

# Orwell and Catholicism

Lawrence Dugan

GEORGE ORWELL ENJOYED RUMINATING in print over how a writer's social and political beliefs seem to move beneath what he writes like an underground stream. One of the twentieth century's greatest essayists in English, he was extremely sensitive to how subject matter and honesty weighed against style. Among other topics, this frequently led him to expand on several ideas about Roman Catholicism that pervade his essays and non-fiction. Throughout his career he seemed to adjust these ideas to fit into his own world view, the outline or model of politics that looms in the background—or right at the front—of so much of his writing.

John Rodden and Leroy Spiller are the only critics who have paid attention to this aspect of Orwell's thinking. But Rodden's main interest is Orwell criticism—how Catholic, Jewish, conservative, radical, and other critics have reacted to his work and whatever attention he paid to those groups—not the development of Orwell's attitude toward Catholics and his conclusions about them at the end of his career. Since the Church is an important institution and Orwell is an important writer, the subject is of interest. When reading his essays

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LAWRENCE DUGAN is a librarian at the Free Library of Philadelphia. His poetry has appeared recently in *Poetry East and Cyphers (Dublin)*.

and journalism, we are able to follow a first-rate intellect's patterns of thought on a critical issue.

Spiller comes closest to making a thorough analysis of Orwell's attitude toward the Church, but he concentrates chiefly on his radical anti-Catholic shift during the Spanish Civil War and on the general anti-Catholic tone in his work.<sup>1</sup> But Orwell's anti-Catholicism went through more stages of development and decline than anyone seems to have noticed. Particularly significant is the concession, late in his career, that some Catholic and conservative writers, including Chesterton, Belloc, and Peter Drucker, may have been very astute in their political predictions, an achievement Orwell valued highly.

## I

Orwell's arguments revolve around the importance of converts to Catholicism in British literature of the 1920s and 1930s (for instance, Evelyn Waugh); the political weight of the Church in British, Irish, American, and international affairs; and, above all, the Church as a universal institution with the appeal and the power of a vast organization, in direct competition with the Communist Party, a similar organization in his eyes.<sup>2</sup> He generally did not talk about "the Church," but rather about

Catholicism or “the Catholics”; the tone of his comments range from mild antagonism to blunt hostility. The main point is that religion is always treated as politics pretending to be something else.

Orwell saw Catholicism as a reactionary force working against left-wing movements in the world, not as a moral force preaching a doctrine that was unique. He must have sensed, however, that something was missing from his definition of the Church, for his opinion shifted with the course of events in the middle of the last century, until finally his understanding of Catholicism must have seemed so inadequate that he stopped referring to it in his journalism, at least as an essential part of the paradigm he was always readjusting to display his world view.

A good place to start considering his attitude toward Catholicism is in the middle of his career, with “Inside the Whale,” a long essay published in 1940. At first the scope of the essay appears to be fairly narrow, the literary career of Henry Miller and an appraisal of his novels, if they even are novels, for as Orwell comments, so much in Miller’s books appears to be straight autobiography, and, many would add, laced with a good deal of fantasy. He praises Miller’s *Black Spring* (1936), which he describes as an American’s view of Paris, where Orwell himself had lived in the twenties, and that of an American who is completely apolitical; and with this last point he begins a long digression on writers who *are* political, and why they are.

He discusses how unique Miller is among British and American writers of the 1920s and 1930s. Many of the 1920s group (Orwell claims) were attracted to Catholicism and to continental movements of a reactionary cast, *e.g.*, futurism and modernism. He includes Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Forster, Huxley, Wyndham Lewis, Eliot, Norman Douglas, Waugh, Christopher Hollis, and older writers like Yeats and Maugham. Not mentioned, but

presumably included, are Compton MacKenzie, Beerbohm, Robert Graves, and others. I am contracting several lists into one, for it is a long essay and he re-works his grouping of writers.

This is a heterogenous list. Evelyn Waugh did convert to Catholicism and T.S. Eliot became an Anglican, which Orwell describes as “the ecclesiastical equivalent of Trotskyism.”<sup>3</sup> Lawrence had enormous differences with the Church that are obvious, yet with his follower Huxley, he may have been somehow sympathetic. Orwell might also have mentioned Hemingway, who claimed to be a death-bed convert when he was wounded in World War I and who has sympathetic references to Catholicism in his novels, but Orwell concentrates on British writers for his comparisons, although Miller was American.

Then the economic depression (the “Slump”) comes, Hitler takes over Germany, and suddenly many of the most prominent British writers are communist sympathizers, including W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, C. Day-Lewis, and Louis MacNeice. Moscow is now the attractive foreign capital, not Rome. Orwell asks: Why should these two large foreign organizations have any appeal for the liberally educated Englishman, raised in a democratic, free-thinking society? His answer is that both the Church and the party share basic qualities given in the question itself. They are universal, powerful, and dogmatic, and they demand total allegiance from middle-class Englishmen who choose to enlist in them.

Orwell seems quite sincere in this comparison. Nor is he the only writer to notice the religious intensity of some communist adherents, their fanatical, unquestioning loyalty in defending the most outrageous changes in party policy, and much worse. What Orwell does not notice, or does not point out, is that the Catholic Church makes no such demands on its members. One may not like what the

Church teaches, but it does not change its doctrine overnight as the Communist Party did in the twenties and thirties, indeed often enough that a willingness to accept the truth stood on its head was the distinguishing mark of the good party member:

But I do not think one need look further than this for the reason why the young writers of the 'thirties flocked into or toward the Communist Party. It was simply something to believe in. Here was a Church, an army, an orthodoxy, a discipline....all the loyalties and superstitions that the intellect had seemingly banished could come rushing back under the thinnest of disguises. (1:515)

Both the Church and the Party have an essentially anti-British outlook, and both benefited when the old system of English values, at least political values, had collapsed after World War I. The Catholics and their High Anglican and Aesthete fellow-travelers of the twenties were pessimists; while the writers of the thirties were so optimistic in their Stalinism as to seem like Boy Scouts, although they had pledged adherence to a deadly code. Both were products of an anti-British attitude, a hatred of the imperial system, which translated into disaffection from Western liberal society. In older, less political writers the same quality could be seen, with ancient capitals replacing modern ones: for Yeats, Byzantium was the land of heart's desire; for Lawrence it was Italy under the Etruscans; and for the Auden-Spender group it was Moscow.

