

CHURCHILL ON RELIGION
THE INTUITION



Arthur Pan. Winston Churchill, 1943.

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In his memoirs book, *My early life* (first published in 1930), at the beginning of Chapter IX, "Education at Bangalore", Winston Churchill confesses that¹:

"It was not until the winter of 1896, when I had almost completed my twenty-second year, that the desire for learning came upon me."²

The way the Old Bulldog refers to this event depicts it as something similar to a revelation: it "came upon" him. Significant it is. Having been considered, predominately by his beloved but unloving father as stupid and unfit for anything other than the Military, the boy Winston lived up to such brilliant expectations.

Nevertheless, the same boy had revealed himself the master of an immense memory, both extensive and acute, and the owner of a very peculiar and rather establishment unfriendly intuitive intelligence, as one can perceive reading the "table episode" narrated in the same memoirs book (pp. 9-11), where he declared not to address himself to tables, even though the Latin language permitted so. This

¹ BIO NOTE: Américo José Pinheira Pereira, Doctor in Philosophy, Portuguese Catholic University, 1996. Several items of scientific publications in the areas of Ontology, Ethics, Portuguese Thought, Epistemology, Philosophy of Religion, Ancient Philosophy and Political Philosophy, including nine books. Various Academic Administrative positions. Director of the Philosophy Department 2013-15. Senior research member and Board member of the Philosophy Centre of the Portuguese Catholic University. His main publications are: *Ética e Teologia. Declinações de uma relação* (2016); *Eros e Sophia. Estudos platônicos II* (2015); *A Crise do Bem. Reflexão sobre o Job e o sofrimento* (2014); LAVELLE, Louis, *Cadernos de Guerra. Na frente*, Francisco Piedade Vaz (transl.), Américo Pereira (coord.); "Guerra, uma redefinição", *Synesis*, vol. 6, nº 2, Jul/Dez 2014, pp. 1-20.

² CHURCHILL Winston, *My Early Life*, London, Eland, 2000, p. 107, [1930]. All other quotations will be from this same edition, marked *Ibidem*.

kind of establishment-strange way of being intelligent was what classified him as 'stupid'. One has to thank the gods for such stupidity, the same that allowed him to perceive in Hitler, since at least 1932, what apparently all others – all of them very 'non-stupid', whose paragon was Neville Chamberlain – did not: that Hitler was a political and human monster, ready to plunge the world in chaos and indiscriminate murder.

The revelation-like type of his turning to learning can thus be pertinently appreciated as an authentic revolution from a stance of stupidity and ignorance, as prophesised by Lord Randolph Churchill, to a stance of real interest in knowledge. The irony of Churchill's writing is bitter and reveals the consciousness of someone who effectively discovers that he is capable of learning well and swiftly, even as widely and deeply. Churchill, perhaps for the good of Mankind, never was an Academic or even a formal Scholar: but who remembers the great majority of Academics or Scholars?

The beginnings of the long learning itinerary were Socratic: "I began to feel myself wanting in even the vaguest knowledge about many large spheres of thought." ³ The reality of the departure was, thus, less 'divine': the young Cavalry Officer recognized that he was ignorant. This is the normal and actual point of departure for anyone who sets about to learn not as a social obligation but as a personal spiritual adventure. Churchill had found, at last, the world of search for meaning, the world of Socrates and the Socratics.

It is no wonder that in p. 111 he mentions the "hemlock". One wonders, reading systematically Churchill's memoirs, if this presence of the 'hemlock peril' is not constant in them, perhaps the deep root of what is commonly known as "Churchill's 'black dog'": the feeling of perhaps being wrong in spite of all evidence. After the prophecies of stupidity and the realities of wrong options, albeit the clarity of evidence, with all others who mattered still being against him, the old soldier found himself alone and misunderstood, unloved, ever impertinent and best to be dead.

³ *Ibidem.*

Fortunately for humankind the Socratic intelligence was able, for many years, sooner or later, to kill or at least, even if in an ephemeral way, cast away the 'black dog', indicating the correct path to follow when the direst moments presented themselves.

