

Christianity and Europe

At the present time, there are many voices, not least eminent clerical voices, being raised to remind us, as Europeans, of the danger of forgetting our Christian roots. When one looks closely at the history of 'Europe', however, the 'roots of Europe' may not perhaps appear as specifically Christian at all, at any rate not specifically Christian in any simplistic sense. It is surely in no sense controversial to point out that one undeniable root of European culture owes nothing whatever, at least in its own origins, to Christianity. This is the root Europe inherited, like its very name, from ancient Greece. For Greece's principal contribution to the identity of what was to become Europe was well and truly formed before Christianity appeared on the scene. Indeed the Greek contribution to the future of Europe was formed in what would appear to have been total ignorance of the Jewish tradition from which Christianity eventually sprang. The same is true of the culture of ancient Rome, another essential ingredient of what later became 'Europe'.

As for the other main root of Europe, it was provided by the barbarian peoples who swept through the Roman Empire in late antiquity. In those chaotic days, Christianity was only a thin overlay, a veneer that never penetrated too deeply into the barbarian humus that made up and still makes up the body of Europe. Hence the permanent validity of such truisms as: 'Civilization is only ever skin-deep', or: 'Every generation is equidistant from barbarism'. Christianity undoubtedly provided some of the glue helping to hold the vast edifice of early barbarian Europe together, and, equally, it was the vehicle transporting some elements of classical culture to the barbarians of Europe, as Islam, in its turn, was later to do. And it is also of course true to say that Christianity has, over the centuries, inspired great civilizing achievements in the areas of art, architecture, music and literature, but in its name wars, inquisitions, crusades, pogroms, and countless acts of

indiscriminate brutality have also been perpetrated. The question may even be asked whether, in the course of its history, Christianity has done more harm than good. This question loses none of its power to embarrass, even if it is pointed out that the calculus needed to weigh up the pros and cons of the Christian religion's influence accurately will presumably never be agreed upon.

Could it, then, perhaps be something of a liability to have a religion as so substantial a part of one's roots? Would it not be safer for religion not to be too closely identified with the cultural process we call 'history'? Might Judaism's role in European history not offer a better ideal to aim at than the traditional role Christianity has played in the West? Judaism has acted as a moral and civilizing leaven in Europe, without being thoroughly absorbed by it, indeed being often rejected by Europe. So, might modern Europe's rejection of Christianity not be a blessing in disguise, for both Christianity—and Europe?