

King David to count his people and then killed seventy thousand of them for no good reason.

Voltaire may have hurt the churches with his pen; but he started them on a necessary revision of their teachings. Attitudes to persecution, fanaticism, superstition, could never be the same. Voltaire, jesting to the last, ordered that his tomb at Ferney should be half in the church and half outside it. His jests usually carried truth. He was spiritually half outside because he could never be comfortable with the Church as he found it; and half inside because he was aware of influencing the churches for the better.

There were aspects of morals as then taught which he assailed, and by doing so began to change them. He wrote an encyclopaedia article called 'Why?'. Why do half the girls in Europe say their prayers in Latin which they do not understand? Is it right that divorce should be impossible to get in half Europe and difficult to get in the other half, and does this make for moral behaviour if we wish to make adultery less common? As for adultery, if the woman commits it she is pilloried and penalized, if the man commits it no one minds; is this just? He did not agree with Bayle in thinking reason a useless way to find the truth. And, though Bayle was more obviously a Christian than he, Voltaire did not share his view that morals could be separated from religion without danger to society.

CHANGES IN CHRISTIAN IDEAS

There began to be adjustments in Christian doctrines, and for the better. Partly this was a discarding of old myths, though few noticed that they were being discarded. Examples are the myth of Antichrist, and the nature of hell and of Christ's descent into it.

Antichrist

The word 'antichrist' is found three times in the New Testament, in the letters of St John; but as a general word for an opponent of Christ, not as an incarnation of evil. He was a person who teaches untruths about Christ;

especially that he was not the Messiah and that he had no human body. The idea of a supernatural opponent of Christ was a borrowing from pre-Christian myths, of battles between good and evil powers in heaven. By AD 200 Christians began to pen books about Antichrist, as a king who sends out his messengers, and the chief enemy of God. St Augustine used the language of the Book of Revelation to describe him bringing in a reign of a thousand years in which he torments the disciples.

By 950 Antichrist had a biography. He was born of human parents, but was soon possessed by the devil and endowed with the desire to make himself into a god. He was born in Babylon, educated at Bethsaida and trained by magicians. His aim was to make a kingdom of the devil on earth. He was held in check by the Church and its bishops and kings, but in the end he would win for a while and have a world empire with its capital in Jerusalem – until Christ and the archangel Michael destroyed him on the Mount of Olives. He was no longer a literary myth; the people in the pews knew about him. And as he became real he could be applied to any power that was thought wicked, even a 'wicked' emperor such as the German-Sicilian Frederick II; while dissenters against the papacy used his name to abuse the pope.

Martin Luther was slow to take up the idea when he revolted against the pope; but he did believe that the pope stood for the opposite of what was true; and so Antichrist came into Protestant thought, no longer as a person with a biography, but as a living institution, the Curia of Rome. This usage lasted in Northern Europe for nearly a century and a half. It then vanished except among eccentrics. The idea of Antichrist yielded to the less mythical one of an anti-Christian. But he remained in some forms of literature; in the late nineteenth century he was central to the thinking of Nietzsche and his notions of the superman.

The history of Antichrist shows how a myth could be taken up, expanded and used – and then, suddenly, within only two or three decades, seen to be nothing to do with faith.