Being known as a proud and even vain man, Churchill reveals himself in these pages as someone utterly different. The following long citation is a perfect example of that:

"One day, before I left England, a friend of mine had said: 'Christ's gospel was the last word in Ethics.' This sounded good; but what were Ethics? They had never been mentioned to me at Harrow or Sandhurst. Judging from the context I thought they must mean 'the public school spirit', 'playing the game', '*esprit de corps*', 'honourable behaviour', 'patriotism', and the like. Then someone told me that Ethics were concerned not merely with the things you ought to do, but with why you ought to do them, and that there were whole books written on the subject. I would have paid some scholar £2 at least to give me a lecture of an hour or an hour and a half about Ethics. What was the scope of the subject; what were its main branches; what were the principal questions dealt with, and the chief controversies open; who were the high authorities and which were the standard books? But here in Bangalore there was no one to tell me about Ethics for love or money. Of tactics I had a grip: on politics I had a view: but a concise compendious outline of Ethics was a novelty not to be locally obtained."⁴

Ignoring the anecdotic details concerning the absence of people in Bangalore capable of explaining what "ethics were", one can perceive that having heard for the first time about the existence of ethics was a veritable intellectual shock, furthermore, having being told that 'Christ's gospel was the last word in Ethics.'

Churchill's non formal education on religion was the doing of his beloved Nanny, Mrs. Everest, who was a woman who "held such a simple faith that she had no fears at all",⁵ having lived "such an innocent and loving life of service to others",⁶

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 107-108.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

the same woman of whom Churchill affirms that "My nurse was my confident. [...] It was to her I poured out my many troubles, both now and in my schooldays."⁷

The example of faith he had was the example of simple faith of his confidante's. No intellectual speculation on the reasons of action there. Pure belief and the evident practical obligations were the mainstays of the example of the woman who impeded his childhood from being a barren period of loveless life and lack of due appreciation.

No wonder, then, that Churchill, formally educated in the formal religion of Harrow and the Military, thought that ethics related to Christ were "the public school spirit', 'playing the game', '*esprit de corps*', 'honourable behaviour', 'patriotism', and the like.". What else could they, for the moment, be? The world in which Churchill had been educated was a world of strict prescriptions both in morals and religion. Politicians and the Military limited themselves to follow up on these values. One was told what the right thing was, one believed with simplicity in it, one acted accordingly. That was all. In Latin, one was even supposed to address tables!⁸

This young man and officer, used to act on tradition and simple belief, found out that there was a new possible world, the world in which you could, and perhaps should, act pondering on the "why" of your possible action:

"Then someone told me that Ethics were concerned not merely with the things you ought to do, but with why you ought to do them".

There is a fundamental sense to what one does. On this naïve intuition much would depend, for the mature Churchill, though many times erring, always procured to be the master of the "why" of his action.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 10-11. Here one can find a marvelous account of what differentiated Churchill's special intelligence from the ones of his 'equals': the child Churchill did not address tables, even though Latin had a formal possibility for doing so. Would he have perceived Hitler and the latter's true aims if he had the kind of general intelligence that allowed people to "address tables"? One wonders.

Religion in the Army seemed to run on military type protocols. One observed what one was supposed to observe, asked no off-protocol questions and all was due to end well. In Churchill's own words:

"In the Army too there were regular church parades, and sometimes I marched the Roman Catholics to church, and sometimes the Protestants. Religious toleration in the British Army had spread until it overlapped the regions of indifference. No one was ever hampered or prejudiced on account of his religion. Everyone had the regulation facilities for its observance. In India the deities of a hundred creeds were placed by respectful routine in the Imperial Pantheon. In the regiment we sometimes used to argue questions like 'Whether we should live again in another world after this was over?' 'Whether we have ever lived before?' 'Whether we remember and meet each other after Death or merely start again like the Buddhists?' 'Whether some high intelligence is looking after the world or whether things are just drifting on anyhow?' There was general agreement that if you tried your best to live an honourable life and did your duty and were faithful to friends and not unkind to the weak and poor, it did not matter much what you believed or disbelieved. All would come out right. This is what would nowadays I suppose be called 'The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness.'"⁹

Some of the great religious and philosophical questions were, nevertheless, present. The "ethics" were also at least supposed. But the reality of it all seemed to lack the living flavour that always supported Churchill's endeavours: the expression "the Religion of Healthy-Mindedness" is quite meaningful of that tastelessness.

