfect; men are imperfect. Now a perfect consequence cannot spring from an imperfect principle. Christianity therefore is not the work of men. If Christianity is not the work of men, it can have come from none but God. If it came from God, men cannot have acquired a knowledge of it but by revelation. Therefore, Christianity is a revealed religion.

Given this perspective, it becomes worthwhile to review some of the salient reflections of Francois Rene de Chateaubriand.

Pointing to parallels in the writings of the Egyptians, to remarks of Heraclides of Pontus and Porphyry, de Chateaubriand surmises that the doctrine of the Trinity, in some way, in the recesses of man's consciousness, awaiting full revelation in Scripture. His reference to the mantric syllables "om, ha, hum", is not however, very supportive of his assertion for while Orientals do speak of distinct predication, nevertheless they always add that the multiplicity of predication is rather a consequence of ignorance than of insight, for in truth, the ultimate reality, Brahman, is one, and all is Brahman. Sabellius was a heretic precisely because of a modalistic understanding of the relation between Father and Son. And hence, Christian doctrine paradoxically asserts the one-ness of God and the three-ness of persons. De Chateaubriand's use of the *us* (plural) in "Let us make man!" to seek Old Testament support for the Trinity is not uncommon. In fact, he cites Tertullian, asserting further that the Trinitarian doctrine is not really unattainable by simpler minds.

With some reason, he asserts that all cultures speak of some original fall of man. Whoever does not reckon with a fall will be hard-pressed to explain, in de Chateaubriand's thinking, man's aptitude for affliction. From here, he proceeds to discuss the mystery of the redemption, employing verbal subtleties that nevertheless are not totally sophistic. For example, he argues: If man was created, he was created for some end: now, having been created perfect, the end for which he was destined could not be otherwise than perfect. And from the disparity of the wretchedness of man, after the fall, and the sublime end for which he was brought into existence, our author establishes "the necessity of succor, or of a redemption." At this point, it seems in order to remark that de Chateaubriand makes not pretenses at theologizing or at philosophizing (which he does not regard very highly, anyway). When he argues, it is for the purpose of demonstrating the reasonability of a Christian position; his aim is to prove that the Christian is not being foolish in giving his assent of faith. Since man, fallen, could not be his own redeemer, a being superior to him, the Son of Man, had to take the bitter cup. This image inspires the author to reflect: if Jesus himself found the cup bitter, how would have an angel been able to bear it? And what of death? After the fall, annihilation was due man. But the entreaties of the Eternal Word kept the Father's hand from executing judgment, so death, from which the believer would be borne, was created to fill man with terror.

Insisting that there is no need for subtle speculation to grasp these truths, de Chateaubriand asserts that Christianity has its seat in the heart; it aims not at disputation but at virtue. This is correct, but not adequate, for a Christian is so as a human being, and a human being, regardless of how sentimentalists would have him, is a thinking being. Speculation is then not only a pass-time of the Christian. It is demanded by the very being of man. What interests us next, however, is an insight of de Chateaubriand that echoes a Patristic conviction: *Anima naturaliter Christiana est!* (Tertullian). Says our author: "The moment you acknowledge a God, the Christian religion presents itself, in spite of you, with all its doctrine . . ." It is not difficult to see that this position is most convenient, considering the author's purpose, for if the soul is, naturally, Christian, being one is fulfilling the very demands of one's being; Christianity is, to use contemporary phraseology, humanism!

In spite of de Chateaubriand's disavowal of theological endeavour on his part, his insights are, many times, valuable examples of Romantic "theologizing" that contemporaries may find not totally disagreeable. On the incarnation, he perceives Christ exemplifying the prodigy of physical creation, framed in the bosom of celestial love. Closely linked with Christ in his discussion of incarnation is Mary, again giving us a picture of 19th century Marian piety.

The author's familiarity with the writings of the Fathers manifests itself clearly in the presentation of Baptism. He quotes and cites, in particular, St. Ambrose's description of the practice in his time. This is, of course, in consonance with the Romantic admiration for tradition and with its inclination towards the golden past.

Corresponding to the two possible states of life — celibacy and family life — Chateaubriand sees what he calls the two social sacraments: Orders and Matrimony. It is hardly needed to explicate the cogency of this fact, for it demonstrates quite vividly, at least for a Romanticist like our writer, that Christianity does not only envision man fully in his individuality but in his social life as well. Some pages are devoted to a defence of celibacy and his argument is really functional: a priest is celibate to be a real minister of God, for his people; furthermore, maintaining the rule of celibacy had advantageous effects on population for things go bad for a nation that has grown exceedingly populous.

