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LITERATURE AND DOGMA: *MATTHEW ARNOLD'S VIEW OF THE BIBLE*

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Abstract: The article discusses Arnold's *Literature and Dogma* in the context of the *Zeit Geist*, which includes a wholesale attack on Christianity, particularly after the publication of Darwin's evolutionist theory, although the early Victorian period had witnessed a revival of religious life in Great Britain. Matthew Arnold's writing is placed in the tradition of the liberal Broad Church (initiated by his famous father Dr Thomas Arnold, among others) which was ready to accommodate opposite, even contradictory, dogmatic opinions in order to achieve a Christian church of the whole nation. The article substantiates the idea that in his *Literature and Dogma* Arnold adapted Christianity to what science could swallow; the Bible becoming for him, "a term of poetry and eloquence", the only reading suitable to a man of culture, culture being his chief value, as a supporter of the Hellenic spirit. It is demonstrated that Arnold shares a positivist attitude to science with the philosophical Liberals but considers that the common man needs the Bible for the emotional and imaginative support it gives him for the practice of morality. Arnold argues that the Jews gradually added, in the last centuries before our era, a compensatory extra-belief to the original thought of the Bible by anticipating a future triumph, ascribing only a poetical value to such accretions, not a scientific one.

In the presentation of Arnold's picture of the figure and teachings of Christ, the article stresses that he considers the miraculous elements in the Bible a vast *Aberglaube* accruing to the new creed brought by Jesus an extra-belief in the "phantasmagorical advent of Jesus Christ, a resurrection and a judgment", an everlasting glorification of Christ's adherents and the everlasting punishment of his rejecters. The article also distinguishes between Arnold's position regarding Christ as being human rather than divine, and that of the Unitarians. It also rejects Arnold's classification as an agnostic, demonstrating that never, throughout his whole study, does he doubt the existence of God as an external power. The article emphasizes in conclusion that for Arnold the God of the Bible is independent of the Dogma and that it is the method and secret of Jesus that bring salvation to mankind.

Beginning as a poet of great romantic sensibility and a literary critic that supported classical models and then becoming more impressionistic (*Essays in Criticism*, First Series 1865, Second Series 1888), Matthew Arnold evolved towards social criticism (*Culture and Anarchy*, 1869), and subsequently towards religious

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criticism, writing *St. Paul and Protestantism* (1870), *Literature and Dogma* (1873), *God and the Bible* (1875), and *Last Essays on Church and Religion* (1877).

Written in the late Victorian period, Arnold's works in this field are illustrative of the *Zeit Geist* /Spirit of the Time, which included the contestation of the Bible as sacred writing. The early Victorian period (the 1830s and 1840s) had witnessed a revival of religious life and debate within the Anglican Church between the fervent Evangelicalism of the Low Church, anti-ritualist and emphasising the individual conversion experience, the renewed stress placed by the Oxford Movement (later Tractarianism) or the liturgically oriented High Church, on the tradition of ritual and sacraments to be found before before the church of England became Protestant in 1534 (Davis 103), and the great efforts of the much smaller Broad Church with its liberal efforts to ensure a middle way "neither wholly sacramental nor wholly Evangelical" ready to accommodate opposite, even contradictory, dogmatic opinions in order to achieve a Christian church of the whole undivided nation (Davis 112).

The Midvictorian period however brought Christianity itself under attack under the impact of the Tübingen School of the Higher Criticism of the Bible (David Friederich Strauss's *The Life of Jesus*, was translated into English by Geroge Eliot in 1846) and the discoveries in the field of the natural sciences: biology (Lamarck, Cuvier, Robert Chambers) and geology (Ch. Lyell) which led to Darwin's evolutionist theory (*The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 1859) and hence to agnosticism or atheism. The philosophic Positivism of Auguste Comte's became for his Victorian advocates like John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, George Lewes, Frederic Harrison, John Morley "something like a religion of science or, what Comte himself called the "*Religion of Humanity*" – a highly developed set of beliefs that promised to substitute humanity for God as an object of worship" (Kucich 117).