Effectively, the lack of taste derives from the reduction of religion to an ethical form; just another one. A commercial form to be more precise: one behaves well, thus, one gets the due reward, as if human life and action were part of a great universal deontological protocol, administered by a kind of super-gamekeeper or warden, Mr. God.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

The religious scepticism phase ensued, and the self-educating young man experienced the company of some then illustrious thinkers:

"I now began to read a number of books which challenged the whole religious education I had received at Harrow. The first of these books was *The Martyrdom of Man* by Winwood Reade. This was Colonel Brabazon's great book. He had read it many times over and regarded it as a sort of Bible. It is in fact a concise and well-written universal history of mankind, dealing in harsh terms with the mysteries of all religions and leading to the depressing conclusion that we simply go out like candles. I was much startled and indeed offended by what I read. But then I found that Gibbon evidently held the same view; and finally Mr. Lecky, in his *Rise and Influence of Rationalism* and *History of European Morals*, both of which I read this winter, established in my mind a predominantly secular view. For a time I was indignant at having been told so many untruths, as I then regarded them, by the schoolmasters and clergy who had guided my youth. Of course, if I had been at a University, my difficulties might have been resolved by the eminent professors and divines, who are gathered there. At any rate, they would have shown me equally convincing books putting the opposite point of view. As it was I passed through a violent and aggressive anti-religious phase which, had it lasted, might easily have made me a nuisance."¹⁰

The formal mode of reduction of religion to ethics remains. As a micro-cosmos of the civilization to which he belonged, Churchill was experiencing the intellectual void that the reduction of religion to ethics necessarily carries. As just another form of ethic theory or method, religion reveals itself as another cultural product, and nothing else. The human being soon has the intuition that there is nothing other than his reality and the reality of the world in its physical strict sense.

The profound "religious questions" mentioned above all receive the same negative answer: all there is and all there will ever be is this physical mode of being. Necessarily all ends with physical death and with it all possibility of sense.

This definitive negative answer was not sufficient to a person such as Churchill, in whom life revealed itself as most abundant. Death as the supreme lord is not an

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

acceptable end. All sense lost is an absurd: "leading to the depressing conclusion that we simply go out like candles. I was much startled and indeed offended by what I read.". This certainty was not what Churchill's "simple faith" and complicated life had shown him and would show him.

Young Churchill's eagerly sought for many adventures, some of which lived before the delivery end of a gun barrel. Those experiences made the youth ponder differently upon the trends and hazards of life. In his own words:

"My poise was restored during the next few years by frequent contact with danger. I found that whatever I might think and argue, I did not hesitate to ask for special protection when about to come under the fire of the enemy: nor to feel sincerely grateful when I got home safe to tea. I even asked for lesser things than not to be killed too soon, and nearly always in these years, and indeed throughout my life, I got what I wanted. This practice seemed perfectly natural, and just as strong and real as the reasoning process which contradicted it so sharply. Moreover the practice was comforting and the reasoning led nowhere. I therefore acted in accordance with my feelings without troubling to square such conduct with the conclusions of thought."¹¹

Did Churchill simply separate practice from theory? Is he telling that what was thought about grave religious questions did not matter as long as one had one's life running smoothly according to one's desires? At first sight it may well seem that this is the conclusion to draw from his words. Nevertheless, that would be just an alternative form of 'Healthy-Mindedness', something we already know not to be in Churchill's liking.

What, then, is his point? His point is that the substance of what one's life is changes radically one's perspective on things. Religion, though capable of being submitted to the screen of thought, is not reducible to what that screen filters as acceptable. It is the living experience that yields the meaning that the person understands as religious. No one tells anyone what religion is. No one tells anyone what the latter's religious experience is and what is its meaning.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 113-114.