De Chateaubriand cites no less than eight ancient legal (moral) prescriptions, only to point to their poverty and inadequacy to introduce

author, because the legislators have been human beings, limited in understanding, often erring. In contrast, the Decalogue that displays such an inner harmony and consistency only eloquently argues for its own divine origins. In passing, we take note of how the author translates "Elohim" — thy God, of course, interpreting this as a reference to the Trinity. What we today take to be a plural of intensity, our author, quite understandably, with some Patristic support, took as an allusion to the Trinity. What is significant, however, is that the author quite explicitly affirms the consistency between the Decalogue and human nature. A serious study of the decalogue may support the author's contention.

From a reading of just the title of the third chapter of Book III, the reader at once notices that the author is somehow elated over what he calls "new proof of original sin." It is, of course, an argument which, after Heisenberg, we may admire as a specimen of historical interest. The argument proceeds thus: All throughout the universe, there is harmony — in the heavens, in plants, among brutes, but surprisingly, not among men, and not in man. De Chateaubriand summarizes the disharmony in the following manner. "His heart gains at the expense of his head, and his head at the expense of his heart." The primitive state of man, then, could not have been different from the rest of the universe — in harmony and integral. This being so, it is possible to make sense of man's present disharmony if one grants a "fall". In summary, this is the new proof that our author advances for original sin. Of course, with Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, it hardly retains its standing. But the point is, rather, that Chateaubriand, wanting to show the excellence of Christian doctrine, advances an argument perceivable from nature, or at least, apparently so. Consistently with this line laid, the author conceives of Adam's fall in terms of "wanting to know everything at once," and it will be recalled, of course, that Genesis does speak of the Tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil, and of the serpent's invitation to god-likeness. With this came the initial reef in man, for knowledge outran volition; the intellect went too far ahead of the heart.

From arguments mustered from chronology, the organization of plants and even an amusing chapter on sea-fowl, de Chateaubriand attempts to establish the existence of God. In this, of course, he is no pioneer. St. Thomas' famous "fifth way" is a formalization of all such arguments.

If there is order in things incapable of ordering themselves,
there must be a Universal Author. *Atqui*: There is order in
things incapable of ordering themselves.

Therefore: There is a Universal Author . . . this we call God. At this juncture, an observation may be recorded. Throughout the *Genius of Christianity*, de Chateaubriand proffers arguments sometimes clearly influenced by Scholasticism. He even refers explicitly to Aristotle's prime mover (or movers, as later Aristotelian studies prove); nowhere, however, is the name of Thomas Aquinas mentioned, whereas, in numerous places, our author quotes Augustine. Either the author was ignorant of Thomas Aquinas which, considering his familiarity with universal authors, is highly dubious, or our author deliberately left out the name of Aquinas whose method, especially in the time of the continental rationalists (the Cartesian tradition) and of the British empiricists, had fallen from favour. Even so, it remains mysterious why de Chateaubriand does not quote him even once.

In a chapter that might at first trigger a smile of amusement on the reader, our author argues by "presumption in favor of the immortality of the soul deduced from the respect of man for tombs." Reading the chapter, however, proves enlightening. In summary, our author argues: if everything were over for those who sleep the slumber of death, why the voice that speaks to man to honor the ashes of his ancestors? Is it not because the depths of man witness to the immortality of the soul that once vivified the ashes? We do not entirely assent to such deductions, although we recognize a valuable insight: respect for the dead a typically human (and humanizing) trait, so much so that anthropologists have no fears calling *homo neanderthalis* a "man" because of his burial customs. In responding to objections to the assertion of God's existence or to the affirmation of the soul's immortality, de Chateaubriand discounts all such objections as being founded on experiential exceptions. Indeed, exceptions prove the rule, rather than annul them.

