

Modern Fetishism, Aldous Huxley

MODERN FETISHISM

The cult of relics was first rationalized in terms of Christian theology by Cyril of Jerusalem. Unrationalized, it had, of course, existed since the time of the earliest martyrs. Indeed, it had existed long before the coming of Christianity. The Christian cult of relics is merely a special case of an immemorial and universal tendency to attribute mana to certain inanimate objects. The word fetish is derived from the Latin *factitius*, and 'was first used in connection with Africa by the Portuguese discoverers of the last half of the fifteenth century; relics of saints, rosaries and images were then abundant all over Europe and were regarded as possessing magical virtue; they were termed by the Portuguese *feitiços* (i.e. charms). Early voyagers to West Africa applied this term to the wooden figures, stones, etc., regarded as the temporary residence of gods or spirits, and to charms.' There were good anthropologists four hundred years before the invention of anthropology.

Relic worship was officially abolished by all the Protestant reformers. But just as it preceded, so too this cult has survived, Catholicism. Where such deep-rooted tendencies as fetishism are concerned, all that reformers can hope to abolish is the temporary form, not the abiding substance. Officially rejected by theologians, fetishism does not cease to exist. All that happens is that, from being public and respectable, its manifestations become secret, personal and slightly shameful. Defined in terms of sociology, magic is merely unauthorized, private religion. During the war there were probably more fetishes in use among Protestants and agnostics than in the whole of Africa and Melanesia, more even than in the Europe of the later Middle Ages, when churches numbered their relics by the thousand.

Nor, of course, has the cult of public fetishes and avowable relics altogether disappeared; it has merely moved away from the churches and established itself elsewhere. Thus, the flag has taken the place, as a cult object, of the cross; and in the icon corner one sees the image, not of a saint, but of the local dictator or a favourite political author. Even the ancient cult of bones and mummies has been laicized and brought up to date. The graves of the martyrs of the Commune are yearly visited by great crowds of Parisian workmen; and, in the Kremlin, stuffed and refrigerated, Lenin is preserved as an object of adoration for millions of pious atheists. Nor are benighted foreigners the only modern relic worshippers; for at this present moment (1933) we in England are being simultaneously invited, as Maecenases, and, as tax-payers, compelled to contribute towards the purchase, as a national fetish, of the Codex Sinaiticus.

'There are people,' the Director of the British Museum is reported as saying, 'people who criticize the spending of such a large sum of money at a time like this; but the offer by the Government (of £1 for every £1 subscribed by the public) shows that they realize the importance of watching over the intellectual needs as well as the material needs of the nation.' And Sir Frederic Kenyon concludes a letter to *The Times* with the sentence: 'Where millions are spent on the material needs and amusements of the people, may not £100,000 be properly spent upon their minds and souls?' To this question I hasten to return an enthusiastic affirmative.

I should like to see a great deal more than a hundred thousand pounds spent on people's 'minds and souls.' But the money spent on the Codex Sinaiticus is not money spent on 'minds and souls'; it is money spent on a relic, a mere *feitiço*. And the Government which helps to purchase such *feitiços* is not 'watching over the intellectual interests of the nation'; it is indulging, at the tax-payer's expense, in a costly gesture of superstition and idolatry.

All spiritual values may be catalogued under one or other of the three heads: Good, True, Beautiful. Let us dispassionately consider the Codex Sinaiticus and try to estimate its position under each of these three categories.

I will begin with Beauty. Where does the Codex stand in the hierarchy of things beautiful? Obviously, very low. True, the large uncial script in which it is written is pleasant enough; but the book is not and does not claim to be a work of art. At the best, it is a pretty little piece of competent craftsmanship.

Let us consider it now in relation to Truth. Its truth value was very considerable; for the study of the manuscript led to the discovery of a number of interesting and hitherto unknown facts about the text of the Bible. But is there any reason to suppose that further study will elicit any new facts of importance? And, for the purposes of scholarship, does the original manuscript possess any marked and significant superiority over photographic reproductions? And, finally, what is there to prevent the searchers after more historical truth from going to Russia to look for it?