George Landlow affirms that "Sometime in his adolescence Matthew Arnold abandoned Christianity... and turned to agnosticism" ("Arnold's Religious Beliefs"). In our analysis of *Literature and Dogma* we shall demonstrate that Arnold never doubts the existence of God, the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and cannot therefore be labelled as agnostic.

It is true that in his *Literature and Dogma* Arnold adapted Christianity to what science could swallow; the Bible becoming for him, "a term of poetry and eloquence" (LD 10)). It is his examination of social English classes and their culture in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) that led Arnold to his new vision of the Bible. Defining culture as the study of perfection, of the best that has been thought and created in the world, Arnold was convinced that its study could lead to the expansion of the human family against the strong individualism of the age. Arnold puts forth his concept of culture as a solution to the social situation, because "it seeks to do away with classes, to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere... The men of culture are the true apostles of equality, labouring to humanize knowledge (Arnold 1969:464/65). In Arnold's view culture makes for the individual's "best self" and thus produces the right type of state leader, "aliens to their class". He explores the two ways of salvation found in the history of culture, Hellenism-intellectual concern with things as they really are (Plato), and Hebraism-concern with the will of God, stressing conduct and

obedience (emphasised by Puritanism in English history). In his opinion the solution for Britain would be a balance of Hellenism and Hebraism, which will produce a harmonious and enlightened culture and society.

His family context placed Matthew Arnold in early contact with mildly liberalizing approaches to Anglican Christianity as he was the son of Thomas Arnold, the famous headmaster of Rugby and one of the devout leaders of Broad Church Anglicanism who, together with the Christian Socialist F. D. Maurice underlined that worshipping Christ also meant working for social justice. Under the direct or indirect influence of German liberal thought, “Broad Churchmen underscored the Bible, though in some sense divinely inspired, was not, as Evangelicals and Tractarians believed, literally true in every detail, and that therefore the scriptures should be read metaphorically or even mythologically” (Landow, “The Broad Church Party in the Church of England”). Towards the turn of the century Broad churchmen were leaders of the Modernist movement in the Anglican Church, which demanded “a modern creed for modern man” (Britannica: Broad Church).

It is therefore from his father that Matthew Arnold learned that some biblical language had to be read metaphorically (as figures of speech and analogies) rather than literally. Benjamin Jowett, another Broad Church supporter and Oxford professor, put forth the idea that the Bible should be interpreted like any other book (Davis 110). As he underlines in his “Preface” Matthew Arnold does that because of the “inevitable revolution... befalling the religion in which we have been brought up” (LD v), the spreading skepticism about religion and also the growing numbers of those for whom “the Bible is an exploded superstition” (LD vi) and “a priestly imposture”(vii) . Although he is prepared to admit with all Christians that “the Bible and its religion is all important” (vii) Matthew Arnold cannot accept with dr. Newman (the Roman Catholic Church) that it is “the record of the whole revealed faith” (vii). He does not regard all the books of the Bible of equal importance (xxiv) and believes that religion should be recast, as “whatever is to stand must rest upon something that is verifiable” (ix).

Arnold characteristically considers that for the right reading of the Bible culture is needed, that is an acquaintance with “the best that has been known and said in the world, and thus with the history of the human spirit” (xi). And acquiring true culture is a difficult task as it implies not only knowledge, but right tact and justness of judgment and these qualities are formed by and with knowledge (xxvi). But culture will enable us first to “understand that the language of the Bible is fluid, passing and literary, not rigid, fixed and scientific” (xiii) .

Arnold starts from the remark that generally the word “God” is used by people in most cases as “by no means a term of science or exact knowledge but a term of poetry and eloquence, a term thrown out, so to speak, at a not fully grasped object of the speaker’s consciousness, a literary term in short; and mankind mean different things by it as their consciousness differs” (10-11).