The result of this disaffection was what Orwell calls middle-class unemployment. Well-educated young men from good families could no longer look to the military or to the empire or even to industry for work, since these were not politically acceptable choices in a world so ideologically undermined. Imperial family values were on the rocks. Among the few alternatives remaining were left-wing literary politics, and jobs in school teaching and journal-

ism that could be reconciled with them. But Orwell condemns communist intellectuals in terms far harsher than anything he says about their Catholic counterparts:

Every communist is in fact liable at any moment to have to alter his most fundamental convictions, or leave the party. The unquestionable dogma of Monday may become the damnable heresy of Tuesday, and so on. This has happened at least three times during the past ten years. It follows that in any Western country a Communist Party is always unstable and usually very small. Its long-term membership really consists of an inner ring of intellectuals who have identified with the Russian bureaucracy, and a slightly larger body of working class people who feel a loyalty towards Soviet Russia without necessarily understanding its policies. Otherwise there is only a shifting membership, one lot coming and another going with each change of "line." (1:513-14)

This is as lucid a definition as could be asked for, one that gives a clear perspective on a complicated aspect of political life and yet never sinks into jargon. Orwell brooded for years on the lure of totalitarian systems, and he never lost sight of what he was studying. "Inside the Whale" is part of that long sequence of thinking that led up to *Animal Farm* and *1984*, and we can see him trying to fit Catholicism into the perspective he was developing on British intellectual life, but never succeeding in the way he did with Communism, as in the paragraph just quoted.<sup>4</sup>

So what is to be made of his generational model, with the Church standing as the authoritarian lure of the 1920s, as communism did in the 1930s? He never really developed it beyond this fascinating essay and one other, "Notes On Nationalism," although he had a great deal to say about Catholicism, most of it hostile, as the years went on. The problem came when he tried to compose a capsule description of Catholicism to match the

one above of Communism. It did not come out right, and it did not even begin right. The Church's "line" did not shift, its membership did not move through a revolving door. It was dogmatic and it sometimes declared what was undogmatic heresy, but they did not switch places on Tuesday. In short, it preached perennial moral law rather than lies, evasion, and power politics.

Still, if the definition of a Communist Party in a Western country could not be reworked for the Church, Orwell did not let go of the idea. "Inside the Whale" is an essay of over forty pages, and he returns to the argument, not pushing the analogy but leaving it as a suggested comparison:

Between 1935 and 1939 the Communist Party had an almost irresistible fascination for any writer under forty. It became as normal to hear that so-and-so had "joined" as it had been a few years earlier, when Roman Catholicism was fashionable, to hear that so-and-so had "been received." (1:512)

Just who had been received into the Catholic Church is another tricky question, one that Orwell avoids and that eventually destroys his argument. It is odd that Orwell never mentions Graham Greene, whose work he knew and who by 1940 was a Catholic convert and a well-known novelist, and about whom Orwell wrote a good deal elsewhere. Greene would certainly have upended this statement:

It is probably not a coincidence that the best writers of the 'thirties have been poets. The atmosphere of Orthodoxy is always damaging to prose, and above all it is completely ruinous to the novel, the most anarchial of all forms of literature. How many Roman Catholics have been good novelists? (1:518)

Remember that this is an essay about the novels of Henry Miller, whose state of mind, according to Orwell, was that of a Walt Whitman uprooted and dropped in the 1930s (a plausible comparison) and

one well-suited to novel-writing. Yet who is read more these days, Miller or Evelyn Waugh? An "anarchical" sense of humor pervades Waugh's novels of the thirties that is never approached by Miller's dreary fantasies, and Waugh, like Greene, was a Catholic convert.

Orwell apparently had two lists of Catholics: the one that comes to mind today, made up of an older generation including Chesterton, Knox, Belloc, and perhaps Arnold Lunn, and a younger group with the converts Greene and Waugh; and an amorphous second list with a certain affinity for antiquity and the ancient world, including Joyce, Yeats, Wyndham Lewis, Lawrence, and Huxley, of whom only Joyce was a Catholic, and certainly not a loyal one. It was the second group Orwell had in mind in building up his case in "Inside the Whale," but the first also was subject to his ruminations, including, in one memorable passage, Chesterton, whom he often discussed, but only paid tribute to as a political thinker at the end of his own career.

"Inside the Whale," is written in the pure Orwellian voice, and is fascinating to read:

And you have this feeling because somebody [Miller] has chosen to drop the Geneva language of the ordinary novel and drag the *real-politik* of the inner mind into the open. (1:497)

The wind was blowing from Europe, and long before 1930 it had blown the beer and cricket school naked, except for their knighthoods. (1:506)

Orwell's infusion of politics and literary criticism is not subtle, but direct, comic, and honest.