His treatment of atheism is, once more, a testimony to his romantic age. He does not marshal proofs for the existence of God, in answer to atheists. He rather tries to convince the reader that atheism is inutile. The poor man definitely looks forward, to a time beyond this life, when things will go better for him, otherwise, he despairs. The soldier has no need for atheism; he gives his life willingly, knowing that all is not lost, in fact, that much is gained when dying for so noble a purpose. Neither will the rich man profit by atheism, for he yearns to enjoy the pleasures this life offers him even beyond the grave. Unless this were true, he would really have hardly any reason to live a life of comfort and assurance. "For de Chateaubriand, the question then is not." "Does God exist," but Does atheism promote the well-being of man? — a truly romantic vantage-point.

In a chapter that should be part of great interest to literarists, our author opens his second part — the Poetic of Christianity — by stating general principles of epic poetry. The genius of epic, he contends, consists in its presentation of the ethos of the human kind, man in his passions and in the fulness of what it is to be man. This is certainly not an unintelligent assertion. He then proceeds to admire the talents of Homer, of Virgil and of Tasso, but in subsequent chapters, speaks of the merits of Milton (*Paradise Lost*) and of Dante (*La Divina Comedia*), while pointing out what he believes to be their short-comings in reference to his general principle of epic poetry.

His treatment on the characters, Adam and Eve, of Milton's *Paradise Lost* merits some special attention. Quite in contrast to Victorian prudery, de Chateaubriand commends Milton for his "art to remove, with chaste hand, the veil which elsewhere conceals the pleasures of this passion. He transports the reader into the garden of bliss." While being a worthwhile commentary on Milton, this gives us an inkling into the French romanticist's idea of "ideal literature", the capacity to be explicit and chaste, imaginative and tasteful at the same time.

From this standpoint, de Chateaubriand advances the cause of Christianity by labelling it as a *species of passion*, an indication of which is the fact that Christianity has inspired many a poem, and many a song. The mysterious anchorites, the travails of the saint in his hour of temptation, Biblical presentations of human wisdom and folly, all contribute to the cause of a "passionate" Christian religion, and for this, it deserves adherence. Such reasoning is evidently intelligible only to a romantic. Perhaps, the contemporary reader may acknowledge with de Chateaubriand the fact that Christianity does contend with the humanity of man seriously. It makes no attempt to transform man into a deity. After all, is it not the religion of an Incarnate God?

With regard to mythological presentations of Divinity, our author finds another rallying point for Christianity. Undeniably, he writes, the Christian God is far superior to the Deities of Olympus or of the Capitoline Hill. Who among them summons light, separates the immensity of waters with one, solemn, we may add — dramatic, creative word? This way, our author proceeds to extol the uniqueness and the excellence of the Christian conception of Paradise, of hell (which he compares with Tartarus) and of purgatory.

In Book V of this part of *La Genie*, de Chateaubriand treats of what he calls "the three principal styles of Scripture". He mentions three:

historic, poetic and evangelical. If inadequate, at least they are correct. Particularly admirable is his recognition of the Gospels as a literary style, *sui generis*. He discerns in the historical style a combination of *historic truth* and of *mystery*. Without eisegizing 20th century hermeneutics in the distinctions of de Chateaubriand, it seems right to admire his literary sense and his keen perception of forms in Scripture. On the New Testament, he makes some very interesting remarks.

The third and last style of the sacred volume is that of the New Testament. Here the sublimity of the prophets is softened into a tenderness not less sublime . . . Each evangelist has a distinct character, except St. Mark whose gospel seems to be only an abridgement of St. Matthew's. St. Mark, however, was a disciple of St. Peter, and several critics are of opinion that he wrote under the dictation of the prince of the apostles. It is worthy of remark that he has recorded the fall of his master.

The idea of Mark as abridgement is expected; it was the common opinion, even of the official Church, at the time. What is of special merit, however, is his recognition of the distinct character of each evangelist. Whether he took that next step towards a recognition of distinct "theologies" is not known; for what he recognized, however, we can only admire de Chateaubriand.

Part III dedicates itself to a study of the influences of Christianity on "the fine arts and literature". In the second chapter, he attributes the expansion of the musical scale to Guido Aretino. This does not seem to be historically accurate, however, although the monk certainly gave the tones their names which have, except for the first note (from *ut* to *do*) been retained to this day.