Arnold considers that the object of religion is not metaphysics, but conduct, which represents three-fourths of human life (13) and it teaches us “how to obey, regulate, or restrain” our elementary impulses that fall into two categories: the instinct of self-preservation and the reproductive instinct. In short right conduct or

righteousness is the object of religion in general and “in a special manner the object of Bible religion, [t]he word ‘righteousness’ [being] the master-word of the Old Testament, which Arnold richly exemplifies.

Arnold’s sense of morality derives from, and is akin to, the emotion Israel had when he sensed he was being visited and this leads to his definition of God in the Old Testament: “the *not ourselves* which weighed upon the mind of Israel, and engaged its awe was the *not ourselves* by which we get the sense for righteousness, and whence we find the help to *do right*” (27). By his definition of God we can say that Arnold practically reinforces the moral argument for the existence of God, namely “man’s sense of right and wrong out of his need for justice” (Grudem 147). It is noteworthy that for Arnold the true meaning of religion is not simply morality, but “morality touched by emotion” (18). For Arnold rejects a purely secular and utilitarian morality like that of Bentham or Spencer, “our philosophical Liberal friends” (282), considering it lacks the spiritual dimension of the Bible-inspired Christian morality.

Arnold makes an interesting philological point by commenting on the name of God. He says that by not translating the name of Jehovah we get the notion of a mere mythological deity, or by the wrong translation, “Lord”, we get the notion of a magnified and non-natural man, whereas the name actually means “the Eternal” (27) and it does not designate an anthropomorphic entity, but a “power which makes for righteousness” (28), and “the more a man walks in this way of righteousness, the more he feels himself borne by a power not his own” (57). Arnold rejects the notion of god as a person, a first cause, creator of the universe, considering that this view was a later addition because man is naturally inclined to be anthropomorphic. To this effect he quotes Goethe’s statement that “man never knows how anthropomorphic he is” and he deems that because man always tends to represent everything under his own figure, Israel personified his Eternal (29). The English critic emphasizes that “the spirit and tongue of Israel kept a propriety, a reserve, a sense of the inadequacy of language in conveying man’s ideas of God”, in contrast with the strong affirmation of our western theology :”The high and holy One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is holy” (Isaiah lvii, 15). Arnold reads the name of Father for God as a metaphor “because this power in and around us, which makes for righteousness, is indeed described by the name of this authoritative but tender and protecting relation” (31), as Israel had no system,” but poetry and eloquence” (35). Another definition that Arnold gives of God is the certainty that all things tend to fulfill a law of their being, which for him is an admitted reality (38) and illustrates the view of natural religion.

We may therefore say Arnold shares a positivist attitude with the philosophical Liberals but considers that the common man needs the Bible for the emotional and imaginative support it gives him for the practice of morality, a support the whole history of humanity bears out.

After giving his definition of God, Arnold devotes a whole chapter to what he calls “*Aberglaube* invading” referring to the about 600 years between the age of David and Solomon and that of Job. Thus the book of Ecclesiastes, if not quite skeptical and epicurean as it is generally presented, is certainly devoid of the hope generally animating the Bible (62), whereas Job wonders how God can tolerate so

much wickedness on earth. Because of the historical fate of the Jews (God's people were overpowered by other nations and the unrighteous world was successful), Arnold argues that the Jews gradually added, in the last centuries before our era, a compensatory *Aberglaube* or extra-belief, to the original thought of the Bible by anticipating a future triumph in the Book of Enoch and the Book of Daniel and Arnold ascribes only a poetical value to such accretions, not a scientific one (93)