## II

Eight years before, in June 1932, the *New English Weekly* published Orwell's review of a book, *The Spirit of Catholicism*, by Karl

Adam, a German priest. The book is an overview of Catholicism and Orwell found it a useful introduction to the subject. He notes that it is not a work of controversy, unlike recent books by Father C.C. Martindale, whom he mentions, and presumably Ronald Knox, also a priest, whom he mentions several times in other essays. Instead, it is a methodical statement of belief and practice that explains much to the non-believer, *e.g.*, the communion of the saints. But he asks: "What, then, can the non-Catholic learn from this book about the Catholic faith? Well, in one sense nothing, for there can be little real contact of mind between believer and non-believer." (1:80) "Non-believer" is the word he would apply to himself on occasion, even while acknowledging that he often went to Anglican services—the C of E as he calls it in letters to friends. In a letter to Eleanor Jacques he tells how he intends to go to communion soon, as he has been attending his local church regularly, and "my curate friend is bound to think it funny" if he never does. He asks her about receiving communion, as he has forgotten the rite, and about mortal sin, and he finally wonders if it is not wrong to go "when one doesn't believe." (1:102-104)

The letter was written at about the same time as the review of Father Adam's book, in October 1932, and both indicate that early in his career Orwell showed no unusual hostility to either the church in which he was raised, or to Catholicism, even if he felt little in the way of religious belief, and certainly no affection for the latter.<sup>5</sup> This was eight years before "Inside the Whale" and it is important to remember that he had just started calling himself a socialist. By 1940 he had been one for years, and the world crisis had reached a doomsday pitch for many people, including Orwell. In between these two dates he fought in the Spanish Civil War, and this is *the* critical event in his political life.

When the war in Spain broke out in 1936, Orwell quickly became a partisan of the Republican government against which General Francisco Franco (1892-1975) and his nationalist followers had revolted. Early in 1937 he went to Spain with his wife Eileen, intending to write freelance journalism about the war, but upon arriving in Barcelona he enlisted in one of the militia units organized by the P.O.U.M., a coalition of socialist (including Trotskyist) and anarchist parties. He later wrote in *Homage to Catalonia*:

It was the first time I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags or with the red and black flag of the Anarchists; every wall was scrawled with the hammer and sickle and the initials of the revolutionary parties; almost every church had been gutted and its images burnt. Churches here and there were being systematically demolished by gangs of workmen. (*Homage 4*)<sup>6</sup>

After another two-hundred words on the new democratic spirit—tipping was forbidden, no one said "senor" or "don" anymore—he concludes: "There was much in it that I did not understand, and in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for." (*Homage 5*)

*Homage to Catalonia* has become perhaps the most celebrated work of non-fiction about that war. It tells of his enlistment and training early in 1937, the long wait before he saw any fighting, his friendships with Spanish militiamen, and finally the Communist attempt to suppress the P.O.U.M. (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*, the United Marxist Workers' Party) in Barcelona in May. Orwell was shot in the throat during a skirmish in the highlands of Catalonia, and after his recuperation, the final Communist purge began of the anarchist and the socialist organizations that had formed his militia unit. He went into hid-

ing and eventually escaped from Spain, with his wife's help, literally one step ahead of a firing squad, a fugitive from the side he had come to defend. The book is concerned with these events and with how they were portrayed in the British press at the time of the Barcelona uprising and afterward.

At one point he comments that every church he had seen was destroyed, but this does not puzzle him. (*Homage* 52) Nor does the fate of the nuns or the priests who lived and worked in them concern him, except to notice that the hospital where he was treated for his throat wound had very poor nursing, since most Spanish nurses were nuns and none were available, *i.e.*, they had been killed or had fled. (*Homage* 190) In fact the church is so far removed from his ordinary range of interests that it seems somehow unfair to upbraid his insensitivity. Yet how do we assess the following statement?

To the Spanish people, at any rate in Catalonia and Aragon, the Church was a racket pure and simple. And possibly Christian belief was replaced to some extent by Anarchism, whose influence is widely spread and which undoubtedly has a religious tinge. (*Homage* 81)

This is a simple analysis, to say the least, explaining the crushing of one of the most Spanish of institutions, the Catholic Church. The Spanish people thought the Church was a racket—Orwell almost sounds like a Waugh character sounding off at a cocktail party. How an otherwise honest, intelligent man can bring himself to believe this kind of thing is a mystery. It no doubt suited what he wanted to believe about events in Spain, but certainly no one forced him to write those sentences, which could not benefit him in any discernible way. Yet amid the self-deception there is Orwellian comedy at times, the matter-of-fact tone of his that no one can match: “We always had special orders to report the ringing of church

bells. It seemed that the Fascists always heard mass before going into action.” (*Homage* 73)

Orwell is universally credited for his honesty in reporting events, especially because he wrote about the suppression of the P.O.U.M. by the Communists, both in the street fighting in the spring of 1937 and in the purge later that summer, while others on the left in Europe and around the world ignored what was happening. Yet, it might easily seem, from a conservative or a Catholic perspective, the story of one group of radicals butchering another, with Orwell watching the end of a process that had begun months before with the news of Franco's revolt. “Churches were wrecked and the priests driven out or killed,” he says in another place, because they were perceived as pro-Franco. Why should not the same process be used, when political rivals on the left were found to be vulnerable, that had been used to crush the country's most enduring institution? (*Homage* 49)

Orwell's other important work about that period is “Looking Back On The Spanish War,” a long essay composed in 1943, and a much less political piece than *Homage to Catalonia*, at once more impressionistic and even lyrical. The Church is largely unmentioned, except for another Orwellian list in that unmistakable voice: those who hated the Spanish Republic and were responsible for its downfall, “millionaires, dukes, cardinals, play-boys, Blimps....” (2: 262) Yet, it is a moving piece, in Orwell's distinct voice, as in the list just quoted, and its length and skillful digressions and wonderful evocation of a time and place make it almost a companion piece to “Inside the Whale,” for it is a similar mix of literary and political reflection and vivid memories.

