

A brief essay on the rise of the Victorian Era, with emphasis on Chateaubriand's Natural Theology as a factor. (excerpted from *War Comes to God's House*)

The zeal of the Enlightenment, like that of the Reformation, burnt itself out. The atheism of Frederick the Great and the French revolutionaries faded, and waves of Christian revivalism began sweeping the western world. By the mid-Nineteenth Century, the west was in the hands of the phenomenon we know as 'The Victorian Era'. There were many streams in this Christian revival, but for simplicity's sake let us divide them into two groups and label them "popular Christianity" and "Pietism", a not so popular Christianity.

Again for simplicity's sake, let us say popular Christianity arose from the merger of the likes of Chateaubriand's romanticized Christianity with Kant's reasonable Christianity. Chateaubriand, now a confirmed enemy of the megalomaniac despot "Bounaparte" (reverting to the Italian name of the Corsican), struck a popular theme when he declaimed that godless reason led to democracy, democracy to chaos, and chaos to tyranny.

Rene Chateaubriand, a member of the lesser nobility, saw his family lose everything to the revolutionary Reign of Terror. He left France as a young adventurer to roam the wilds of North America in search of the natural paradise Rousseau dreamed of. Disabused of that fantasy, he returned to France to face the deaths of most of his family and friends in the Terror and the the civil war between the Catholics and the revolutionary regime determined to wipe them out. And finally, the transformation of the great enlightened Napoleon Bonaparte, savior of France, into a brilliantly efficient despot and indefatigable war monger.

Those were sobering experiences. Chateaubriand's novels and essays, popular all over Europe and America, exemplified the longing for a return to the ideal of a Christian society; with, for him at least, a benevolent monarch at its head. But for Chateaubriand, Christianity consisted of culture – art and music, and civilized behavior (none of that "noble savage" nonsense), and religious ritual that provided forgiveness and spiritual peace.

Chateaubriand's religion, devoutly Catholic, was based upon a romanticized appreciation of Natural Theology. A long passage from Chateaubriand's *Genius of Christianity* beautifully illustrates both Natural Theology and the Romanticism of the age:

...God of the Christians! It is above all in the waters of the abyss and the depths of the skies that thou hast given the lines of Thy omnipotence! Millions of stars shining out of the sombre azure of the celestial dome, and the moon in the heavens and on the waters! Thou hast never more troubled me with Thy greatness than during those nights when suspended between the stars and the ocean, I had immensity over my head and immensity beneath my feet!

I am nothing; I am only a simple and solitary person: I have often heard the scholars arguing over the prime Being, and I have not understood them; but I have always noted that it is in the sight of the great scenes of nature that this unknown Being manifests Himself to the heart of man. One evening (there was a dead calm), we found ourselves in those beautiful waters which bathe the shores of Virginia; all the sails were furled; I was busy below decks when I heard the bell which called the crew to prayer; I hastened to go and add my devotions to those of my traveling companions.

The officers were on the poop deck with the passengers; the chaplain, a book in his hand, stood somewhat in front of them and the sailors were scattered helter skelter over the main deck: we all stood facing the prow of the vessel to the west.

The sun's globe, ready to dip into the waters, could be seen through the ship's rigging in the midst of endless space. From the movement of the poop, the luminary appeared to change from horizon to horizon.

A few clouds were strewn across the East, where the moon was rising slowly; the rest of the sky was pure; to the north, forming a glorious triangle with the luminary of day and that of night, a waterspout brilliant with all the colors of the prism rose from the sea like a pillar of crystal supporting the vault of the heavens.

Anyone is to be pitied who could not recognize the beauty of God in this spectacle. In spite of myself, tears streamed from my eyes, when my companions, taking off their tarred hats intoned with a coarse voice the simple canticle to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, patroness of seafarers. How touching was the prayer of these men who on a fragile bit of wood in the middle of the ocean were contemplating the setting of the sun on the waters! How it penetrated straight to the soul, this invocation of the poor sailor to the Mater Dolorosa! The knowledge of our smallness in the sight of infinity, the sound of our songs extending out over the waves, the approach of the night with its pitfalls, the marvel of our vessel in the midst of so many marvels, a religious crew imbued with admiration and fear, an august priest in prayer, God leaning out over the abyss, with one hand holding back the sun at the gates of the occident and with the other lifting the moon in the east, and lending an attentive ear to the voice of His creature across the immensity: that is what could not possibly be painted and what the heart of man alone sufficed to feel.

(Chateaubriand in Switzer, p- 63-65)

I have poured over that passage an inordinate number of times as I wrote and edited this chapter, and it never fails to move me. How pitiful indeed, is someone who sees only matter and physical principles.

This is Natural Theology at its most poetic, something only the heart of man could feel; but the heart of man is “deceitful above all things and desperately wicked” the Bible warns us. Some Christians of a sterner nature, found especially among orthodox Protestants, eschewed Natural Theology in favor of a more particular knowledge mediated through the Bible. But Roman Catholicism, and Kantian (Mainstream) Protestantism, went well with such romanticized Natural Theology.

Chateaubriand observed that, “*Christianity, considered as a passion in itself, supplies the poet with immense treasures. This religious passion is all the more forceful because it contradicts all the others, and in order to endure, it must devour them.*” (Chateaubriand in Switzer, p-67)

This religious passion of poets not only devoured all other passions for many men and women of the Victorian Age, but it supplied passion to the rather passionless religion derived from Kant's Categorical Imperative, which tended towards social concern rather than spiritual awakening. During the late Victorian Era the two combined to make a very popular and comfortable religion of cultured propriety and social conscience, one which Dietrich Bonhoeffer would later describe as a real barrier to the true message of the Gospel.