

The relics of St Therese of Lisieux are being processed around the country. They have arrived in London, made a visit to Wormwood Scrubs and now rest in Westminster cathedral. The atheists and secularists are kicking up a mighty fuss about this – which is only right and proper, very understandable, for they are enemies of the Gospel and the Church and their aim is to banish Christianity from public life. What is more difficult to understand is the opposition of some Christians to the procession of Therese's relics.

Inevitably, such a procession invites accusations of *superstition* and the whole event gets dismissed as *medieval* – mostly by ignorant people who know no history. Personally, I am very glad that these relics are among us. I am attracted to the dramatic and colourful outward observances of our faith. In the Algarve, they bring down the statue of the Virgin from its hill shrine every Maytime and there are marching bands and drums and fireworks and feasting for three days on end. Chesterton was once accused of being superstitious and he replied: *I love my religion and I particularly love those parts of it which are ignorantly described as superstitious*. I agree with him. And I think we should have more priest-craft as well. For the priest does have a craft. I am a priest and I try my best to practise it.

But really, why should someone living in our wonderfully progressed and modern 21st century stand gawping at relics or, worse still, kneeling in their presence? The answer is simple: it is to show devotion to something. These outward demonstrations of devotion, support, loyalty, commitment are not limited to Christians. Atheists and secularists do it. Are there any atheist Chelsea supporters? I'm sure there must be a few. They don't merely support Chelsea *in theory*: they wear scarves and rosettes. And on match day Stamford Bridge is like a raucous church with all that heartfelt chanting and singing.

And if the body of Winston Churchill may be paraded on a gun carriage, then the remains of a Christian saint can be processed to Wormwood Scrubs

The reason why Christians and atheists alike practise rituals which involve signs and tokens that superficially resemble totems and fetishes is because we are not disembodied minds. We are bodies, parts and passions and so we relate not just to intellectual matters, to some impossible realm of pure spirit, but we employ visible, physical and material things in all that we do. Ritual and drama are not savagery and primitive superstition: they are the embodiment of the poetic imagination. *Enchantment* involves putting words and desires into a chant. Try a Psalm chant or a Canticle – but perhaps not what they chant at Stamford Bridge.

Suppose there is a residential home for aged and decrepit members of the National Secular Society – the sort of place where Ludovic Kennedy and Polly Toynbee might expect to end their days. And suppose that two residents of this blissful temple to atheism fell in love and decided to get married. They wouldn't merely sign a formal contract: there would be a wedding ring, a cake and glasses of Champagne for ritual toasting of the happy couple.

We cannot do without ritual and symbols. It's not just women in darkest Africa who have rings in their ears and studs in their noses. You see the same phenomenon every day among the infantile chic young women who work in the City. I have been into the homes of atheists and secularists. They have pictures

on their walls. Am I to regard this as a form of superstition? For they do, in a sense, worship these pictures in much the same way as they adore paintings in the art gallery. I bet some of these atheists and secularists even have photograph albums, and that primitive atheist man has a picture of his wife in his wallet. If he should take out this picture and say to me proudly, *This is my wife*, am I really to think that he is married to a photograph?

The barrier to a full appreciation of reality is not ritual or symbols. The barrier is crass literal-mindedness. I may say, *My love is like a red, red rose* but I don't then spray her with insecticide in case she has greenfly. Protestantism is especially prone to literal-mindedness. Protestants don't approve of candles on the altar or fine vestments or *sounds and sweet airs which delight and hurt not*. The literal-minded Protestant is like a man who will get all dressed up to go to a grand restaurant but, instead of eating anything, spends the entire evening reading the menu. Man does not live by words alone but by every piece of bread which comes from the hand of the generous God

R.G. Collingwood gives us a beautiful explanation of the use of ritual. He says:

A servant girl in my father's house, when I was a boy, would never light a fire or put on a kettle without saying to it "Burn up fire!" or "Boil up kettle!" Without that ritual, she would not have expected the fire to burn or the kettle to boil. But, simple country lass though she was, and deplorably superstitious, she would have laughed at you had you suggested that the charm would act if the fire was clumsily laid or the kettle unskilfully placed upon it.

Everything we do from a kiss on the cheek or a handshake to a Pontifical High Mass involves us in symbolism. We are incarnated souls. And so we cannot possibly live merely theoretically. As well as *thoughts*, we need *things*. This is to say that our nature obliges us to live *sacramentally*. When we bring the baby to be christened, we don't just say a form of words, we sprinkle him with water. There are the rings at the wedding. When Our Lord told how we should remember him and invoke his Real Presence, he said we should do so not just with a form of words but with bread and wine: a ritual meal.

The Christian pilgrims who are paying respects to St Therese by visiting her relics are not engaged in some sort of sympathetic magic such as a rain dance or a fertility rite. Christians acknowledge St Therese as a person who, in her lifetime, was very close to God. She is now a saint in heaven enjoying the beatific vision. By associating now with her relics, the pilgrims are showing that they too wish to be close to God. Why not simply get close to God by prayer and contemplation – by words alone? Because we do not live by abstract ideas alone. We are flesh and blood. And in such as processions and hymn-singing we acknowledge our common commitment, our solidarity and so we encourage one another.

The religion of detached spirituality is phoney whether it originates in a 4th century Gnostic sect, among the Manichees or in coteries of Theosophists and atheistic Hampstead Buddhists. Christian materialism is the true perspective because it is derived from two antecedent and fundamental truths: that God made the material world and that he himself became part of that world in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Moreover, spirituality which is not rooted in the material world, is not just phoney but dangerous. People who worship only the pure spirit forget that there can be the bad spirit. Beware of theoretical detachment, beware the idea that all truth is merely a matter of the right propositions or formula. For this way ends in death and destruction. The ancient Gnostic philosophers were detached theorists of this sort. They held that the world of material things is beneath contempt, evil. This led them to the belief that, since matter is evil, what you do in the material world is of no moral significance. It was St John in the first fourteen verses of his Gospel who noticed this danger and gave us the antidote. He said: *All things were made by God and without him was not anything g made that was made.* He was of course repeating the message of *The Book of Genesis: And God saw the world, that it was good.*

The theoretical, disembodied, purely spiritual heresy has returned to threaten civilisation again and again. Chesterton said:

At least five times, with the Arian and the Albigensian, with the Humanist sceptic, after Voltaire and after Darwin, the Faith has to all appearances gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases, it was the dog that died. But if the Church had not entered the world, it seems probable that Europe would be now very much what Asia is now.

Glory be to God who turned his thoughts into things