### III

By the early years of World War II, Orwell's opinion of Catholics seemed established.

It reached its harshest perhaps in 1941, when the threat of a German invasion had passed and America and Russia were now on England's side. During the war he wrote a "London Letter" for *Partisan Review*, then one of the best-known literary journals in America, and in the November-December 1941 issue he outlined the critical segments of the British public to watch for changes in political opinion. He broke them down under headings that include "the rich," "the working class," "the communists," and "the Catholics." Why a special category for Catholics? "I suppose I need not repeat the history of their pro-fascist activities in the past. *Since the outbreak of war they have dared not be openly pro-Hitler* [my italics], but have done their propaganda indirectly by fulsome praise of Pétain and Franco." (2: 149) He names Ronald Knox and Arnold Lunn as examples. Finally he says, "They are the only really conscious, logical, intelligent enemies that democracy has got in England, and it is a mistake to despise them."

If Ronald Knox ever wrote a line in favor of Hitler or Nazism or German militarism no one has ever discovered it. Virtually all of his close friends were killed in the First World War, no great cause for German sympathy; the Second World War started with Hitler and Stalin on the same side, an alliance that startled everyone except conservatives like Knox who despised power politics and saw little to distinguish between Nazism and Communism. He was certainly pro-Franco, but when we consider his occupation as a Catholic priest, this is understandable, to say the least; and when we think of Franco's persistent neutrality in the war, not even something to be excused. Most importantly, he was under the influence of two older writers, both Catholics, who attacked German militarism all their lives, Chesterton and Belloc. And it is with these two men that Orwell finally confronts the contradictions built into his earlier position.

Whatever led Orwell to these conclusions, there are two things that led him away from them, eventually. First, there is what happened during the war, as I have mentioned. Franco did not enter it on Hitler's side. English Catholics, like Waugh and Greene and the very old Belloc, did not form a fifth column; they went into the army or worked for the foreign office or lived in retirement, respectively. They had only defended Franco. They despised Stalin and Hitler, and Orwell knew this. More importantly, some right-wingers had seen the Hitler-Stalin pact coming, and Orwell finally admits this in an important essay at the end of the war.

In "Notes On Nationalism," published in *Polemic* in 1945, Orwell seems to maintain his old critique of the Church and the right wing, but in reality he has made enormous adjustments to it. First, he acknowledges in a footnote that the only writers in the late 1930s to see that a Nazi-Communist pact was coming were conservatives. Orwell had enormous admiration for political acumen, and felt the need to point out that "A few writers of conservative tendency, such as Peter Drucker, foretold an agreement between Germany and Russia," although they thought it would be permanent. "*No Marxist or other left-wing writer, of whatever colour, came anywhere near foretelling the Pact.*" [my italics]. (3: 364) It may be a footnote, but it is a remarkable statement for Orwell.

Second, Orwell now talks of "Political Catholicism," as he draws up an outline of nationalist tendencies. He classes it as a sub-heading under "Nationalism" along with "Zionism," "Anti-Semitism," "Communism"—all of which he believes attract adherents who support them. After several hundred words he writes about Chesterton:

Ten or twenty years ago, the form of nationalism most closely corresponding to Communism today was political Catholicism. Its most outstanding proponent—although he

was perhaps an extreme example rather than a typical one—was G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton was a writer of considerable talent who chose to suppress both his sensibilities and his intellectual honesty in the cause of Roman Catholic propaganda ....Every book that he wrote, every paragraph, every sentence, every incident in every story, every scrap of dialogue, had to demonstrate beyond possibility of mistake the superiority of the Catholic over the Protestant or the Pagan. But Chesterton was not content to think of this superiority as merely intellectual or spiritual: it had to be translated into terms of national prestige and military power, which entailed an ignorant idealisation of the Latin countries, especially France. (3: 365-6)

Catholicism is now prefaced with the word “political,” presumably because “Catholicism” gives too wide a scope. And Orwell has gone back to a writer whose heyday was earlier. Chesterton was dead several years by then, but at least Orwell is dealing with a real Catholic convert and not a mere sympathizer. He is not described as one of “the most intelligent enemies democracy has in this country,” nor as part of the fifth column he warned about in the middle of the war. No more is heard of them.

It is also interesting that Orwell describes Chesterton, the chief Catholic apologist of the previous quarter century, in terms almost identical to the way he described himself in “Why I Write”:

Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic socialism, as I understand it....It is simply a question of which side one takes and what approach one follows. (1: 5-6)

He is angry, almost frustrated in the tone he uses about Chesterton; but he is writing about him, and not the pseudo-school of Catholic aesthetes he had set up before and that had fallen away with the passing of events. Chesterton, Belloc, and Ronald Knox were Francophiles, life-

long opponents of German militarism, with Chesterton and Belloc making a few pro-Mussolini remarks many years before the war. Chesterton’s younger brother, Belloc’s oldest son, and almost all of Knox’s close friends died in the First World War; Belloc’s youngest died in the Second.<sup>7</sup> They were not known as reactionaries—Chesterton and Belloc both supported the General Strike of 1926, for instance—and they were far more influential, in the long run, than Wyndham Lewis or J.B. Morton, the younger Catholic newspaper columnists at whom Orwell was always taking a poke.<sup>8</sup>

One advantage of “Catholic” as a political label is that “conservative” did not fit either Chesterton or Belloc to someone of Orwell’s generation. From the standpoint of the early twenty-first century they are certainly conservatives, indeed among the most important in the unfolding of the twentieth century; yet to most it is no surprise that they had nothing but contempt for Hitler and Stalin, and were not at pains to distinguish between them. Orwell finally paid brief tribute to them in one of his very last important political essays, a review of James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution*, in which he seems to lay to rest his old Catholic bogeyman once and for all.