That which a bourgeois Churchill previously experienced as religion is something quite different from what he experienced later as a front line officer, killing and always on the verge of being killed. The extreme peril, the peril of losing one's life, one's unique being and chance of being, changes dramatically the value of everything that constitutes human life.

Facing mortal danger, why not ask for the protection of something we believe is capable of protecting us? The unreasonable thing to do would be to ask for the protection of something we knew could not protect us or we were absolutely certain that did not exist at all. There is no such negative certainty, and that is why Theology can discuss it: one does not discuss certainties.

So, nothing is more intelligent for someone who believes that something may help, travelling the dire commotions of battle, than to ask for its help: "I did not hesitate to ask for special protection when about to come under the fire of the enemy: nor to feel sincerely grateful when I got home safe to tea.". The gratitude, a common and very important feature of religious experience, is the act that the recipient of a grace offers to the giver of such a grace. Of course, the grace, as experienced, is the confirmation of the goodness of one's belief.

In terms of living experience, there is no vicious circle in this mode of thinking, for this is no act of disembodied thought, but the *intuition* of the sense that constitutes the absolute of any human experience, its meaning. In the light of such an intense experience and the absolute that is its meaning as lived, can anything really cast a shadow of doubt? Not for Churchill.

Therefore, is it not the exercise of thought far from the taste of reality that which needs to be questioned as far as its veracity and relation to the truthfulness of the same reality? Where does the truth about religion reside: in the scholastic cabinets or in the mud and blood of battle? Is it a matter of 'the brain' or of 'the gut', or both?

For Churchill, certainly it is the latter. Religion as all important matters is not a field for opinion: it is not what the others' opinions consist of that is important to

him, but what he finds out reality to be. If what he experiences as a religious subject does not agree with the criticism on religion, it must be the criticism that is wrong.

This is Churchill as Churchill, the genuine. The same attitude is found when he fought almost alone against the presence of Hitler and what the tyrant stood for. He cared nothing about the predominant view on the "Corporal": Churchill *knew* he was a vicious tyrant. Nothing else mattered.

One can ask oneself if Churchill's attitude towards Hitler was not a religious one, in the sense that it constituted an experience based on an intuition focused on the destiny of mankind. It was such in Hitler; it is hard to believe that it could be something other than this in Churchill, for just such a powerful intuition and experience could sustain such a long struggle not just against the tyrant, but against what seemed sometimes to be the whole world.

Without mentioning the author's name, Churchill quotes Blaise Pascal. Perhaps for us to understand how Churchill's mind worked and why he had his very peculiar way of being religious, we should listen to Pascal, explaining what he knew to be the "esprit de finesse", he, one of the greatest "géomètres" of all times:

"Tournez. C'est qu'ils ne peuvent du tout se tourner vers les principes de géométrie, mais ce qui fait que des géomètres ne sont pas fins, c'est qu'ils ne voient pas ce qui est devant eux et qu'étant accoutumés aux principes nets et grossiers de géométrie et à ne pas raisonner qu'auprès avoir bien vu et manié leurs principes, ils se perdent dans les choses de finesse, où les principes ne se laissent pas ainsi manier. On les voit à peine, on les sent plutôt qu'on ne les voit, on a des peines infinies à les faire sentir à ceux qui ne les sentent pas d'eux-mêmes. [...] Il faut tout d'un coup voir la chose, d'un seul regard et non pas par progrès de raisonnement, au moins jusqu'à un certain degré."¹²

Churchill is an extraordinary example of this kind of intuition and of intuitive mind and life. His religion is what he sees as his experience of relation with God, a

¹² PASCAL Blaise, *Œuvres complètes*, Préface d'Henry Gouhier, Présentation et notes de Louis Lafuma, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1963, "Pensées", série XXII, 512-1, p. 576.

most personal figure of God (act of God?), perhaps only understandable by the man who did not address tables.

