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THE FAITH OF MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE

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THE FAITH OF MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE

What has made Malcolm Muggeridge?
What has turned him from the scourge
of the BBC and all other traditions into
a thoroughly orthodox believer in Jesus
Christ?

One of the turning points was probably
during the World War II when, alone in
Mozambique as a British Secret Service
agent, he felt utterly desolate. In his
own words: "Alone in the universe, in
eternity, with no glimmer of light in the
prevailing blackness; no human voice
could I hope to hear, or human heart I
could hope to reach; no God to whom I
could turn, or Saviour to take my hand."

This happened in his pre-Christian
phase, and yet you have to ask, reading
his biography "Chronicles of Wasted
Time", whether he was ever really
"pre-Christian". His entire life from the
beginning reflected a consciousness of a
God who was out there and who was
somehow reachable.

How to reach that God did not come to
Muggeridge until very late in his life,
but he spent sixty years groping in that
direction.

The end of that lonely moment, by the
way, was that he determined to drown
himself, and he actually swam at night
right out into the harbour of Lourenco

Marques when "suddenly, without
thinking or deciding, I started
swimming back to shore."

"There followed," he says in volume 2 of
his biography, subtitled "The Infernal
Grove", an overwhelming joy such as I
had never experienced before; an
ecstasy.

In some mysterious way it became clear
to me that there was no darkness, only
the possibility of losing sight of a light
which shone eternally; that our clumsy
appetites are no more than the blind
reaching of a newly born child after the
teat through which to suck the milk of
life; that our sufferings, our afflictions,
are part of a drama — an essential,
even an ecstatic part — endlessly
revolving around the two great
propositions of good and evil, light and
darkness."

He got back to shore, in due course,
rejoicing at life again and "breathing in
the grey dawn, greedily."

It is customary to go back to ancestry
and childhood to find out how the
jigsaw of a person's character was
formed.

His life began in 1903 in a
semi-detached house in Croydon
(England), a suburb that still looked
like a village. He was one of five sons,
all brought up on socialism as their
theology. His strongest childhood
memory is waiting for his father to
come home at Croydon railway station
and running forward to meet him.

His father's library was large, and from the very earliest days Malcolm knew that words were to be his life interest. "There was nothing else I ever wanted to do except use them! no other accomplishment or achievement I ever had the slightest regard for, or desire to emulate. I have always loved words, and still love them, for their own sake. For the power and beauty of them; for the wonderful things that can be done with them."

That being the case, he spent a lifetime as a journalist, script writer, editor of "Punch", leader writer for "The Guardian" and later television interviewer and commentator.

At age seventy, he could confess: "Surveying now this monstrous Niagara of words so urgently called for and delivered, I confess they signify to me a lost life. Possibilities envisaged but never realised. A light glimpsed, only to disappear . . ."

His father was an old-time socialist, and Malcolm loyally supported his street meetings. Ultimately his father became a Labour Member of Parliament, and young Malcolm came to meet Ramsay Macdonald and other great notables.

He has some devastating things to say about "tame clergymen" who followed the socialist camp and even about bishops. "The episcopal contingent in the House of Lords, if they did not line up with the agnostics and atheists in matters like divorce and the legislation

of homosexuality, came in time to accept these 'reforms' as permissible, even desirable.

"One ought not to have been surprised. After all, only a few centuries after Christ had been crowned with a crown of thorns his alleged representative on earth was being crowned with a gold one."

Malcolm went to a local elementary school and then on to Selwyn College to read a Natural Science tripos. He scraped his Cambridge degree, with little interest in the study or his fellow-undergraduates. To Malcolm, Cambridge was "a place of infinite tedium, of afternoon walks in a damp, misty countryside; of idle days, and foolish vanities, and spurious enthusiasms."

The last year, however, was different. He spent it at Oratory House, headquarters of an Anglican religious order, the Oratory of the Good Shepherd, and there established a lifetime friendship with Alec Vidler and a lifetime love-hate relationship with the Church of England.

It is at this period that Muggerridge seems to have caught onto a basically Christian attitude to mankind, although his personal expression of it is often cynical. He became certain that "everything human beings tried to achieve was inadequate to the point of being farcical, mortality itself is a kind of gargoyle joke, and yet every moment

of every day is full of enchantment and infinitely precious."

He grasped, though it was not all clear to him as a young man, that there was a vast chasm between God's radiating love and human experience, and yet over the chasm was "a cable-bridge, frail, swaying, but passable. And this bridge, this reconciliation between the black despair of lying bound and gagged in the tiny dungeon of the ego, and soaring upwards into the white radiance of God's universal love — this bridge was the Incarnation, whose truth expresses that of the desperate need it meets. Because of our physical hunger we know that there is bread; because of our spiritual hunger we know there is Christ."

Muggeridge again and again displays a dismal view of human nature, somewhat in line with the Christian position. He is not just a sceptic about man's endless optimism about himself, he is the cynic par excellence.

On the eternal aptitude of man to fool himself, he points to the League of Nations in Geneva — where he served a short stint after working as a journalist in Moscow.

"Barely was the Palais des Nations completed and ready to be occupied than the Second World War was ready to begin. While Hitler's panzers were actually roaring into Poland from the west, and Stalin's divisions lumbering in to meet them from the east, the League was in session in its new

premises, discussing — the codification of level-crossing signs."

Nor did world leaders learn from this exercise in futility. "Another Tower of Babel, taller, more tower-like and more babulous, sprang up in Manhattan, to outdo the League many times over in the irrelevance of the proceedings, the ambiguity of its resolutions, and the confusion of its purposes. What will they be discussing there, I ask myself, when the guided missiles begin to fly?"

