The English Soul and God: a reflection

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In what follows I shall argue that the English soul is characterised by a set of deeply rooted attitudes. The most publicly visible attitude consists of confident cheerfulness. This is the attitude in which government and business are conducted in England. The attitude of official optimism has a religious foundation; it is the attitude required by a belief in Providence. Anyone who has this belief should expect the good to prevail.

That seems to be a descendant of the Calvinist concept of faith. Thus Calvin wrote in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*: "we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence towards us.[1] There can be no doubt of the value of this in the ordinary course of life.

That there is this belief in Providence, I call Cardinal Newman to witness: "What Scripture especially illustrates from its first page to its last, is God's Providence; and that is nearly the only doctrine held with a real assent by the mass of religious Englishmen ... I repeat ...I am speaking of the mass of piously-minded and well-living people in all ranks of the community

Newman wrote that in a book published in 1870.[2] In support of that, one may cite the enduring popularity of Psalm Twenty Three, which has good claim to being England's prayer: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes."

We come now to the second attitude, which has two components. The first of these is a low estimation of human nature. This estimation is directed, not at humanity's intellectual capacity, but at its spiritual capacity. Any talk of the higher

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1. Bk3, Ch2, Sect.2).
2. *Grammar of Assent*. Ch.4, Sect2].

reaches of the spiritual life is met with quiet, but pointed, lack of interest. Humanity is not up to them. As the various degrees of conspicuous sanctity provide the best evidence of God's existence, this aspect of the second layer reinforces the other aspect, viz religious skepticism.

This low estimate of humanity's moral nature seems to be a direct descendant of Luther's sinful yet justified man [*simul justus et peccator*], and is evident in the current writings of the very considerable English philosopher Richard Swinburne. "Men have little natural desire to be saints and heroes", he confidently asserts.[3] And sanctity is not a theme of English literature, or a pre-occupation of any major writer. One may find a contrast in Russian literature, with the portrait of Fr. Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Tolstoy's theme of the supernatural dimension of charity in his short stories. Another contrast may be found in India in the work of Mahatma Gandhi, who spent his life trying to bring sanctity into politics, and whom the Viceroy [Lord Irwin, if I remember correctly] found so odd that he might have "stepped off another planet."

It must be emphasised that knowledge and trust are two different things. It is possible both to trust in God and deny that we have knowledge of him. And that is what the English soul does. At the top level of the English soul is trust in Providence. At the next level, there is skepticism about our capacity to know anything about God. And this skepticism has a religious origin. It was originally skepticism in defence of Bible purity. The decision to take religion from the Bible alone meant that every other source of religion, whether nature or experience, had to be repudiated. Merely human claims to know of God's existence, on whatever evidence, had to be greeted with firm skepticism. Thus would Biblical faith remain unsullied by any human admixture.

Skepticism as an expression of humility

Furthermore, the Puritans held that it would be sheer pride for humanity to assert that it could understand nature, the work of the infinite God. Appropriate humility requires that we appreciate our proper place and acknowledge that such understanding is beyond the reach of finite, sinful humanity. Thus skepticism becomes an expression of humility.

3. *Responsibility and Atonement*, p. 116.

Skepticism is capable of marching on despite the death of its origins, and is aided and abetted by the tendency to empiricism, which appears to be native to the English soul. Locke, Berkeley, Mill, Russell, were all empiricists, as, more recently, was A. J. Ayer, professor of philosophy at Oxford. He took to be real the things his senses revealed and the fewest objects necessary to explain them, this last being a use of Ockham's razor. Empiricism has the merit of eliminating superstition and reinforcing commonsense and practicality, but if seeing, hearing, and touching are the criteria of reality, then religion has a hard row to hoe, unless saints are sufficiently visible, which is rendered unlikely by the pessimistic assessment of spiritual capacities.

Skepticism finds an occasional adversary in that other tendency of the English soul, this time an acquired one, though one that has put down deep roots. This is the belief in intellect. Perceiving that the absence of evidence for religious belief means that religion is based on a assumption, despite the rhetoric that is used to disguise this, thinkers like Alister Hardy and Richard Swinburne have argued that there is good evidence for religious belief. If their views are not accepted, it seems likely that, in the long run, skepticism will undermine trust in Providence.