ANNEX: The whole fragment quoted from *My Early Life*

"My various readings during the next two years led me to ask myself questions about religion. Hitherto I had dutifully accepted everything I had been told. Even in the holidays I always had to go once a week to church, and at Harrow there were three services every Sunday, besides morning and evening prayers throughout the week. All this was very good. I accumulated in those years so fine a surplus in the Bank of Observance that I have been drawing confidently upon it ever since. Weddings, christenings, and funerals have brought in a steady annual income, and I have never made too close enquiries about the state of my account. It might well even be that I should find an overdraft. But now in these bright days of youth my attendances were well ahead of the Sundays. In the Army too there were regular church parades, and sometimes I marched the Roman Catholics to church, and sometimes the Protestants. Religious toleration in the British Army had spread until it overlapped the regions of indifference. No one was ever hampered or prejudiced on account of his religion. Everyone had the regulation facilities for its observance. In India the deities of a hundred creeds were placed by respectful routine in the Imperial Pantheon. In the regiment we sometimes used to argue questions like 'Whether we should live again in another world after this was over?' 'Whether we have ever lived before?' 'Whether we remember and meet each other after Death or merely start again like the Buddhists?' 'Whether some high intelligence is looking after the world or whether things are just drifting on anyhow?' There was general agreement that if you tried your best to live an honourable life and did your duty and were faithful to friends and not unkind to the weak and poor, it did not matter much what you believed or disbelieved. All would come out right. This is what would nowadays I suppose be called 'The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness.'

Some of the senior officers also dwelt upon the value of the Christian religion to women ('It helps to keep them straight'), and also generally to the lower orders ('Nothing can give them a good time here, but it makes them more contented to think they will get one hereafter'). Christianity, it appeared, had also a disciplinary value, especially when presented through the Church of England. It made people want to be respectable, to keep up appearances, and so saved lots of scandals. From this standpoint ceremonies and ritual ceased to be of importance. They were merely the same idea translated into different languages to suit different races and temperaments. Too much religion of any kind, however, was a bad thing. Among natives especially, fanaticism was highly dangerous and roused them to murder, mutiny or rebellion. Such is, I think, a fair gauging of the climate of opinion in which I dwelt.

I now began to read a number of books, which challenged the whole religious education I had received at Harrow. The first of these books was *The Martyrdom of Man* by Winwood Reade. This was Colonel Brabazon's great book. He had read it many times over and regarded it as a sort of Bible. It is in fact a concise and well-written universal history of mankind, dealing in harsh terms with the mysteries of all religions and leading to the depressing conclusion that we simply go out like candles. I was much startled and indeed offended by what I read. But then I found that Gibbon evidently held the same view; and finally Mr. Lecky, in his *Rise and Influence of Rationalism* and *History of European Morals*, both of which I read this winter, established in my mind a predominantly secular view. For a time I was indignant at having been told so many untruths, as I then regarded them, by the schoolmasters and clergy who had guided my youth. Of course if I had been at a University my difficulties might have been resolved by the eminent professors and divines who are gathered there. At any rate, they would have shown me equally convincing books putting the opposite point of view. As it was I passed through a violent and aggressive anti-religious phase which, had it lasted, might easily have made me a nuisance. My poise was restored during the next few years by frequent contact with danger. I found that whatever I might think and argue, I did not hesitate to ask for special protection when about to come under the fire of the enemy: nor to feel sincerely grateful when I got home safe to tea. I even asked for lesser things than not to be killed too soon, and nearly always in these years, and indeed throughout my life, I got what I wanted. This practice seemed perfectly natural, and just as strong and real as the reasoning process which contradicted it so sharply. Moreover the practice was comforting and the reasoning led nowhere. I therefore acted in accordance with my feelings without troubling to square such conduct with the conclusions of thought.

It is a good thing for an uneducated man to read books of quotations. Bartlett's *familiar Quotations* is an admirable work, and I studied it intently. The quotations when engraved upon the memory give you good thoughts. They also make you anxious to read the authors and look for more. In this or some other similar book I came across a French saying which seemed singularly apposite. 'Le cœur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît pas.' It seemed to me that it would be very foolish to discard the reasons of the heart for those of the head. Indeed I could not see why I should not enjoy them both. I did not worry about the inconsistency of thinking one way and believing the other. It seemed good to let the mind explore so far as it could the paths of thought and logic and also good to pray for help and succour, and be thankful when they came. I could not feel that the Supreme Creator who gave us our minds as well as our souls would be offended if they did not always run smoothly together in double harness. After all He must have foreseen this from the beginning and of course He would understand it all.

