

Malcolm Muggeridge (1903-1990)

Pundit to Pilgrim

Today's generation, I suppose, has largely forgotten Malcolm Muggeridge (although it should be said that there is a journal, *The Gargoyle*, dedicated to him, that a Muggeridge Society exists and that his religious writings flourish, especially in the United States). I remember him vividly as a TV pundit of the 1970s and 80s. His TV presence was compelling. He was pungent, scathing, mordant, sarcastic, sceptical, iconoclastic, curmudgeonly, but also capable of being totally charming, witty and cuttlingly intelligent. His gnomonic appearance – great domed head, bulbous nose, wide mouth – had a slightly clownish aspect. His voice was unmistakeable but how to describe it? Resonating, close to gravelly, absolutely clear enunciation, the voice of an orator or debater, and he endlessly orated and debated, as well as producing, in his own words, a torrent of words for publication. As obituarists remarked, he had an unerring capacity to puncture pomposity; and he spent his life ridiculing authority. He was a rabid critic of modern western civilization, of capitalism, materialism and moral vacuity, as also of all totalitarian regimes and ideologies, Fascist, Marxist, whatever. He is sometimes cited as a pungent social critic, but there is something missing. It is thoroughgoing social analysis. His judgments are often absurdly sweeping, often paradoxical and inconsistent. Take his book *The Thirties*, finished, appropriately enough, in an army training camp as the world readied for World War 2. It is a fascinating, readable and amusing book, with wonderful pen portraits of the politicians and public figures of the age. But almost everything and everyone is reduced finally to the absurd. As history (for which he professed contempt¹) it is highly problematical, to say the least.

When in 1978 Muggeridge's youthful novel *In a Valley of this Restless Mind* was re-issued, he wrote an introduction to it that rightly redressed the common assessment of him as a lifelong sensualist and sceptic, until he "got religion" late in life:

It is generally assumed, by those who know me only through the media, especially television, that for the greater part of my life my attitudes were wholly hedonistic and my ways wholly worldly, until, in my sixties, I suddenly discovered God and became preoccupied with other-worldly considerations. ... The fact is that, unlike Demas, I have never cared much for this present world, and have found its pleasures and prizes, such as they are, little to my taste even in pursuing them.²

As the novel showed he was even then searching for spiritual meaning in life, although characteristically not finding it. And also in the process he vindicated Evelyn Waugh's reading of him

¹ While in Peking in 1958 he wrote in his diary: "I have never had much interest in the past. I find the present too absorbing" (3 June, 1958): John Bright-Holmes, *Like It Was: The Diaries of Malcolm Muggeridge* (London, Collins, 1981), p.495; Hereafter *Diaries*. On this, as on so many topics, he was ambivalent. His writings and TV shows are full of references to history and historical figures Too often he made statements simply for effect..

² MM, *In a Valley of this Restless Mind* (London, 1978; 1st edition 1938), introduction p.13. Elsewhere he wrote: "there was no point in my life when I underwent any dramatic change. I would say that for me at any rate, the process has been not a sudden Damascus road experience, but more like the journeying of Bunyan's Pilgrim, who constantly lost his way, fell into sloughs, was locked up in Doubting Castle and terrified out of his wits in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, but still, through it all had a sense of moving towards light, moving out of time towards eternity": *Christ and the Media* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p.89.

as a Puritan at heart, his attitudes to sex being “that of a surfeited and rather scared Calvinist”, a verdict Muggeridge accepted.³

Even as a student at Cambridge, Muggeridge was drawn to Christianity. There he met Alec Vidler, who was studying to become an Anglican priest, and was to become a leading church historian: “Muggeridge also considered this vocation. Vidler would remain a committed friend and life-long Christian influence on Malcolm. He noticed that Muggeridge [potentially] ‘had a kind of genius as a talker and writer and even as a seer’ ”.⁴ Muggeridge continued during most of his early and middle age to waver between aggressive unbelief and religious yearnings. This is abundantly clear to any reader of his diaries.

