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## Book Review: 'My Dear Timothy by Victor Gollancz

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## Victor Gollancz: MY DEAR TIMOTHY \*

"I AM desperately anxious that you should understand Christianity, for that, when it comes to it, is what this letter is about; and there are things in Christianity, I feel certain, that can be better understood for a previous understanding of Orthodox Judaism," writes Victor Gollancz on page 111 of this 438-page autobiographical letter to his grandson.

One feels that this letter is addressed to the writer himself as much as to his grandson; that Gollancz's quest is not yet ended, has, indeed, only begun; and that the pages of this volume are like a heap of clothes which the anxious soul is stripping off. For how does one go about the quest for understanding? Perhaps for the modern man there is only one way: to remove, slowly and painstakingly, the cumbersome garments in which he is stifling.

Gollancz's journal, for it is more a journal than a letter, seems at first a rambling series of meditations and observations not just on Orthodox Judaism in relation to Christianity but on everything in the world: on his own birth, childhood, growing up, the opera, music, the love of nature, Oxford, socialism, psychoanalysis, war, poverty, anarchism, vegetarianism, on the atom bomb, on Christ and the Sermon on the Mount.

But if one is patient and waits until he has finished the whole book, one discovers that it has a plan. This plan combines the hard kneeler in the confessional and the soft couch in the analyst's office to expose the naked soul to God. "I have always felt a vast, single, living bliss *behind* everything" (p. 397), Gollancz declares in one place; and in another: "I was on my way to the adoration of Christ" (p. 394).

He was on his way—and this book is the story of such a wayfarer. Beset with painful anxieties, afflicted with inner contradictions, Mr. Gollancz does not spare the reader. Irresolute, at some moments

\* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953.

obdurately self-sufficient, at others crying out with Blake: "O Saviour, pour upon me thy Spirit of meekness and love" (p. 398), the book attains a kind of universal quality as the story not alone of a Jew's pilgrimage toward Christ but of modern man's.

Yet as Mr. Gollancz tells it, one is more exasperated and disquieted than pleased. One wonders: Why is Mr. Gollancz so disquieting? Is it because he is a Laodicean? Terrible words of St. John to the Church of Laodicea: "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot" (Apoc 3:15). No—Laodiceans, unfortunately perhaps, are never disquieting. One is usually soothed by the Laodicean—circumspection, moderation, a placidly uncontroversial nature—these all tend to make the Laodicean much praised as an urbane, philosophical, mellow, above all mellow, personality; he is so restful. Mr. Gollancz is not restful.

"Some seed of goodness, mercifully implanted in me as in every other human being, was pushing towards the light through a huge dead tonnage of carnality and unsaintliness: a seed that after another fifty years of struggle and experience is still only an inch or so nearer the goal" (p. 102), writes Mr. Gollancz. He has literally recorded what happens when a "seed of goodness" pushes "towards the light." By documenting all the forward reachings and backward slidings, the cross-purposes of the longing soul and the self-indulgent body, Mr. Gollancz has held a mirror up, not only to himself but to us—and we, fancying ourselves Hyperion, look in and find that a satyr is looking out. Mr. Gollancz is too much *us*. He is too distastefully each one of us who thinks a little, has a slightly sensitive heart, and who somehow through a thick skin has felt the touch of God's index finger. Unable to move, committed to the habits of the world, the torpor of our flesh, those like Gollancz and ourselves are not bound by the great iron bonds of any major vice (these are easier to break sometimes) but by all the small amiable habits, the little silk strings, the thousands of hair-silk strings, of the world in which we live. Yet we are not mindlessly bound, and there is the rub. We think and we feel; we have known the touch of God's index finger on our shoulder and so we twist and turn, groan and weep, cry Yea, cry Nay, and thus exposed in the most pitiful weakness, we are disquieting to others and to ourselves; exasperating to others, disgusting to ourselves.

Victor Gollancz has stripped off his garments and stands naked. And

naked, we do not like ourselves. He does not like himself. Gerard Manley Hopkins movingly describes this condition of the soul:

*I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree  
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me.*

Gall and heartburn is the taste of the natural man to himself *after* he has tasted, perhaps only for a moment, Christ.

