

Joseph Blanco White: one road to Unitarianism

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If ever a life could be said to illustrate the many and diverse roads that lead to Unitarianism, that of Joseph Blanco White surely does. It is a road that leads from the devoutly Roman Catholic city of Seville in 1775 to the graveyard of Renshaw Street Chapel in Liverpool where he was buried in 1841. In between these two dates and these two vastly differing locations, lie extremes of doubt and fervour, radical changes of religious allegiance, literary prowess and political engagement.

Blanco's father was the son of an Irishman (William White) who had adopted the name Guillermo Blanco to assist those Spaniards who had difficulty with the surname White. His mother was the daughter of a minor Andalucian aristocrat and both parents were renowned for their piety and good works in a city which was dominated by the Roman Catholic faith. A career in the church was the traditional aspiration of most Spanish (and indeed, Irish families) as it was the best guarantee of preferment and prestige in Spanish society. The Blanco White family fared well in this respect as their two daughters became nuns and Joseph opted for the priesthood enthusiastically. He described himself as inheriting 'the unhesitating faith of persecuting Spain' and 'the impassioned belief of persecuted Ireland', a heady cocktail, indeed.

It was not difficult for Joseph, therefore, to persuade his parents that he wished to enter the church rather than the family business and, after a rather difficult three years at the Dominican College of San Tomas, he was sent to study at Seville University. Here he was intoxicated by the more enlightened atmosphere that prevailed in the wake of reforms initiated by Carlos III and enjoyed great success in the Academia de Letras Humanas as a poet and translator. The views of the 'Jansenist' group also began to influence him and to alert him to the need to reform and purge the church of the accretions of dogma and religiosity that had built up over centuries serving only to distract from her original purity and mission. He also hinted later at a period of licence and sensuality that was restrained only by the parsimony of his father when calculating his

allowance although one might well conclude that, in the main, this was retrospective wishful thinking!

After ordination in 1799, Joseph was awarded a royal chaplaincy which was to be the first step towards an illustrious career in the service of the monarchy. It appears, though, that even at this stage, he was beginning to entertain some doubts about the Church, and these he attempted to conceal by mounting a vigorous campaign against the modern thinking that was starting to permeate many areas of the Spanish intelligentsia. One of his duties was to minister to a community of nuns and he began to question the value of conventual life, possibly because of the death of one sister who had entered a convent and the imminent departure of the other to join a convent. Finally, he felt unable to suppress his doubts and maintain the appearance of a committed priest and he obtained leave to go to Madrid to consider his position. He became involved in educational reform at the Pestalozzian Institute but also fathered a son during this time by Magdalena Esquaya only discovering this much later after he had reached England. To his credit, he then did everything possible for Magdalena prior to her early death in 1816, paid for his son's education and eventual voyage to Britain and did all he could to further his subsequent career in the Indian army.

It was around this time, too, that his career prospects with the royal family began to diminish; the possibility of a post as tutor to the youngest Spanish prince vanished when the King abdicated in the face of the invasion of Spain by Napoleon I. The Bourbon monarchy was swept aside by French troops rather as it had been imposed some one hundred years before under the terms of the will of the last Habsburg monarch, Carlos II. Napoleon installed his brother Joseph as king and began to implement far reaching reforms in church and state. Blanco returned to Seville to participate in the patriotic struggle which he favoured over his liberal instincts (principally by editing 'El Semanario Patriotico'), but the French troops were soon threatening Seville and he took the bold decision to sail to England, using his command of the language to gain entry to the port of Cadiz and board a ship to Falmouth. He left Spain on 23 February 1810, for the first and last time, and never saw his parents or his homeland again.

England in winter, even Falmouth, provided a severe culture shock and caused him to wonder if he would long survive the rigours of the climate. 'A strong persuasion that the climate would kill me in a short time, took possession of my mind; and I felt as if I were going to land into the grave'. Clearly, however, he did not hold the climate against England for long and always expressed his gratitude for the welcome that he found there. His linguistic skills and his literary abilities soon gained him access to the best London salons where he was surprised by the genuine piety and sincerity of religious faith having assumed that religion was more a matter of formal observance in protestant Britain than a deeply-held and inspirational impulse. This realisation led him to seek acceptance into the Church of England and he became an Anglican priest in 1814. He justified this move saying 'I never allowed myself to put opinions upon the shelf as settled for ever'. Although he was to preach occasionally he never in fact occupied a benefice or stipendiary position in the church.

Another opening beckoned as a political writer and, encouraged by Lord Holland and others, he founded *El Espanol* which aimed to encourage the Spanish colonies in South America to fight for independence whilst Spain was distracted by the Peninsular War. This editorial fervour was not always popular as many regarded it as a dangerous precedent to foment revolt against authority even when that authority was dictatorial and oppressive and many of his former friends and allies in Spain responded furiously. His efforts must have been heartily appreciated in some quarters, however, as he was awarded a pension of £250 a year for life by the Foreign Office. His financial position was also helped by his position as tutor to Henry Fox (son of Lord Holland) between 1815 and 1817. Living in London for most of the period 1810-1826, brought him into contact with many of the most famous literary figures of the day such as Southey, Coleridge and the clerical wit Rev. Sydney Smith. His 'Letters from Spain' (1822) provides an entertaining picture of early nineteenth century Spain and is typical of his elegant style and lively writing.