Patrick Walsh observed: “Muggeridge was always peering behind the drama of human existence for God. He would explain this way of seeing by quoting the English poet William Blake:

We are led to believe a lie

When we see not Thro’ the Eye

To see with the eye goes only half way toward encompassing reality. Microscopes, telescopes, and all instruments of modern science fall short. To see through the eye includes the invisible spiritual dimension of reality to which modernity, in its preoccupation with material progress, is blind. Muggeridge in reporting on his century created a new literary genre, a kind of eschatological journalism as yet unappreciated”.⁵

I’ve been reading his autobiography *Chronicles of Wasted Life*.⁶ I find myself getting quite fond of old Malcolm, with his biting sarcasm and absurdist sense of the world. But what a weird mixture there is of insight and staggering insensitivity: for example, his callous dismissal of Hiroshima, no doubt shared by many at the time. He spoke of the “hysteria” that was worked up over the dropping of the atomic bombs: “Somehow it seemed to me that just having an enormously more powerful weapon altered nothing; it was the will to destroy rather than the means which mattered, and if human destructiveness had reached the point that our very earth itself could be turned to dust, this danger would not be averted by agitating for nuclear disarmament” (p.264). Even a trip to Hiroshima in 1946 did not make him noticeably more caring about the human carnage done there. In 1950, at the height of the Cold War, he proposed dropping an atomic bomb.⁷ No doubt his overall

³ *Restless Mind*, p.10

⁴ Patrick J. Walsh, “Malcolm Muggeridge: A Modern Pilgrim”, *Modern Age*, 42 (2005), p.182. Vidler in his autobiography *Scenes from a Clerical Life* (London, Collins, 1977) wrote of Muggeridge: “When I first got to know him he was being prepared for confirmation... I do not consider that in his autobiography he has adequately assessed the sincerity and depth of his initiation into Christian faith and practice at this time” (p.33). Walsh notes that when, after graduation, Muggeridge went to India as an English teacher, he wrote a letter to his socialist father in 1926, asserting “that the ability to say ‘Dadda’ to God is what people need more than the minimum wage” (p.182). Walsh says that Muggeridge “imbibed a combative spirit against the forces of materialism” from Thomas Carlyle (p.183).

⁵ Walsh, *Ibid*, p.183.

⁶ *Chronicles of Wasted Time: Vol.2, The Infernal Grove* (London, Collins, 1973). Following references are to this text.

⁷ This was on a BBC programme *Any Questions?* See diary entry for 13 July, 1950 in *Diaries*, p.401. He also later expressed sympathy for at least some of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s viewpoints: diary 24 February, 1954; *ibid*, p.467.

attitude was conditioned by his long stint during the thirties with the League of Nations at Geneva, where he became totally disillusioned with efforts to ensure world disarmament and peace. The “Dawn Seekers” who persistently placed their faith in a utopian human future continued to be favourite targets of his ridicule (his great friend Hugh Kingsmill coined the phrase “Dawn Seekers”).

Also, again despite the grain of truth, there was his dismissal of the achievements of the Attlee govt and its welfare system, e.g. the National Health System – yet his father, a prominent Fabian socialist, had been a passionate advocate of a more caring world and more social justice for the poor and disadvantaged (but Muggeridge did see the potential for “rotting the system”). He greeted the election of the Labour government in 1945 with mixed feelings. They included a large dollop of *schadenfreude*. Despite his father’s lifetime dream of a Labour government, “here was I in the office of a Conservative newspaper [*The Daily Telegraph*], and taking no joy in the occasion beyond a certain satisfaction at the confusion of all the pundits and the overthrow of a government in office” (*Diaries*, p.261). In a diary entry in 1949 (8-9 June), he ridiculed the Welfare State “which, in its efforts to produce everything for everyone, would inevitably result in producing nothing for anyone”. At around this time he began voting Conservative, but not without guilt feelings.