"I don't know for how many years now I have been struggling against the conviction that my whole spiritual and intellectual position is false," Gollancz cries out, "and I have been growingly aware of this falseness whenever I have called to mind, for the purpose of this letter, my ideas at various periods of my life. . . . When I come to the final page, shall I find that I have at last been able to conquer whatever it may be in me 'wretched man that I am,' that prevents me from accepting intellectually, and living spiritually, the truths, which . . . I believe I have always known?" (p. 240).

He believes that there is only one answer in a world of atom bombs and starving millions: the answer of the Sermon on the Mount. He demands an absolute living of the Sermon on the Mount: ". . . the absoluteness is everything. I do not believe you can approximate to Christian ethics. . . . You cannot be more or less of a Christian, just as you cannot be more or less of a lover" (p. 239).

He feels that the atom bomb requires absolute pacifism, yet he is not a pacifist; that the hunger of his fellow humans requires the religious "holding of all things in common," but he does not find himself giving up all worldly goods and going to live with the poor. He quotes Bl. Henry Suso picturing the en-Christ-ed soul "as a free and blithe-some leader of a choir" of all creatures, of birds, beasts, and fishes (p. 52). And he longs to be a vegetarian, so as not to kill any of God's creatures for food; yet he eats meat.

One is aware that almost from infancy he has struggled with a proud hatred of man's imperfections which has made the Absolute Way seem either *wrong*, or unattainably *dissevered* from man. Thus, in his youth, his father's Orthodoxy gave him "an utter detestation of anything that might fetter the human spirit. Compulsion in all its forms became anathema to me" (p. 106). Because he saw that it was possible to

make religious gestures and yet live unreligiously; that the moneylenders might confess on the Day of Atonement their sin against God and yet "never dream of not going on being moneylenders" (p. 78), he decided that men "would repent more if there was no Day of Atonement" (p. 98). While he sang the *Hallel*, the song of praise to God, "still with its Hebrew words, to the tune of a Christian hymn" (p. 28), he wondered if people would not "thank God more if there was no *Hallel* to sing at stated times on stated occasions" (p. 98).

It is interesting to compare these statements with the writer's remark about his marriage. He describes his marriage as "essentially perfect" (p. 427) although he admits that he was not always a faithful husband.

As the eyes of the body see all objects reversed until the mediating mind corrects the vision, so it is perhaps with the eyes of the spirit, which perceive experience upside-down until grace corrects the vision.

St. Francis de Sales declares in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*: "The proud man who trusts in himself has just reason not to attempt anything. He that is humble is so much the more courageous, the more he acknowledges his own inability." The great saint warns us not to be disturbed at the sight of our imperfections, "for our perfection consists in fighting against them. And how can we fight against them without seeing them, or overcome them without encountering them?"

Perhaps it takes special gifts to be a vegetarian, a pacifist, a conscientious objector. But one can be ignoble, weak, cowardly, full of sin, and still be called to love Christ. As in the "essentially perfect marriage," one who loves Christ may be unfaithful, may commit adultery, and yet be forgiven and in mercy taken back. Perhaps one may not "approximate" to being a vegetarian, one either is or one isn't; one may not "approximate" to being a pacifist—but one may *only* "approximate" to being a lover. One will be "more or less a lover"; one will fall and rise and fall again and Christ will lift one up again, and over and over again all one will be doing will be "approximating" the Lover and through the Lover to Christian ethics. When one has made the absolute choice which puts the Teacher first, then the teaching will no longer be disintegrated in the black currents of conflicting tensions; one will have made the rock.

Victor Gollancz tells his grandson that "Christ, who knew everything, is the safest guide for us here" (p. 281). He loves Him with an

ardent and devoted heart: "He lives and reigns for me eternally; and whether or not I should hesitate to call Him Lord, I can assuredly call Him Master" (p. 402). Yet he wishes to love Christ as *he* wishes to love Him; not as He wills to be loved. And although he declares that "to part with a Christ of our own flesh and blood would be grievous" (p. 401), the Resurrection does not have for him the absoluteness that the "teaching" has; in a sense, he puts the teaching ahead of the Teacher, Christian ethics ahead of Christ.