Muggeridge had two stints in India — one as a new graduate, teaching in a Christian college in the north; and the other, years later, as assistant editor of the Calcutta "Statesman". Both he regards as escapism from the realities of life and family responsibilities in England.

He recalls a delightful scene when, in a rather frail canoe, he was called upon to row a visiting English bishop, splendid in purple cassock, across the river to the college for an official visit. It was with difficulty that he restrained himself from deliberately tipping the canoe over — not to upset the bishop, but to see whether the purple would run!

In the second period, Muggeridge lived in the decaying years of the British raj in India, and sensed its fading glory. None of the British public servants at the time seemed to have the faintest inkling that within a few years it would be all gone . . . only to be replaced with a dark brown version of the same kind

of elaborate and inefficient Public Service.

Because his wife Kitty was from a British stalwart socialist family (the Webbs and Potters), Muggeridge for a time wrote on the staff of the London "Evening Standard" — a Beaverbrook paper — specialising in Labour Party leadership and their peccadilloes.

In these three years before the war broke out, Muggeridge and family lived at Whatlington, out in the country from London. "Despite financial anxieties and stringencies, they were the happiest I had known. Our children were beginning to emerge as separate people whom I could get to know; Kitty was well content, as she always is when they are near, and the arduous of house-keeping are heavy."

In this period he had several mystical experiences, which, he says, have continued since. The most dramatic of these was Kitty's serious illness which brought her to the operating table and the edge of death. She desperately needed a blood transfusion in the middle of the night, and Malcolm offered. "As my blood, systematically, to the pump's rhythm, pumped into Kitty's veins, bringing life visible to her face, my blood pouring into her to keep her alive, my life reinforcing hers, for the first time I truly understood what love meant."

He enlisted on the outbreak of war, and after "Dad's Army" kind of training,

became an officer in the Intelligence Corps. He felt more an anti-hero than a hero, and half the time suspected that he was running away from family responsibilities.

There were some ironic moments. "An officer came especially from the War Office to give us an account of the defences of Singapore. He unrolled a map of the Malay Peninsula, and waving his pointer about over it, demonstrated conclusively that no land force would ever be able to make its way through such jungle terrain. At that very moment, while he was speaking, the Japanese were moving swiftly down the Peninsula to Singapore, which fell a few days later."

He spent some of this time in training with novelist Graham Greene and other famous names. Though disclaiming any contribution to the war effort, either at home or abroad in France or Mozambique, Muggeridge nevertheless clearly enjoyed to the full both the excitements and the boredom of the six war years. There were quite a few authors in the Secret Service: "Writers of thrillers tend to gravitate to the Secret Service as surely as the mentally unstable become psychiatrists, or the impotent pornographers."

There are a million such remarks in the two volumes of his autobiography ("The Green Years" and "The Infernal Grove"). There are stories of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Kim Philby the master

double agent, Ander Gide, Harold Macmillan and Evelyn Waugh. It remains for the third volume (presumably, on the way) to tell in full detail how he turned from super-cynic into orthodox Christian; but the seeds of faith can be picked up by the wayside all through his life.

One of the most self-revealing moments is when he says: "The saddest thing to me, in looking back on my life, has been to recall, not so much the wickedness I have been involved in, the cruel and selfish and egotistical things I have done, the hurt I have inflicted on those I loved — although all that's painful enough. What hurts most is the preference I have so often shown for what is inferior, tenth-rate, when the first-rate was there for the having. Like a man who goes shopping, and comes back with cardboard shoes when he might have had leather, with dried fruit when he might have had fresh, with processed cheese when he might have had cheddar, with paper flowers when the primroses were out."

That's how Muggeridge is made.

His ultimate not-quite-complete conversion to orthodox Christianity is revealed in his latest book "Jesus, the man who lives" (Collins, London, 1975).

"Plenty of great teachers, mystics, martyrs and saints have made their appearance at different times in the world, and lived lives and spoken words

full of grace and truth, for which we have every reason to be grateful. Of none of them, however, has the claim been made, and accepted, that they were Incarnate God. In the case of Jesus alone the belief has persisted that when he came into the world God deigned to take on the likeness of a man in order that henceforth men might be encouraged to aspire after the likeness of God; reaching out from their mortality to His immortality, from their imperfection to His perfection . . .

"This is what the Incarnation, realised in the birth of Jesus, and in the drama of his ministry, death and Resurrection, was to signify. With it, Eternity steps into time, and Time loses itself in Eternity. Hence Jesus; in the eyes of God, a man, and in the eyes of men, God."

In a magnificent conclusion to that book, Muggeridge asserts: "Either Jesus never was or He still is. As a typical product of these confused times, with a sceptical mind and a sensual disposition, diffidently and unworthily, but with the utmost certainty, I assert that He still is. If the story of Jesus had ended on Golgotha, it would indeed be of a Man Who Died, but as two thousand years later the Man's promise that 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them', manifestly still holds, it is actually the story of a Man Who Lives."

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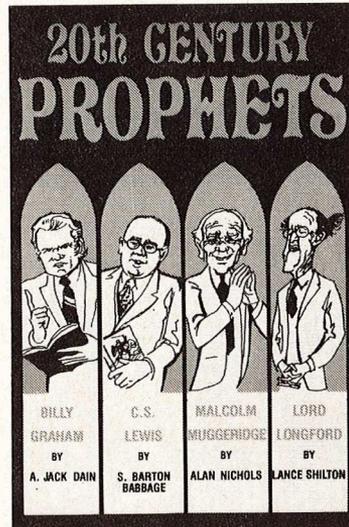
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