And that seems to be what is happening. Recent media reports state that the number of people who believe in a personal God is down to 26%.

How should the English soul be responded to? One can appeal to non-sensory experiences: conscience and the varieties of religious experience. The former was the route taken by Cardinal Newman, the latter by William James, and, more recently, by Alister Hardy. Of course, both these routes are subject to skeptical counter-attack. The idea that God is felt through conscience, ie., through the sense of inner restraint before some actions and the sense of approval or disapproval after them, is countered by the claim that these feelings are due to internalised prohibitions from the social environment. The rejoinder, that they may be felt even in the absence of such prohibitions, has never had the social research it deserves, which is surprising, given the size of the social research industry.

In view of what has been said so far, it may fairly be pointed out that until the social research is done, we would have no right to trust conscience. Indeed, such social research would constitute objective evidence, but there is other evidence of an interior kind, ie., within our own mind, which is difficult to resist. According to Newman, we get a signal, both when we do good actions and bad actions. In the former case, the signal takes the form of a sense of encouragement, peace and

security, and in the latter case, a sense of misgiving, guilt, and fear. It is important that this signal comes with a numinous feel, in the case of bad conscience, a disturbing, somewhat weird ,quality which is a pointer to its other- worldly origin. Unfortunately, Newman is not as good at describing good conscience as he is at bad conscience, and its numinous character is not as easy to bring out, but he does say that it leads to reverence and awe.

Despite Newman's skill at describing bad conscience, its character is somewhat controversial. The kernel of the experience of bad conscience is a kind of numinous "don't", and it is open to anyone to inspect his or her experience to ascertain whether it is there. Newman himself thought of it as a response to a verdict of guilty, but it may be a response to a reproof or a warning. Its function is to arrest action, to make us stop and think, or to encourage action, and as actions build character which in turn affects destiny, the signal is well worth having.

The other forms of religious experience may seem easy to shrug off: who knows what may be going on in the heads of some people? And, in any event, though such experiences may function as evidence for them, they scarcely function as evidence for us. The idea that such inward experience has a public aspect is neglected, except by the artistic traditions of the West and East, which depict some of those having such experience as transfigured, ie., radiating light. However, this has come to be regarded as a mere convention. I myself accepted it as such till I had seen transfiguration several times.

Transfiguration

T. S. Eliot's useful phrase "the objective co-relative" fits transfiguration: the quality of something inward is made public. Religion needs public facts which confirm it. Transfiguration is one; perhaps healing is another. St. Seraphim in nineteenth century Russia was both transfigured and a healer: he had a share of God's beauty and power.

> Transfiguration is recorded of St Dominic
> "From his brows and eyes there emanated a certain radiant splendour which won the admiration and veneration of all."[4]

4. Richard Woods, *Mysticism and Prophecy*, London, Darton, Longman Todd, 1998, 21.

Moreover, a memorable description of this phenomenon appears in Montaigne, who usually gets into history books as a skeptic:

> "[the] divine supernatural and extraordinary beauty that we see sometimes shine in a person like stars under a corporeal veil."[5]

Transfiguration may seem like a prize example of a rare religious phenomenon which is carefully preserved in a special place of honour and brought out to be admired every so often, like the crown jewels. However, one would not think of putting it to any useful purpose. One would not use it as religious evidence. For that, we should appeal to intellect, to the works of Paul Davies [*The Mind of God*] or the Thomist tradition.

That, I suggest, would be a mistake. What is central to the lives of believers is the devotional life, the life of prayerful worship, as expressed, for example, in the Mass. As the devotional life deepens, one achieves some measure of union with God, which is experienced. In the case of someone like St. Seraphim, union with God is more profound than it is with most of us, but his kind of spiritual life is what ours turns into if it develops.

Intellect, with its abstract, rigorous argument, is something else. It is precious, since it is capable of making its own way to truth, and it has the advantage of engaging, on the basis of objective evidence, thinkers who are not religiously inclined. But it should not be allowed to steal the whole show. Attention should be directed at what awakens and develops religious experience.

Experience and intellect can reveal religious realities; the former does so directly, the latter by conceptual representation. Together they should satisfy the instincts of the English soul, and extend optimism from business and public life to religion.

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5. Serge Hughes(ed.), *The Essential Montaigne*, NewYork Mentor 1970, 150.