His definition of philosophy reflects the equivocation with which the term was used. "By philosophy we here mean the study of every species of science." Today, we would prefer speaking of knowledge as science (*ex. scire*) and of philosophy as a speculative science. (This is not entirely correct, of course, for philosophy, especially in its metaphysical departments, is strictly, not science, but wisdom.) Our author starts off by pointing to the fact that, far from hindering the sciences, Christianity has promoted its endeavours. At the same time, however, de Chateaubriand makes no attempt to conceal his prejudices against philosophy. From his remarks, it may be reasonably surmised that he considered philosophy "vain undertaking", a prejudice somehow qualified by de Chateaubriand's own covert tendency towards philosophizing. He takes

issue with Bacon who asserts that while the first steps in philosophy may induce disbelief, more profound knowledge brings one to the threshold of the vision of God. On the other hand, de Chateaubriand replies, how many men, who do not attain the depths demanded by Bacon's position, would forever remain afar off, with God shrouded before them? Neither position really excludes the other, but the reaction of de Chateaubriand bespeaks of his typical perspective. He contrasts the absolutes of mathematics with the relativity of political platforms and legal formulations. "It is a fact that liberty is an excellent thing; but ought we, for this reason, to shed torrents of blood to establish it among a people, how unfit soever that people may be to enjoy the blessing?" Within the rhetoric, one can sense the repercussions of the Reign of Terror. With de Chateaubriand, however, we detest as folly any man who so limits his horizon to the phenomena, to creation, that he becomes entirely estranged from the Ground, the Creator. This seems, though, to be the lot of a great many of today's laboratory savants.

The metaphysicians he cites were, obviously, resonant names in his days: Bacon, Clarke, Leibniz, Mallebranche and Locke. His treatment, however, of metaphysicians (properly so-called) is disappointingly superficial, which rather confirms his avowed apathy for philosophy which would have greatly enhanced his undertaking. Again, we cannot help but refer to his context — Romanticism, especially with respect to its position as reaction to the extreme rationality of the Enlightenment.

With reference to eloquence, he takes special delight in the style of St. Augustine. This is understandable. The Confessions, in particular, are a deliberate attempt to combine prayer with narration and edification. He quotes Tertullian, refers to Lactantius, the Three Chapters, and to St. Chrysostom, leaving us astounded by the scope of his patalogical acquaintances.

Further on, he casts a diagnostic look at signs of decline in society and with prophetic insight, points an accusing finger at irreligion. In this regard, he was merely joining the ranks of Amos, Hosea, etc. who always found in infidelity the roots of morals, social and political decadence.

The fourth part deals with worship. Pointing to parallels in pagan worship, de Chateaubriand points to the surpassing qualities of Christian prayer and song. His treatment of Sunday, however, should win the attention of anthropologists, cultural experts and sociologists alike. He speaks of the Sunday observance as being in "exact correspondence with

the strength of man and animals . . ." Note the line of reasoning. Today, discovering a psychological foundation or a cultural matrix for a particular belief renders it suspect, with regard to its objectivity. A classic example is the dogma of the Trinity. C.G. Jung postulates a triadic tendency in the human psyche, and observes that the Trinity perfectly corresponds with this psychological tendency. From this, some philosophers of religion call into question the objectivity of the belief, precisely because it can be explained as a psychological tendency. For de Chateaubriand, the process is just the opposite: the Sunday observance perfectly corresponds to the human situation; as it is perfectly harmonious, it must be of Divine origin. Again, we may have a lot to learn from such a method, after all, no one who grants a Transcendent dimension to man's existence will deny that man is most fully human when he opens towards transcendence.

Again, we find allusions to the prevailing social philosophies of our author's time, the dislike of religious education and the efforts to wean children from religious education. From this he proceeds to an explanation of the Mass, starting with the assertion that sacrifice, being the essence of worship, the Mass, being sacrifice, is the essence of Christian worship. He traces in the history of sacrifice the attempts of man to offer more perfect sacrifices to the Deity. Naturally, he sees the fulfillment of these aspirations in Christianity for what can be a more perfect sacrifice than the unblemished mystic Lamb? The efforts of our author to show how perfectly human Christianity is leads him, at times, to dangerous positions. For instance, he claims: "The more deeply we study Christianity, the more clearly shall we perceive that it is but the development of our natural light and the necessary result of the advancement." It seems belaboring the obvious to point to the minimalizing effect such assertions have on the heteronomous quality of Christian revelation.

By commenting on the different parts of the Mass, our author not only extols the sublimity but the sentiment of history contained in the parts of the Eucharistic celebration.

