

The Search for Transcendence

by Rodney Nilsen

Conversion, by Malcolm Muggeridge; Collins.

THIS BOOK IS AN ACCOUNT of Malcolm Muggeridge's religious thinking and development, the tracing of a strong feeling of religious transcendence throughout his life, generally not acted upon until later life, and culminating in his decision to be received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1982. The narrative is episodic and told, for the most part, in the third person, presumably to emphasise that it is being written from the viewpoint of detachment, rather than the engagement with the world which has characterised, superficially at least, most of his life.

He propounds implicitly an almost mediaeval view of mankind's spiritual state — God is unknowable and nothing we can do can provide anything of worth; anything which smacks of merely human striving or endeavour is worse than useless, it is bad because it simply deludes. Any attempt to attain knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, is held as valueless, and only provides us with the illusion that we may actually know something.

There is a sense in which one can agree with thoughts such as these, by holding that knowledge may exist on many levels, not just one or even the two (the worldly and the unworldly) to which he restricts us, and that while human knowledge may have a certain validity, we should not accept it as final, or even as anything like the way things may be in some final sense.

Such qualified views as these have little place in the Muggeridgean world view, which generally is relentless in its concern to delineate, positively identify and throw out by root and branch any merely human attempts to ameliorate our state of ignorance. His view, that knowledge attains validity only by reference to truth, is one with

which one may agree, but it appears to refer to an exceptionally limited concept of what truth may be taken to be. By reacting in an extreme way to the idea that human knowledge and reason provide some guarantee of automatic improvement in our lot, Muggeridge becomes almost obscurantist, creating a barrier between himself and all but the closest of his kindred spirits.

Science comes in for cutting treatment, but indirectly and emotively rather than by a substantial discussion of issues. Thus, to demonstrate the futility of scientific enquiry, for him it suffices to argue that many have been led to delude themselves by responding to it as though it carried within itself the inevitability of human improvement. On this basis, to show that any form of belief or intellectual enquiry is wrong, it would be considered sufficient to observe that some have drawn unwarranted conclusions from it. If such an approach were to be considered reasonable, it is not only science which would be found wanting, but also his own present position, a point of which he is aware, but to which he responds inadequately.

Another matter which he raises is the proper attitude which should be taken towards governments and other human institutions. On this he writes:

So, there are not good times and bad, worthy rulers and unworthy: nor is there progress and recession... Envisaging the possibility of a good government is a dangerous illusion.

But even if we agree that good government is impossible, are we to conclude that all governments and societies are equally bad? If we are, how is this to be reconciled with his attack upon western liberals who are regarded as having undermined the certainties and Christian values upon which their civilisation has been built? The irony here is that by suggesting that no times or governments are good or bad, he embraces at one level the very relativism he resolutely condemns in the liberal mind.

The questions raised in this book are perennial, and one does not always need to agree with him to accept that the world needs people like Muggeridge who asserts with conviction, despite the reservations above, the existence and importance of transcendent truths. He heightens our awareness of the illusions into which we continually retreat and, in the age of relativism, he sometimes movingly expresses the inadequacies of our preparedness to acknowledge only what can immediately be seen and touched and felt.

Another of his strengths is that what he finds most disappointing and objectionable in our state is also what he finds most disappointing and objectionable in himself or, at least, in the self that he was. As the warmth and humanity of parts of this book show, his struggle to relinquish this former self may be succeeding, but the contradictions remain, intractable, and unresolved as ever.

Muggeridge has clearly had an immensely varied and interesting life. It is possible that this varied experience, together with his apparent need of a simple, unqualified level of transcendent affirmation, has accentuated the sense of world weariness apparent in much of his writing, and also of what seems to this reviewer to be an exaggerated perception of the futility of human existence.

One is left with the impression that the acceptance which he now feels he has attained is not so much based upon a sense of inner peace, as it is upon feelings of disillusion and futility which have left him nowhere else to go — the destination may be right, but the road wrong. Had he been able to take greater heed of the advice in the *Cloud of Unknowing*, a book he admires and which he quotes at length, that we should choose to be humbled by the unimaginable greatness and incomparable perfection of God rather than by our own imperfection, his strivings may have been more rewarding for us as well as for himself.

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