Then Arnold dwells extensively on the figure and teachings of Christ. He begins by saying that it must have been very difficult for the Jews at the time to find in Jesus the genuine Jewish Messiah or to find in him the Son of Man described by Daniel, one coming with the clouds of heaven and having universal dominion given him (72). He underlines that what the New Testament added to of the Old Testament judgment and justice as religion of morality is more inwardness (*"Blind Pharisee, cleanse first the inside of the cup that the outside may be clean also!*, Matthew xxii, 26), more feeling manifested in mercy and humbleness, which is the very essence of Christianity. Arnold considers that the Jewish religion was ripe for this development that made religion more personal (an inward disposition), rather than social (outward duties), an attitude which is present, even if not emphasized, in the Old Testament too. So, Jesus comes and teaches conduct and righteousness with what Arnold calls his unique "sweet reasonableness" (the term with which he translates the term *epieikeia*) that gave his words "an air of consummate truth and likelihood" (79). Jesus teaches self-renouncement, "Whoever will come after me, let him renounce himself and take up his cross daily and follow me!" (Luke ix, 23), but also self-examination and mildness: "Learn of me that I am mild and lowly of heart, and ye shall find the rest unto your souls" (Matthew xi, 29). Thus Jesus teaches simply and clearly the two qualities by which our ordinary self is counter-acted, self-renouncement and mildness, and by his personal example he made his followers feel that in this lay the secret of their best self and that their happiness depended upon it (80). As in *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold wants to identify the manner in which man can transcend his self-centredness, and this the imitation of Christ's moral model.

Arnold next discusses the miraculous elements in the Bible, what he considers to be a vast *Aberglaube* engaged in the future and the miraculous accruing to the new creed brought by Jesus, that is the extra-belief "of a phantasmagorical advent of Jesus Christ, a resurrection and a judgment, Christ's adherents glorified, his rejectors punished everlastingly" (95). The author defines *Aberglaube* as the "poetry of life", as fairy-tales that men's imagination create as they want to take "shortcuts to what they ardently desire, whether the triumph of Israel or the triumph of Christianity" (95).

As the Spirit of the Time makes an ever increasing number of people reject miracles, Arnold undertakes the task to make the revelation of Jesus independent of miracles. The language of the Bible, he deems, is words "thrown out at an immense reality not fully or half fully grasped by the writers, but even thus, able to affect us with indescribable force... *the mind of Christ*" (122-23). Though the New Testament presents Christ as a thaumaturgist, Arnold sees him as a healer, a doctor in moral therapeutics, "the bringer of light and happiness, the calmer and pacifier, or invigorator and stimulator" (129), who believed "in the moral root of much physical disease" (130). He never doubts the good faith of the evangelists, he ascribes their

view of Christ's miracles to the Zeitgeist of the time, but he also sees man's natural inclination to create signs and wonders "presages, and tongues of heaven" (*King John* III. iv, 153-58) as an archetypal human feature and he quotes Shakespeare to support this view.

The miraculous facts that after his resurrection Jesus is not known to Mary Magdalen, but taken for the gardener, that he is not known by his two disciples going with him to Emmaus, that he is not known by his most intimate apostles on the borders of the Sea of Galilee and then his ascension – all these elements to Arnold "seem to tell [us] we are in wonderland" (131). He underlines that it is not Jesus who relates his miracles to us or tells us of his own apparitions after his death, or who alleges his crucifixion and sufferings as the fulfillment of prophecy. Arnold emphasizes that it was the reporters' doubtless belief, as men of their time, that "by miracles Jesus manifested forth his glory, and induced the faithful to believe in him" (138) and he exemplifies the errors with the palpable mistake St Paul made when understanding and announcing that the world was to end within the lifetime of the first generation of Christians (136). He also compares the reports of the four Gospels remarking, for instance, that the way Mark relates the scene of the Transfiguration shows "that he was suspicious of the preternatural" (148) or that the writer of the fourth Gospel, John, "seems to have come into contact, in Asia or Egypt, with Aryan metaphysics whether from India or Greece" (154). Arnold contrasts the reports with the greatness and simplicity of Jesus' spirit as manifested in *his* words, which contain no metaphysics but only rely on intuition, and act as checks to fanciful interpretations in Arnold's opinion. He looks up to Jesus as a "wonderful figure transcending his time, transcending his disciples", his own words "going far above their heads; treating Scripture and Prophecy like a master while they treated it like children, resting his doctrine on internal evidence while they rested it on miracles" (143). The author devotes the whole Chapter VII to "The Testimony of Jesus to Himself", underscoring the difficulty of the literary criticism of the documents in its endeavour to decanter the *Aberglaube* (10).