#### IV

“James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution” is Orwell’s final formation, the reconciliation, of his ideas on totalitarian government. In it we see the theory behind *Animal Farm* and *1984*, the essential points of totalitarianism described: the importance of omnipresent government; of a bureaucratic class interested in perpetuating it; of the end of nations as political units; and of an amoral ideology, and indeed with amorality as the basis of government.<sup>9</sup> By way of discussing these, Orwell describes again the Hitler–Stalin alliance of 1939, which shocked ide-

logues around the world, and the similarities between Communism and Fascism. He also has an interesting point to make about Belloc's *The Servile State* (1912), an influential short book on the rise of modern slave states. After criticizing the style in which it is written, Orwell says: "Still, it does foretell with remarkable insight the kind of things that have been happening since about 1930 onwards. Chesterton, in a less methodical way, predicted the disappearance of democracy and private property, and the rise of a slave state which might be called either capitalist or Communist." (4:162-63) He had made a similar remark about *The Servile State* about a year before in "Notes on the Way," a short essay that appeared in *Time and Tide*, using the phrase "astonishing accuracy." (2:16) Why should a cheerful, extremely intelligent, successful writer like Belloc have written a non-fiction work predicting the rise of slave states in the near future? Not a fictional dystopia like Jack London or Huxley or Orwell himself imagined, but a closely argued tract, drawing on the history of slavery in the ancient world and finding comparisons with the modern state. It was astonishing, considering what had happened in the years after 1912, and Orwell admitted this. Other writers are named in "James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution" as creators of dystopias, such as London, Wells, Zamyatin, and Huxley, but they are not credited with wisdom as Shaw's "Chesterbelloc" is in the sentence above.

This essay has been judged, quite accurately, as a key place in Orwell's thinking. Burnham's book had attracted attention in America and in England for several convincing assertions, among them, that the totalitarian future would not be communist or fascist, but would borrow features of both; and that a bureaucratic class of managers would control it. It set the tone for the political arguments of the late 1940s, when fascism seemed all

but dead, communism triumphant, no longer an ally of the West, but a dangerous, international enemy.<sup>10</sup>

Orwell's essay, both appreciating and attacking *The Managerial Revolution*, is several thousand words long (it appeared in the British journal *Polemic* in 1946) and the old religious/ideological axis has dimmed to a pale shade of its original vigor. Power politics became truly comprehensible to Orwell as World War II ended, and the old nineteenth century Whig model, with the Catholic Church on the negative side of the balance sheet, was gone forever, as the Soviet (and later, Chinese) power bloc emerging from the rubble at the war's end made it obvious that a new concept of power was in force. Even the Atlantic Alliance seemed to fit the new model of global bureaucrats creating a massive multinational power bloc in a flexible post-war order in which ideology was no more than a mask for power politics. All of the raiders, bandits, chiefs, princes, and commissars of history evolved into an international species of technicians, political leaders, and propagandists whom Burnham very cleverly labelled "managers."

Burnham witnessed the 1930s and 1940s as Orwell had, but from the perspective, Orwell claimed, of an American power-worshipper. In *The Managerial Revolution* he developed a theory of modern post-war power, with capitalism and socialism, communism and fascism finally collapsing into a system of contending global tyrannies led by the modern, efficient experts mentioned above: "millionaires, dukes, cardinals, playboys, Blimps" were history. So also were unions, red militias, and literary politics. Those things did not disappear, but seemed dwarfed into irrelevance by Burnham's apparently accurate prediction of two or three large blocs of nations contending for power in an endless propaganda war backed up by military power unimagined before. Burnham explained the way things

seemed to be heading and gave it a theoretical backbone, managerialism.

Like many theoretical experts, however, Burnham made a number of mistakes in the details. He continued to predict a Nazi victory well after most others saw that Germany was defeated; and in coming to the realization that Russia would win in the east, he never missed a beat in his tone of admiration for the winning side. He simply switched sides, from the safety of America. Still, Orwell felt he had connected with a theory of the emerging world that worked. He quotes long passages from Burnham to give the feel and sense of his thinking, and in these we see a sort of twisted version of Orwell's own vision of the future. It is *1984* described without any fear or even displeasure. To Orwell, Burnham was a new kind of intellectual, one who no longer lied about dictatorships or rationalized their evil deeds. Rather, he applauded them as the necessary tools of the new managers of society who could only do what human history demanded of them: lead the earth's ignorant millions by fraud and violence until all power is concentrated in the hands of the world's emerging oligarchies.

Orwell's view of international politics did not develop much after this time. His critique of Burnham is his last word on power politics and total government, and there is no room in it for the old critique of the Church. The real enemies of freedom had emerged after the war, or at least some of them, with a plausible theoretician, and this is before the Chinese communists had come to power.

A state of affairs had emerged beyond anything the liberal/radical school had ever dreamed of; one sentence in the essay suggests a political type Orwell has not mentioned before: "English writers who consider communism and fascism to be *the same thing* invariably hold that both are monstrous evils...." (4:175) He goes on to contrast them to those who believe in one or the other, in his continu-

ing attempt at a mental map of the English intelligentsia. But he has used a phrase and suggested a category of person he has not noted before: those who think they are the same thing. He italicized three words in the quote for some reason—"the same thing"—yet he never expanded on this category or type. Who were they? "Political conservatives"? "Political Catholics"? "Neo-Tories," or any other of the groups he was always labeling? He has acknowledged a new species of political creature but not labeled it.