Accordingly, I have always been surprised to see some of our Bishops and clergy making such heavy weather about reconciling the Bible story with modern scientific and historical knowledge. Why do they want to reconcile them? If you are the recipient of a message which cheers your heart and fortifies your soul, which promises you reunion with those you have loved in a world of larger opportunity and wider sympathies, why should you worry about the shape or colour of the travel-stained envelope; whether it is duly stamped, whether the date on the postmark is right or wrong? These matters may be puzzling, but they are certainly not important. What is important is the message and the benefits to you of receiving it. Close reasoning can conduct one to the precise conclusion that miracles are impossible: that 'it is more likely that human testimony should err, than that the laws of nature should be violated'; and at the same time one may rejoice to read how Christ turned the water into wine in Cana of Galilee or walked on the lake or rose from the dead. The human brain cannot comprehend infinity, but the discovery of mathematics enables it to be handled quite easily. The idea that nothing is true except what we comprehend is silly, and that ideas that our minds cannot reconcile are mutually destructive, sillier still. Certainly nothing could be more repulsive both to our minds and feelings than the spectacle of thousands of millions of universes – for that is what they say it comes to now – all knocking about together for ever without any rational or good purpose behind them. I therefore adopted quite early in life a system of believing whatever I wanted to believe, while at the same time leaving reason to pursue unfettered whatever paths she was capable of treading.

Some of my cousins who had the great advantage of University education used to tease me with arguments to prove that nothing has any existence except what we think of it. The whole creation is but a dream; all phenomena are imaginary. You create your own universe as you go along. The stronger your imagination, the more variegated your universe. When you leave off dreaming, the universe ceases to exist. These amazing mental acrobatics are all right to play with. They are perfectly harmless and perfectly useless. I warn my younger readers to treat them as a game. The metaphysicians will have the last word and defy you to disprove their absurd propositions.

I always rested upon the following argument, which I devised for myself many years ago. We look up in the sky and see the sun. Our eyes are dazzled and our senses record the fact. So here is this great sun standing apparently on no better foundation than our physical senses. But happily there is a method, apart altogether from our physical senses, of testing the reality of the sun. It is by mathematics. By means of prolonged processes of mathematics, entirely separate from the senses, astronomers are able to calculate when an eclipse will occur. They predict by pure reason that a black spot will pass across the sun on a certain day. You go and look, and your sense

of sight immediately tells you that their calculations are vindicated. So here you have the evidence of the senses reinforced by the entirely separate evidence of a vast independent process of mathematical reasoning. We have taken what is called in military map-making 'a cross bearing'. We have got independent testimony to the reality of the sun. When my metaphysical friends tell me that the data on which the astronomers made their calculations, were necessarily obtained originally through the evidence of the senses, I say 'No?. they might, in theory at any rate, be obtained by automatic calculating-machines set in motion by the light falling upon them without admixture of the human senses at any stage. When it is persisted that we should have to be told about the calculations and use our ears for that purpose, I reply that the mathematical process has a reality and virtue in itself, and that once discovered it constitutes a new and independent factor. I am also at this point accustomed to reaffirm with emphasis my conviction that the sun is real, and also that it is hot – in fact hot as Hell, and that if the metaphysicians doubt they should go there and see." ¹³

ABSTRACT

Having had an initial twofold education on religion, first under the paradigm of "simple faith" through the example of his Nanny, Mrs. Everest, on which a bourgeois mode of understanding religion was poured at Harrow and Sandhurst, when facing the mortal perils of frontline soldier life, Churchill evolved to a peculiar personal mode of understanding and living the relation with the divine.

KEYWORDS

Churchill, Religion, Intuition.

¹³ CHURCHILL Winston, *My Early life*, London: Eland, 2000, pp. 111-116, [¹1930].