Arnold underlines that Jesus teaches *a change of the inner man*. "You look for the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the reign of righteousness, God's will done by all mankind. Well then, seek the kingdom of God ! The kingdom of God is within you!" (Luke xvii, 21). He regards this requirement as performing "a real revolution" (178) towards Hellenism: "It was the introduction, in morals and religion, of the famous *know thyself* of the Greeks; and this among a people deeply serious, but also wedded to moral and religious routine, and singularly devoid of flexibility and play of mind" (178).

His knowledge of Greek also makes Arnold propose better translations of familiar biblical phrases : "*Happiness and reality* came through Jesus Christ" instead of "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" and "To know the *happiness* of God in *reality*" instead of "To know the grace of God in truth" (179). Or the translation of *spirit* by *influence* in Jesus' "God is an *influence*, and those who would serve him must serve him not by any form of words or rites, but by inward motion and in reality" (180).

Arnold's comment on the famous story of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:7) stands out as striking. After substituting fault for the generally used "sin"

he remarks, “And they were all convicted by their conscience” (180). His astonishing ultimate conclusion in this passage is that if conscience ever became enough of a power, there would be no offenders to punish (181), which testifies that his moral aspirations lead Arnold towards a definite utopian statement.

Arnold also dwells on the difference Jesus establishes between the life of righteousness and common life; “He that liveth his life shall lose it, and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal” (John xii25; Luke ix 23). It is the dialectic between life and death, the will make T.S. Eliot describe the death in life quality of contemporary life in *The Waste Land*.

Arnold stresses again and again that many people, including the clergymen who write to the *Guardian* “are not conversant enough with the ways in which men think and speak so as to distinguish rightly between them and to perceive that the Bible is *literature* and that its words are used, like the words of common life and of poetry and eloquence, approximately, and not like the terms of science, adequately” (215). Thus he makes a long demonstration with ample arguments, that the resurrection is not external, not material (223), that Jesus’ rising to eternal life was turned into a literal miracle (225), whereas Jesus’ use of words was metaphoric. He considers that Jesus had died long before the Crucifixion, by taking daily a metaphoric cross as he says: “Therefore does my Father love me, because I have laid down my life that I may take it again” (John x 170). And Arnold deems that Jesus had risen to life long before his crowning resurrection, risen to life in what he describes as “my joy to have kept my Father’s commandment and abide in his love” (John xv 10,11), a joy he wished to see fulfilled in his disciples too. Thus, the words he said when Lazarus was raised acquire a large symbolic meaning: “I am the resurrection and the life, he that believeth on me, though he die, shall live and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die” (John xi 25, 26).

Arnold’s position regarding Jesus Christ as human rather than divine may seem akin to that of the Unitarians, who also “set to work to make religion more pure and rational, as they suppose, by pointing out that this or that of these doctrines is false” (264), referring probably to such doctrines as original sin and predestination:

... The Unitarians are, perhaps, the great people for this sort of partial and local rationalising of religion; for taking what here and there on the surface seems to conflict most with common sense, arguing that it cannot be in the Bible and getting rid of it, and professing to have thus relieved religion of its difficulties. (284)

However Arnold regards his “literary” reading of the Bible superior and accuses the Unitarians of “intellectual shallowness” and unsound logic (284), because they have retained too much dogma.