"In the physical Resurrection I was interested hardly at all," he writes of his experiences at Oxford. And goes on to say: "I feel much the same today, if a little more strongly. . . . I am even readier to admit its possibility; but inclined still more emphatically to deny its occurrence: indeed I am of the opinion, which I hope I shan't be thought offensive for expressing, that no educated man genuinely 'believes in' it now—believes in it (without mental reservations, interpretational gymnastics, or half-conscious self-deception) in the way in which he believes, say, that cruelty is vile. Interest in the matter at all, other than a generalized interest in anything miraculous, derives, it seems to me, from an undutiful repudiation of death—part and parcel, surely, of that very self-centeredness Christ forever rebukes us for: as well as from an overestimation of the body not a bit less lamentable than that underestimation of it so prominent in a lot of Christian sermonising. But the spiritual Resurrection is another matter: this is an undeniable fact, and of supreme importance . . ." (pp. 402-403).

There would have been, there would be, no stumbling block, nothing to overcome in the acceptance of Christ, had it not been necessary to accept fully, completely, with all its *essential* implications, the flesh of Christ. Here, indeed, lies the bone in the throat of all, be they modern skeptics, Buddhists, or medieval Lollards, who believe in a Christ that is spirit but not in the Christ in the flesh—whether they say with the fifteenth-century Lollard: "How can Christ be in the bread on the altar?"; or with Sri Aurobindo and the Buddhists: "What does it matter in the end whether a Jesus . . . was actually born in Nazareth or Bethlehem, lived and taught and was done to death on a real or trumped-up charge of sedition, so long as we can know by spiritual experience the inner Christ, live uplifted in the light of His teaching?" (p. 401); or with Gollancz: "In the physical Resurrection I was interested hardly at all."

Here we have the most exact summation one could possibly find of why Christ is a stumbling block to so many today—their repudiation of the flesh. For no matter how often Gollancz may say that “to part with a Christ of our own flesh and blood would be grievous,” he has nevertheless arrestingly summed up man’s revulsion against the immortality of the body as an “overestimation of the body.” That the *flesh* should be immortal is an offensive thought to many moderns. And yet those who have this revulsion against the immortality of the flesh are the ones most impassioned about the flesh of Mother Nature. Gollancz, who finds the Resurrection an “overestimation of the body,” sings the praises of nature: “All physical things are sacraments, and the world is so beautiful because it is a sacrament of the Supreme Beauty” (p. 22).

But St. John of the Cross says: “Por todo la hermosura nunca yo me perdere—for all the beauty in the world never will I lose myself.”

Immortality in the flowers, the trees, the rich teeming earth—some call this mysticism. People imagine they are glad to die and be born again as flowers. Yet they cannot see how they can rise again in the very flesh. Now, when a radioactive substance is placed in a container, the container itself becomes radioactive. A man will believe that if he has been exposed to atomic energy he will become radioactive and even dangerous to be near; but he will not think God can affect the flesh as much as radium. It seems unbelievable that man so hates, and rebels against, the flesh of his body. This is the rebellion that is at the bottom of all the heresies willing to adore Christ in the spirit but refusing to accept Him in the flesh. Offended by the flesh, Gollancz is, of course, horrified by “institutions”: “I do not believe that the Church—any Church—will ever really be the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ is the fellowship, free and almost casual, of all who love Him, and try to follow Him, and would pity and forgive, in His spirit, their fellow human beings” (p. 413).

“To part with a Christ of our own flesh and blood would be grievous.” Victor Gollancz has felt the touch of the Lover. He calls Christ “the Supreme Particular,” and, quoting again from Blake, says that he worships Him not as “a God, afar off” but as “a brother and a friend.” He imagines that Timothy may ask him: “Why Christ? Why not Krishna, or some other Avatar?” And he replies that “on the boy born in Elgin Avenue to his own special heritage . . . Christ’s teaching has

made an impact as of the *utterly* true, Christ's personality has made an impact as of the *utterly* adorable, Christ's living and dying has made an impact as of the *utterly* good" (pp. 398-399).

This is what stands at the heart of the "letter" by a modern grandfather to his modern grandson. All else lies heaped, like worn-out garments, tossed aside. The book closes most appropriately with a quotation from Gerard Manley Hopkins:

*Bad I am, but yet thy child.  
Father, be thou reconciled,  
Spare thou me, since I see  
With thy might that thou art mild.*

*I have life before me still  
And thy purpose to fulfil;  
Yea a debt to pay thee yet:  
Help me, sir, and so I will.*

When one has stripped off the old garments, new are offered, but these are wedding garments meant for a marriage "essentially perfect" in which one will sing the *Hallel* at "stated times on stated occasions" until one wakes to find the stated times and stated occasions have turned into all the time.

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