Polemical matters were to enter his life again in the mid 1820's as the controversy over Roman Catholic emancipation began to intensify and to dominate the political agenda. This was not perhaps one of the finest episodes in his life, as he later admitted, as he chose to condemn the proposal for Roman Catholic relief in the

strongest terms. In the course of fifteen years in Britain, he seems not to have taken the measure of the settled, peaceable, established catholic community in the country and instead, chose to write 'Practical and Internal Evidence Against Catholicism' detailing the oppressive nature of that religion (drawing on his own experiences in Spain) and suggesting that Catholics could not be trusted to respect the liberties enjoyed by Britons in a Protestant state. This work earned him an Oxford MA and incorporation into the Senior Common Room of Oriel College.

Here he met Richard Whateley with whom he was soon to campaign in favour of Roman Catholic Emancipation (a change of mind ostensibly to avoid the prospect of civil war in Ireland) and also John Henry Newman with whom he shared a love of music. Both were accomplished violinists, often playing together or in larger groups, and both at this time were Anglican priests whose paths were to diverge spectacularly in future years. Oxford was an idyllic interlude for him but his equanimity was disturbed by the controversy over Emancipation and the odium that he incurred over his 'betrayal' as the anti-Catholics termed it. This furore led him to leave Oxford and follow Richard Whateley to Dublin where the latter had recently been appointed Anglican Archbishop.

In the course of his three year sojourn in the Archbishop's household, he embarked upon a thorough scrutiny of his own beliefs and began to clarify his views on the evils of organised religion. By now, he had become convinced that all established religions were inimical to independent thought and liberty of conscience, not merely the Roman Catholic church. He concluded that theology was routinely used for political ends and that mysticism was employed to manipulate emotions. Moreover, the church interpreted the message as though Christ had come to tell people how to think rather than how to live.

Finally, he realised that Anglicanism was little different from the faith of his fathers. He became intent upon recovering the original spirit of Jesus Christ and the early Christians, shorn of dogma and manmade complexity. Using the criterion that any scriptural passage that could be interpreted in differing ways could not be considered to convey an essential

truth, he concluded that the divinity of Christ was not a revealed truth and that he could no longer accept it unquestioningly. Prior to the release of his book 'Observations on Heresy and Orthodoxy', which he felt it would be discourteous to launch whilst he was still under the Archbishop's roof, he decided to move to Liverpool to explore the Unitarian persuasion.

In 'Observations...' he expressed the opinion that everyone had a different view of the truth, usually formed in their own image. "When someone proclaims his intention of defending the 'Christian truth' he only expresses his resolution to defend his own ideas, spawned by the words from the Bible," he writes. In Liverpool, he discovered kindred spirits in James Martineau of Paradise Street Chapel and John Hamilton Thom of Renshaw Street Chapel, especially the latter. The Unitarian form of service came as a revelation to him and he eulogised thus:

"I had never witnessed anything so really sublime as the whole worship in which I was joining...I heartily thank God for having been made acquainted with the Unitarian worship. I have seen nothing superior nor even equal to it".

Blanco White was to spend the last five years of his life in Liverpool during which he suffered from indifferent health as he has through much of his earlier life. Apart from publishing his 'Observations' shortly after his arrival, he set himself to learn German so as to gain direct access to the latest biblical scholarship in that tongue, maintained a correspondence with William Ellery Channing, the distinguished American Unitarian, and set to work writing in Spanish once more. Finally, his health grew so precarious that he was moved to Greenbank, the home of William Rathbone, a prominent businessman and Unitarian in the city. After three months of dedicated care from his hosts and friends, he died on 20 May 1841. Although at time during his last years, he had thought to leave Liverpool, even to return to Spain, he always expressed his gratitude to Liverpool and its Unitarian community which had sustained him and brought him true fulfilment.

It is inspiring, and also humbling, to think of this cosmopolitan figure, in self-imposed exile from his homeland and family for thirty years, discovering his spiritual home among the Liverpool Unitarians after an

exotic and eventful journey. Along the way, he embraced differing religious persuasions, became an admired literary contributor, influenced the politics of Great Britain and Europe by way of his writer's craft and gained a reputation at the heart of the nation's intellectual elite. It is an intriguing twist that one of his great friends at one period of his life was John Henry Newman, a restless, questing figure also seeking his own personal truth. Although the roads that they travelled were sharply contrasting, they each finally attained their spiritual desires and found ultimate solace in ways which neither could have envisaged when they embarked upon their journey.

Appendix: this sonnet written in 1828 is considered to have been Blanco White's finest work and illustrates his mastery of the English language.

Night and Death

Mysterious Night! When our first parent knew
Thee, from Report divine, and heard thy Name,
Did he not tremble for this lovely Frame,
This glorious Canopy of Light and Blue.

Yet 'neath a Curtain of translucent Dew,
Bathed in the rays of the great setting Flame,
Hesperus with the Host of Heaven came,
And lo! Creation widened in Man's view.

Who could have thought such Darkness lay concealed
Within thy beams, O Sun! or who could find,
Whilst Fly, and Leaf, and Insect stood revealed,
That to such Countless Orbs thou mad'st us blind!
Why do we, then shun Death with anxious strife?
If Light can thus deceive, wherefore not Life?