Arnold’s conclusion is that the God of the Bible is independent of the Dogma and that it is the method and secret of Jesus that bring salvation. He profoundly deplores the specific feature of his times, the masses’ loss of the Bible and its religion because they treat it as imposture or a fairy-tale, and he regards this as a great loss, for he deems the Bible is a great inspirer of conduct. He considers that the existence of an enduring power, not ourselves, which makes for

righteousness, is verifiable. “Try all the ways to righteousness you can think of, and you will find that no way brings you to it except the way of Jesus, but that this way does bring you to it” (300). As we have said Arnold practically reinforces the moral argument for the existence of God, but this argument can be easily refuted by the fact that there are so many men who lack a moral sense related to the Christian type. It is clear that Arnold spoke from his own spiritual experience and practice for, as Basil Willey remarks, “a reading of Arnold’s *Note Books* will convince any reader of the depth of Arnold’s spirituality and of the degree to which, in his ‘buried life’, he disciplined himself in constant devotion and self-forgetfulness” (“Matthew Arnold”). As Philip Davis argues, Arnold’s faith in the Bible may be likened to that of Coleridge, who in *Aids to Reflection* speaks of having faith in whatever in the Bible “finds me”. Davis describes this as a practice, rather than a theory, which “gradually accumulates...into a form of implicit and intuitive wisdom which is the exact opposite of Hebraic ‘pressing’” (Davis,134). Arnold is also optimistic about the future of righteousness, which reveals him to be a great liberal humanist.

In conclusion we cannot agree with George Landow when he concludes that Matthew Arnold went farther than his father and “held, finally, that the Bible is all metaphorical, recording essential human hopes and aspirations rather than historical events” (“Arnold’s Religious Beliefs”). For, as we have seen, never, throughout his whole study does Arnold doubt the existence of God as an external power, an influence that is not ourselves. His conviction is similar to that of “all men who have an inner feeling that God exists” (Grudem 145) but it is also based on the Scripture. At the same time he believes that the kingdom of God is within us, in the human heart, and by following the way of Jesus we partake of the Eternal Spirit of Righteousness, and therefore of immortality, a belief he shares with other broad churchmen, as Shea and Whitla point out:

To the literalist Evangelicals, the natural world is a snare and a delusion, anticipating in the deleterious effects of the Fall; to Broad Churchmen, the empirical facts of the natural world are read analogically as revelatory of God’s nature and the divine plan for the world. . . . The Broad Church position locates the analogies not in the relation between the design of the world and the divine nature but in correspondences between human life and experience and aspects of the divine order, ultimately between the human heart and the divine spirit. (qtd. in Landow, *The Broad Church Party*)

On the other hand in the preface of *God and the Bible* (1875) Arnold underlines the status of the Bible as myth, stating “The personages of the Christian heaven and their conversations are no more matter of fact than the personages of the Greek Olympus and their conversations” (Super vol VII 384). Nevertheless it is on the Bible that he bases his more abstract definition of God, whereas he reads the “the personages of the Christian heaven” in a literary, that is symbolic, way.

Because of his liberal religious views in an age of religious crisis, Arnold was attacked from two sides: “the orthodox accused him of infidelity, of turning God into a ‘stream of tendency’ and of substituting vague emotion for definite belief”; and the atheists accused him of “clinging to the church and retaining certain Christian beliefs of which he had undermined the foundations” (Willey: “Matthew

Arnold”). Although, as we have shown, his commentary of the Bible clearly comes at odds with many articles of the Church of England, he is a Christian according to the definition of Christianity as the religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus as presented in the New Testament. As a great intellectual and open-minded sage sincerely attached to Christianity, Matthew Arnold wanted to find another sanction for Christianity, namely the moral sanction, because modern rational man could not but reject its miracles. That makes Delaura describe Arnold’s religious position as “religiously tinged moralism...with a Biblical quality” put forth in a “rationalized collection of natural moral truths” (*Hebrew and Hellene*, ch VI). We would therefore conclude that Arnold treasured the Bible as definitely belonging among the best that has been thought and created in the world. By saying with Basil Willey that Matthew Arnold really founded Anglican “modernism”, we thus appraise the great thinker’s merits in their historical context within the Broad Church tradition.

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