

It is St Michael and all Angels. We are made, says the Psalmist, *a little lower than the angels*. So what is our character, our human nature? The best way to discover the character or nature of a person or a whole society is to examine what he and they create and produce. For the first 1500 of the last 2000 years, our understanding of human nature was formed out of the Christian faith. The centre of this faith is that there is an eternal God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. That God created us. That we turned our back on him and preferred our own way. This is called, in the jargon, Original Sin. We are all contaminated by it. We need to be saved from ourselves. Only God could do this. He did it by sending his Son to be crucified and to rise from the dead for our salvation. That was the formative story of the history of Europe until about AD 1500.

This story was brilliantly elaborated upon by the great philosophers and theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas and Anselm. It was the creative source of profound poetry in works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It found musical expression in the up and down, back and forth, processional/recessional movement of Gregorian chant. And the faith was presented visually by the great painters of the 12th and 13th centuries. Our poetry, painting and music were living images of the truth that our faith is not abstract, but incarnated in *things*. God is our Creator. And our creativity is derived from him. He inspires us to copy his handiwork. In all our creations, God and his purposes for mankind were at the centre. The purpose of our artwork, our music, our poetry was to reveal God and to glorify him.

Around AD 1500 all this began to change. The Medieval period ended and the Renaissance began. This was the most momentous revolution since the end of the classical age and, like all revolutions, it was characterised by a radical re-orientation. The Renaissance artists and poets dethroned God and put man at the centre. Of course this was not achieved overnight. There are vast Christian themes in the great Renaissance painters, but already their attention was turning from the symbolic expression of God and man and the story of our redemption. Attention was shifting onto the human form and the landscape.

If you listen to today's commentators on art, they will enthuse about this revolution and particularly about the discovery of *perspective*. The early Italian painters did not discover perspective – because they did not need it. Perspective, in any case, would have been presumptuous, because, for the medieval painter, true perspective was from God's point of view. The Renaissance began to paint from man's perspective and, as Collingwood says, we started to *cling to the picture-plane as convulsively as a drowning man to a spar*.

The same revolution occurred at the same time in philosophy and theology. Descartes did not base his thinking on the centrality of God. The Bible told us: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. God is the origin of all things and therefore of all knowledge. Descartes set this aside and asked, *Is there any knowledge in the world so certain no reasonable man could doubt it?* And his answer was *Cogito ergo sum...I think, therefore I am*. God was dethroned and human self-consciousness was made central to our whole outlook and thought. Instead of theism – the belief in God – we got humanism – the belief in man.

We see the same movement in the greatest poet of the age, William Shakespeare. And Hamlet, his greatest character, does not have faith but doubt. Aquinas had set the being of God at the centre. Hamlet, in his torment, undermines the very idea of being: *To be or not to be?* He replaces God's affirmative with an interrogative. A question is put at the centre.

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals.

See how Shakespeare raises man to the level of the divine: *infinite in faculties...like an angel...like a god.* But then he lowers him to *the paragon of animals*. And so with Shakespeare, as with the Renaissance painters, man is just part of nature. Ignorant people describe the medieval period as *superstitious*. The superstition of the Renaissance is humanism

The Renaissance then was the great crisis of modern times. It was the time when our idea of human nature changed: we were decreasingly seen as children of God and increasingly regarded as autonomous masters of our own being. This great divide is explained brilliantly by T.E. Hulme when he says:

Renaissance art we may call vital art in that it depends on pleasure in the reproduction of human and natural forms. Medieval and Byzantine art is the exact contrary of this. There is nothing vital in it. The emotion you get from it is not a pleasure in the reproduction of natural or human life. The disgust with the trivial and accidental characteristics of living shapes, the searching after an austerity, a perfection and a rigidity which vital things can never have, leads here to the use of forms which can almost be called geometrical. Man is subordinate to certain absolute values; there is no delight in the human form, leading to its natural reproduction; it is always distorted to fit into the more abstract forms which convey an intense religious emotion.

You get the first hint of something gone wrong in the beginnings of the Renaissance itself, in a person like Pico Della Mirandola. You get there the hint of an idea of something which finally culminates in a doctrine which is the opposite of the doctrine of Original Sin: the belief that man as a part of nature was after all something satisfactory. You get a change from a certain profundity and intensity to that flat and insipid optimism which, passing through its first stage of decay in Rousseau, has finally culminated in the state of slush in which we now have the misfortune to live

This slush all comes about because we have dethroned God and set human nature at the centre. When man is seen as only part of nature, in other words, an animal, his capacity for good and evil is discounted. We are merely animals – that's the modern gospel from Dawkins and his gang And the idea of the holy disappears. Our modern period is thus iconoclastic. We have discarded the sacred image. We have even reached such a mire of degradation that the very word *icon* is used to speak blasphemously – as of a celebrity or a pop song. Descartes' *I think, therefore I am* seems rather innocent today. But the revolution did not stop there. The *I* became ever more intensely the object of our attention, until it led to that filthiness of mind which is called *psychoanalysis* and from that to the self-centred therapeutic culture we now inhabit.

Medieval art glorified God. Renaissance art glorified humanity and the world of nature. Art today means popular art which glorifies mere amusement and sensation. And so art is not just secularised but dehumanised. Is this a matter for regret? Not at all. We even got Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill to invent a philosophy of ethics to justify our dehumanised state and called it *utilitarianism*. Pig philosophy. Anything is as worthy as anything else. As Bentham said, *Pushpin is as good as poetry*. Bingo or *Strictly Come Dancing* is as good as *The Divine Comedy* – if that's the sort of thing you like.

The decay goes much further and deeper than the artistic expression of godless human nature. Because post-Renaissance society's rejection of God became total and complete, the absolute standards in morality were abolished too. Now anything is art that anyone says it is, from a pickled cow to a blinking light-bulb. And in morals there is no right and no wrong, only matters of opinion to which we are all alleged to have our *right* – however uninformed and foolish. Things have finally turned out as Hamlet said they would: *There's nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so*. How right Hamlet was when he said of this moral anarchy, *To me it is a prison*.

It has taken 500 years to go from Descartes to the sadistic nihilism of Jean Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett; from *The Virgin and Child* to Madonna; from the Son of Man to Charles Manson; from the polyphony of Byrd and Tallis to heavy metal; from *The earth is the Lord's and all that therein is* to sentimental twaddle about *the environment*. By dethroning God, we have debased human nature. As C.S. Lewis said, *The death of God leads inexorably to the abolition of man*.

This is not a counsel of despair. God everlastingly holds out his hands to receive us back. St Michael and his army are with us in the battle against the forces – some within ourselves – which threaten to corrupt us to destroy us. We have the opportunity to turn back to God Our Father. Do it now!

Do you need to be told that whatever has been can still be?

Yet nothing is impossible, nothing

To men of faith and conviction.

Let us therefore make perfect our will.

O God, help us