We come now to the category of Goodness. Of what makes for goodness the Codex clearly possesses no more than any other copy of the Bible. Indeed, for practical purposes, it actually possesses less than the Authorized Version you can buy for five shillings at the nearest bookseller's. For the five-shilling Bible is comprehensible and available; whereas the Codex is kept locked up in a box and can be read only by experts. Its light is permanently under a bushel. The ordinary visitor to the British Museum looks at it through two intervening layers, one of plate glass, the other of his own ignorance. What he understands of the Codex is nil. What he feels, if he feels anything when he examines it, is a vague sentimental awe, mingled with self-satisfaction. The Codex for him is just an equivalent—yet another equivalent—of Shakespeare's birthplace.

Having peered at it and perhaps taken off his hat to it, he goes away with the comfortable conviction that he has done his duty by Culture and Religion. A bus trip to Stratford-on-Avon is for thousands of Shakespeare's fellow-countrymen sufficient excuse for never looking into Macbeth or Hamlet. They feel that they have done enough by paying an idolatrous visit to the shrine of the Bard; to read him would be a work of supererogation. It is now to be the same with the Bible. The Codex Sinaiticus stands to the Bible in exactly the same relation as Anne Hathaway's cottage to the works of Shakespeare. If you regard idolatry as a good thing, then you will wholeheartedly approve of the purchase of the Codex. I happen to regard idolatry as a very bad thing—all the worse for the fact that it has roots that go deep into our human and sub-human nature.

The general conclusions which impose themselves are these. The Codex is not beautiful. Its truth value seems to be pretty well exhausted; and anyhow such truth value as it still does possess is as readily available in facsimile as in the original, and in Leningrad as in London. Finally, its powers to propagate the good which, in common with all other copies of the Bible, it contains, is exceptionally, almost uniquely, small. On the contrary, its power to propagate a habit of stupid and irrational idolatry is exceptionally great.

In view of all this, one may be permitted to wonder how precisely 'the intellectual needs of the nation' are being served by the acquisition of this costly fetish; or in what sense, other than a purely Pickwickian one, it can be said that our hundred thousand pounds are being spent upon the people's 'minds and souls.' The truth of the matter is that the purchase is wholly unjustifiable in terms of a rationally idealistic philosophy. Spiritually, the Codex is valueless. If it is precious, it is precious only for its rarity, its associations and because it is superstitiously felt to contain some kind of mana.

There is in almost all human beings a stamp-collector and a fetish-worshipper; and it is to these personages that the Codex makes its appeal. Our hundred thousand pounds have bought us an object which is a mixture between the British Guiana Two-Cent, 1851, and the Thaumaturgical Arm of St. Francis Xavier.

The tendencies to superstition and mere collecting are, as I have said, almost universal; they are not for that reason rational or good. A Government which

professes to care about 'the mind and soul of the people,' to watch over 'the intellectual needs of the nation,' has no business to spend public money for the gratification of these absurd and always slightly discreditable passions. Its business is to encourage all manifestations of the Good, the True and the Beautiful.

The Government's action seems the more unjustifiable when we reflect that it has consistently put forward the plea of economy as an excuse for cutting down the grants (small enough, heaven knows, at the best of times) for scientific research. 'It has been decided to concentrate available funds on the work of the most immediate practical value to industry, leaving to happier times the expansion of work, of which the results could only be available at some more distant date.' In other and less hideously official words, it has been decided that the pursuit of truth for truth's sake is too expensive. But when it comes to buying a stamp-collector's fetish, fifty thousand pounds of other people's money are stumped up without the smallest hesitation.

What applies to Truth applies also to Beauty. The Government is too poor to spend more than a miserably small sum on the acquisition of beautiful objects, or on the encouragement of men and women capable of adding to the existing store of artistic beauty. But it has money to spare for idolatry and mere bibliophily. Our National Church had the good sense to abolish the cult of relics; our National Government has now officially reversed the policy of these reforming idealists, and the tax-payer is to find fifty thousand pounds for the purchase of a fetish.

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