The fact that the world awaited the dawn of the Messianic era is in agreement with the presentation of the author. For if Jesus came as the fulfillment of these expectations, then humanity is tremendously promoted by accepting Jesus. At certain times, our author can be, not only poetic, but really religious and inspiring. "He who could bring the world to revere a cross, he who held up suffering humanity and persecuted virtue as an object of veneration to mankind, he we insist, can be no other than a God." In our generation of exhausted theologizing and

overstretched subterfuges, such a passage brings a sublime point wonderfully home. Not only does de Chateaubriand have profound respect for the mystery that it is the Christ but he also captures most succinctly the revolutionary character of the Christian Gospel.

His treatment on the hierarchy is no less interesting. He accepts and glories in the tradition of an unbroken line of apostolic succession. He tries to establish the venerable origins of institutions like the archiepiscopate. All along, he displays a strong historical sense that seems surprising to us who claim to have exploited the historico-critical method for the first time. In words that seem to echo the doctrines of some philosophers of the Enlightenment, de Chateaubriand speaks of the peasant without religion as a "ferocious animal, without restraint of education or of human respect; coarse, distrustful, avaricious and ungrateful." Such a not-too-flattering evaluation of the present without religion is best understood as an attempt to dramatize the incredible transforming effect of Christianity that transforms the peasant into a docile subject of God's reign.

Because of its origins in antiquity and the quality of life it espouses, monasticism is lavishly praised by our author. Not only does he dwell on the spiritual merits of such a life; he mentions the effects of monasteries on the landscape, the indispensable assistance monks have rendered to travellers, their contributions to the preservation of articles of culture and art, etc. . .

On the missions, he attributes to Christianity the distinction of inspiring men to self-sacrifice, something pagans were never and would never have been capable of conceiving. He mentions four missionary areas: the missions of Levant (Africa and the Near East), the missions of America, the missions of India, within which he includes the Philippines, and the missions of China.

What no respectable, honest historian will omit is the enormous influence Christianity has played on education, and this point, de Chateaubriand develops. He mentions, in particular the work of the Benedictines whom he regards quite highly; he acknowledges the fruitful pedagogy of the Jesuits, but unfortunately omits mention of the Dominicans who have played as great, if not greater, roles in education. He mentions them however as admirable missionaries of South America. He also outlines the course of studies a prospective Jesuit undertakes, revealing the traditional predilection of the society not only for scholarship but for proper placement.

Among these last chapters, really appendages to the fourth part from the point of view of content, is a chapter on the influence of Christianity on law and jurisprudence. While he dwells quite eruditely on the parallels between civil and canon laws and points out to the dependence of civil law on canon law, he forgets to mention the profoundly humanizing effects Christianity had on the almost cruel, inhuman law-codes of ancient civilizations.

His recapitulation really serves to remind the reader of the motive of the literary enterprise: to convince the reader of the beauty and the grandeur of Christianity, and of the benefits it has rendered mankind. By reflecting on the decadence of Rome and on its stunning perversities, he envisions a society without Christianity in a last recap of his entire treatise.

Does de Chateaubriand succeed? The 20th century has not always been kind on previous centuries, but we have gone a long way in recognizing the genius of ages past, seen within the limits of their historical contexts. There seems to be hardly any person to deny that de Chateaubriand succeeds in presenting Christianity as an excellent, fully human, profoundly moral, intensely cultural religion, and therefore of Divine origin. With his arguments, we may take issue; with his proofs, we may find fault. His assertions may be incorrect, his findings, unwarranted. Yet for all his limitations, de Chateaubriand points a wonderful, objectively faithful, picture of the genius of Christianity. There is, of course, the fundamental problem to solve: Does a fully human religion necessarily have Divine origins? This is not the place to work towards an answer. Granting an affirmative response, however, which finds support from not a few scholars of religion and theology, de Chateaubriand presents a very good case.

We have tried to show the consistency between the different expositions and the general purpose of *The Genius of Christianity*. Everywhere, the marks of a romantic manifest themselves — in style, argument and exposition. We have also endeavoured to recognize the times when de Chateaubriand speaks not only to his age but to ours.... If Viscount de Chateaubriand did not succeed in winning those who had fallen back to the fold, at least he succeeded in making a great number cherish the heritage of the Christian religion.

The Genius of Christianity is at the same time a testament of the romantic genius of de Chateaubriand.