He probably only half-accepted the existence of conservative thinkers who found both Fascism and Communism repellent. He himself found them equally so, and had taken enormous personal risks by saying so, but came to realize that he had allies with whom he did not feel comfortable. He also was moving toward the position that they were *the same thing*, not only that both are evil political systems, but also that they were in essence the same, arising in Europe at the same time, making the same appeals, using the same tactics, hating the other system, competing for the same uprooted intellectual supporters, and with the same results, the horrors of World War II, which was started when they formed an alliance in 1939.

There were plenty of other leftists who hated Stalin, or Stalinism, or even the Soviet Union, but that is not the same thing, and Orwell sees the distinction. The conservative writers and politicians who despised both Stalin and Hitler as essentially the same were, in effect, right for the wrong reasons. Their Catholicism or old-fashioned common sense and decency should have obscured political reality, or narrowed it, but instead, for some reason, they got it all right while the Left did not. Had Orwell known of Pope Pius XI's encyclical *On the Church and the German Reich* (1936), in which the race-religion of Nazism is denounced as a revival of "an aggressive paganism," he

might have found this an easier discovery.<sup>11</sup> He certainly knew of Catholic hostility to Communism, but the logic of a fascist-communist synthesis as suggested by some conservative thinkers had eluded him, until it happened, because of Catholic sympathy for Franco, a fact that clouded his judgment for years. He had nearly been killed fighting Franco, and his hatred of the Nationalist regime never abated.

Still, Orwell had at last shaken off the old Puritan attitude toward the Church. I am not talking here about puritanism in the debased modern sense, as a term of reproach to be thrown at someone with an overly scrupulous sense of public decency. I mean the early modern form of Protestantism that remains alive as a political theory long after most of its religion has faded. The Puritans abandoned the sacraments and hierarchy of the Catholic Church and replaced them with personal judgment in religious matters, with heavy emphasis on reading the Bible, and with preaching as the center of public worship; in general it was a radically simplified view of religion. Since Catholicism was the enemy of all this, it was the opponent of political freedom.

This approach, reduced to the last phrase above, survived well past the death of Puritan religion because it was simple and useful; a widespread example is the popular theory that puritanism was responsible for the spread of literacy. The reasoning is simple: in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Bible was no longer only something one listened to in church in Latin. Now the ordinary man could read the Bible himself, and was encouraged to do so, as it was available in the vernacular ever since the invention of the printing press and the revolt against Catholic Rome. Hence, more people learned to read.

Intellectuals who would not go near the teaching of Calvin or John Knox in ordinary circumstances find this flexible

political and social model quite useful in an all-purpose way, and have for decades. It keeps things simple, providing a plausible explanation and a large visible enemy, Catholicism. I am not going to review this well-established theme of liberal intellectual history, except to say that Orwell accepted it until the end of World War II, when the old model collapsed, as the world seemed to have done, and some basic ideas from Belloc and Chesterton helped to explain the rubble.

## V

In July 1948 Orwell reviewed Graham Greene's novel *The Heart of the Matter* for *The New Yorker*. The war was over, it was Greene's first novel since the early 1940s, and Orwell was now the famous author of *Animal Farm*. The review opens with this statement:

A fairly large proportion of the distinguished novels of the last few decades have been written by Catholics and have been described as Catholic novels. One reason for this is that the conflict not only between this world and the next world but between sanctity and goodness is a fruitful theme of which the ordinary, unbelieving writer cannot make use. (4:439)

One can see the change that has reached to Orwell's literary criticism. Actually, the review is a well-written attack on *The Heart of the Matter's* plot, in which a devout and practicing Catholic stumbles into a series of acts normally unthinkable to him, including deception and adultery, for extremely unlikely reasons; and eventually he commits suicide for an unlikely reason, hoping to cover it up and accepting eternal damnation, not out of fear for what he may face in this life, but because he thinks it the right thing to do under the circumstances. Even allowing for the stress of the situation—Scobie, the protagonist, is a police officer in an unnamed British colony in West Africa—

the plot seems unconvincing to Orwell, making as it does an apparent justification of suicide and damnation from an orthodox Catholic position.

Orwell relates this to Baudelaire and the nineteenth-century satanic school, which went back at least to Byron and in some sense even to Blake, and seemed to exalt the idea of damnation as against a tame bourgeois heaven. He points out that this is probably a sign of weakening religious faith in a culture, for in an age of faith, hell is taken far too seriously to be ridiculed. He also refers to Péguy and Bloy and discusses the problems and the advantages of the Catholic perspective. He points out the problem that persists in Greene's novels of unlikely characters who are *practicing* Catholics, like Pinky in *Brighton Rock*, and he carefully distinguishes Catholic orthodoxy from the vague justifications that Greene seems to promote, as when a priest defends Scobie's suicide.

The book ranks very high with admirers of Greene's work, but some have come to view his plots just as Orwell did; and the long life that Greene spent taking stranger, and more left-wing political positions, and giving photo-ops to Central American dictators, have justified their scepticism. Yet, there is no mention of politics in the review, except to note the absence of politics from the novel.

It is surprising to see Orwell's handling of the question of salvation and an after-life in such a thoughtful manner, but he was moving toward a position that was more realistic about the claims of the Church. The War was over, and he was not writing for *Polemic* or *Partisan Review* or *Horizon*, but for *The New Yorker*. For whatever reason, this review, the last important piece he published with any reference to the Church before his death, a little over a year later, is attuned to Catholicism as a moral agency and not as a worldwide organization competing with the Communist Party.

## VI

Orwell gave a radio talk in 1943 about Gerard Manley Hopkins. He was working for the BBC at the time and produced regular programs about literary topics that were broadcast in India. First he read the sonnet "Felix Randall," then gave a short analysis of the poem, which is about a blacksmith, or "farrier," who, as the narrator learns, has just died. Orwell gives a thoughtful description of the circumstances of the poem, its archaic quality, concerned as it is with a disappearing occupation. He regards Hopkins as a poet of the first rank, acknowledges that he was a Catholic priest, and establishes an impartial mood about the value of the poem. His brief analysis of Hopkins's style, of his use of words, is among the best I know.<sup>12</sup>

Yet he does not allow the style to override the meaning of the poetry. He talks about Hopkins's role as a priest who gives the last sacrament to Felix Randall, and about the Christian belief in an afterlife, and the poet's attitude toward death. It is a remarkable short essay, vibrant with Orwell's voice, which can be comic, observant, even melancholy. The piece has an ironic reason for existing. The broadcasts to India were the only government propaganda that he ever wrote. Yet he simply says what he thinks of the poem:

It is the poem, first of all, of a Catholic, and secondly of a man living at a particular moment of time, the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the old English agricultural way of life—the old Saxon village community—was finally passing away. The whole feeling of the poem is Christian....The Christian attitude towards death is not that it is something to be welcomed, or that it is to something to be met with stoical indifference, or that it is to be avoided as long as possible; but that it is something profoundly tragic that has to be gone through with. (2: 132-33)

The talk was broadcast in May 1941 and later published in *The Listener*. It was written back in Orwell's militant anti-Catholic period, but he never allows those feelings to corrupt his literary criticism. Rather, the poem allows him to lower his political lens for a moment and to write about a Catholic subject as a philosophical idea underlying a literary creation. A large anthology of first-rate essays by him of this kind could be gathered, including his short piece on nineteenth-century American literature, "Riding Down from Bangor," or "Thoughts on the Common Toad," or his essay about Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, which reveal a more easygoing approach to literary subjects because they are not overshadowed by modern politics. But Orwell was a political man. He felt strongly that it was modern man's duty to look at the world around him and think about it in political terms. His eye was rarely off politics.

This was true especially when he wrote about language. How many college teachers of composition have ever challenged this sentence in "Politics and the English Language," published in 1946: "Statements like *Marshall Pétain was a true patriot*, *The Soviet Press is the freest in the world*, *The Catholic Church is opposed to persecution*, are almost always made with intent to deceive." (4: 133) Is a colleague or friend who makes such a claim about the Church not only wrong but also attempting to deceive one? And here I must make a bit of a retraction. The Church no longer fit comfortably into Orwell's world view after the War, but if it came to his notice outside of literary criticism, he still had an opinion about it.

In an essay "The Prevention Of Literature," also published in *Polemic* in 1946, he quotes an old Puritan hymn:

Dare to Be a Daniel,  
Dare to stand alone;  
Dare to have a purpose firm,  
Dare to make it known.

In one of his great punch lines, he says: "To bring this hymn up to date one would have to add a 'Don't' at the beginning of each line." He is talking about the timidity of modern writers in relatively safe circumstances who are quiet about political dishonesty. Later on he says: "The Catholic and the Communist are alike in assuming that an opponent cannot be both honest and intelligent." He drops Catholic after this sentence and for the rest of a long paragraph goes after Communist thought control. He does the same at the start of the next paragraph: "Fifteen years ago, when one defended the freedom of the intellect, one had to defend it against Conservatives, against Catholics...." (4: 61-62) The rest of the long paragraph is about the Soviet tyranny and myth, as it should be, in any essay about modern tyranny. But the Catholic refrain is repeated.

## VII

Orwell died in 1950 at the age of forty-six. He was buried in an Anglican funeral service, arranged by Malcolm Muggeridge and Anthony Powell, at his own request. Would he have changed his views about Catholicism had he lived longer? Most likely. He was an essayist and political thinker of great originality. If he was a social democrat in ordinary times, and a revolutionary leftist in critical ones, he was also an independent thinker free of the restraints that guide ordinary political writers and thinkers. It is extremely unlikely that he would have been pulled into the swamp of political correctness that has benighted many secular academics discussing the Church in the late twentieth century.

Here I have not discussed the reaction of Catholic writers to Orwell, a very interesting topic that at least one scholar, John Rodden, has examined in some detail. I have also not commented on Orwell's attitude toward the family, which coin-

cides with Catholic teaching in some surprising ways, as George Woodcock acknowledged in an important early study.<sup>13</sup> Nor have I discussed his novels, for the issue of the Church and politics did not present itself to him as a useful one in fiction, although there are occasional references to Catholicism in his early novels. I believe that his essays, not his

fiction, contain his best writing, although two of his novels, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, are crucial political works in Western intellectual history; and if they have rough edges, their content and style sometimes achieve poetic force in a single sentence, as in the opening of *1984*: "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen."<sup>14</sup>

1. John Rodden, "Orwell on Religion: The Catholic and Jewish Questions," *College Literature* 11 (1984), 44-58, and "George Orwell and British Catholicism," *Renascence* 41 (1989), 143-168. Leroy Spiller, "George Orwell and British Catholicism," *Logos* 6 (2003), 150-163. This essay comes closest to a full analysis of the topic, but as a starting point, with particular emphasis on Orwell's interest in Anglicanism in his late twenties. 2. Rodden is quite accurate in his emphasis on this point. "It is startling to see, piecing together scattered journalistic references, how often the lines of Orwell's thought on Catholicism, Communism and anti-Semitism ran on parallel tracks." *Ibid.*, 46. 3. Although all of Orwell's numerous biographers and critics (the number of the former is remarkable) comment on his attitude toward the Church, it is almost always in a perfunctory manner, despite his repeated references to Catholicism in a controversial sense. (Even an early Catholic critic such as Christopher Hollis is more interested in the attitude of Catholics toward Orwell, rather than his opinions of the Church, for which excuses are made.) This is probably because their reading detects a consistent anti-Catholic current in his thought, with no variation to it, which they take for granted; this is incorrect, as I shall establish. For an example of an otherwise excellent book that follows this path, see Michael Shelden, *Orwell: The Authorized Biography* (New York, 1991) in which the subject is barely mentioned. (See Lawrence Dugan, "A Sense of the Whole," *Modern Age*, Volume 35, Number 1 [Fall 1992], 79-82, for a review of Shelden.) In the same way Raymond Williams, in *George Orwell* (New York, 1971), and Ian Slater, in *The Road to Airstrip One* (New York, 1985), pay little or no attention to the subject, although the latter discusses in some detail the relation of the Church to Spanish politics in the 1930s. If most seem to ignore his attitude toward Catholicism, at least one critic agrees strongly with its harshest elements. Christopher Hitchens, in *Why Orwell Matters* (New York, 2002), 7-8 says: "His one especial insight [apropos the Church and politics] was to notice the special collusion of the Roman Catholic Church

and of Catholic intellectuals with this saturnalia of wickedness and stupidity; he alludes to it again and again." Although this is an inaccurate assessment of Catholic writers and thinkers of the period, Hitchens is closer to a sound evaluation of Orwell's beliefs than those who take his anti-Catholicism for granted or ignore it. He did believe in the suggested collusion by British Catholics, but, as I shall show, he came to realize it was minimal, far outweighed by anti-German and anti-totalitarian sentiment amongst Catholics, and their behavior during the war. 4. "Inside the Whale" was first published in a collection of essays by that title in London by Victor Gollancz in 1940 and reprinted in *Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, 4 vol. (New York, 1968), Volume 1, 493-527. All quotations and references from Orwell's essays, letters and shorter works are from this edition and are shown by volume and page number in the text. 5. Orwell's first publication in English appeared in *GK's Weekly*, Chesterton's political magazine. It is titled "A Farthing Newspaper" and is about a French right-wing daily paper. It is available in CEJL 1, 12-15. I had not noticed this after years of reading that edition of Orwell and am indebted to D.J. Taylor for pointing it out in *Orwell: The Life* (New York, 2003), 95. Lionel Trilling noticed a similarity of interests between Chesterton and Orwell in his introduction to *Homage to Catalonia* (1938; New York, 1953); and an Orwell essay like "The Moon Under Water," about an imaginary pub, is as Chestertonian as anything by GKC himself. Many critics have speculated on the temperamental similarity between the two writers, since both were men of letters in the traditional sense, with a great attachment to popular culture; more intellectual affinities have also been suggested. See Louis Burkhardt, "G. K. Chesterton and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," in *George Orwell*, ed. T. Courtney Wemyss and Alexei Ugrinsky (Westport, Conn., 1987), 5-10 for an excellent comparison of *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and *1984*, starting from numerous similarities of detail between Chesterton's earlier novel (1912) and *1984*, and working outward to the authors' sharply con-

trasting philosophies. Burckhardt underestimates Orwell's capacity to stomach violence as a necessary political tool. Otherwise this short paper establishes an extremely useful link between the two. **6.** George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (1940; New York, 1952). Lionel Trilling's introduction to this edition, mentioned above, represents the mainstream liberal approach to the book. **7.** A. N. Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc* (London, 1984), 294-297. **8.** Margaret Canovan, G. K. Chesterton: *Radical Populist* (New York, 1977), 93-94. Evelyn Waugh, *Mon-signor Ronald Knox* (Boston, 1959), 129-161. Waugh visited Orwell in the hospital in 1948 and later wrote him a letter about the absence of religion from 1984. See *Collected Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Mark Amory (New Haven, 1980), 302. I had not remembered this letter and learned of it in a short, interesting article by Alvaro de Silva, "Orwell and Religion," *Chronicles* 10 (December 1986), 18-19. **9.** James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (1938; Bloomington, Ind., 1966). See R. B. Reaves, "Orwell's 'Second Thoughts on James Burnham' and 1984," *College Literature* 11 (1984), 12-21. This is a very interesting discussion of the process of Winston Smith's intellectual challenge to the state's tyranny by way of showing that Burnham's thinking is the back-drop for much of Orwell's Oceania. Mario Varricchio also comments on the influence of Burnham on Orwell's novel in "Power of Images/Images of Power in *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," *Utopian Studies* 10 (1999), 98-114. **10.** *Ibid.*, 13-14. **11.**

Pius XI, *On the Church and the German Reich*, 1937, 3. **12.** According to Jeffrey Meyers, Orwell considered it "the best short poem in the English Language" (*Observer*, Nov. 12, 1944) and used to recite it to himself while on sentry duty in Spain. *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation* (New York, 2000) 147. **13.** George Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell* (1966; New York, 1984). Woodcock was an anarchist in the 1940s who argued with Orwell in the pages of *Partisan Review*. He writes: "At a time when apologies for the family were almost entirely the work of Catholic writers, Orwell's attitude was, here again, exceptional for a left-wing intellectual, but there is no doubt of the genuineness of his feeling that anything which threatened the family or interfered with the natural process of increase was an almost blasphemous attack on life itself." (263) **14.** The novelist Dan Jacobson has written about Orwell's shortcomings as a novelist: "Strangely, however, the mimetic and dramatic qualities missing from the earlier novels appeared readily enough whenever he abandoned the illusory freedom of fiction and turned directly to his own experience—to recollection, reflection, assertion, the giving of evidence in a manner that might be expected from an ideally watchful and intelligent ex-policeman." "The Invention of Orwell," a review of *George Orwell: The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Davison, *Times Literary Supplement*, August 21, 1998, 3.