He also saw the downside of the Allied victory in 1945, especially the rise of totalitarian USSR and Stalinism. Was this a victory of good over evil? “The Red Army coming in from the East bringing freedom on its wings; the Allied forces coming in from the West with enlightenment on theirs?... Had Berlin, in being reduced to rubble, become a citadel of democracy? Or were there, as before, just victors and vanquished, with some uncertainty as to which was which, and justice once more a fugitive?” (*Chronicles*, p.256).

In the late 1930s Muggeridge began having mystical experiences:

The first intimation is, quite simply that time stops, or rather one escapes from time. Then all creation is seen in its oneness; with each part of it, from the tiniest insect or blade of grass, to the vastnesses of space, with the stars and comets riding through them, visibly related to every other part. One sublime harmony, with no place for the discordances of hatred and the ego’s shrill demands; the death of death, since each note in the harmony exists harmoniously for ever. Peace that is no one else’s strife, sufficiency that is no one else’s famine, well-being that is no one else’s sickness. Flesh still, mind still, leaving the soul free to experience the inconceivable joy of seeing beyond the Iron Gates, to where the Creator watches over his creation (*Chronicles*, p.68).

One is reminded vividly of Aldous Huxley’s similar descriptions of mystical experiences he had after taking mescaline in California in the 1950s, which he published in his *The Doors of Perception*, 1954. Muggeridge writes of three such experiences he had while living at Whatlington in the countryside of southern England (near Battle). One was with his close friend, the journalist and writer Hugh Kingsmill, while they were standing on the cliffs just outside Hastings. The sight of the Old Town below wreathed in evening mist, chimneys smoking, their smoke merging into the grey, gathering night made him feel suddenly spell bound “as though this was a vision of the Last Day, and the wreaths of smoke, souls, leaving their bodies to rise heavenwards and become part of eternity”, while he felt a sense of common destiny with all his fellow human beings. Another time was when he gave a blood transfusion to his wife Kitty: “Never in all our life together, had I so completely and perfectly and joyously experienced love’s fulfilment as on that moment”. A third occasion was at harvest time at Whatlington. It was about 11 at night, full moon, “the field’s abundance filled the

air, almost visibly, like a mist of fulfilment". Behind stood the small, ancient church and beyond a massive yew tree, with grave-stones all around in lush grass: "I suppose for a thousand years and more past, anyone standing on that little hill would have surveyed the self-same scene. I felt myself being incorporated into it, until I no longer existed, except as a voice in a choir of innumerable voices, swelling chorus of gratitude for the gift of life, of sharing in its plenitude, of experiencing its joys and afflictions, and treading its ordained path, from the womb where I was shaped, to a grave under that yew tree where I hoped to lie. Some ancestral memory formed on my lips the words *Gloria in excelsis Deo*" (pp.68-69).

Muggeridge had an epiphany during World War 2, when he was working for British Intelligence in Lourenco Marques in Mozambique. One night he felt deeply depressed: "I lay on my bed full of stale liquor and despair; alone in the house, and, as it seemed, utterly alone...in the world. Alone in the universe, in eternity, with no glimmer of light in the prevailing blackness... no God to whom I could turn, or Saviour to take my hand". He decided to take his own life, drove to the coast road, and waded out to sea in order to drown himself. As he prepared to sleep on his watery mattress, he was aware of the distant lights of a cafe and the Costa da Sol. Without thinking or deciding, he started swimming back to shore again, his eyes fixed on those lights: "They were the lights of the world; they were the lights of my home, my habitat, where I belonged. I must reach them. There followed an overwhelming joy such as I had never experienced before; an ecstasy. In some mysterious way it became clear to me that there was no darkness, only the possibility of losing sight of a light that shone eternally". He felt that our sufferings and afflictions were part of a drama "endlessly revolving round the two great propositions of good and evil, of light and darkness. A brief interlude, an incarnation, reaching back into the beginning of time, and forward into an ultimate fulfilment in the universal spirit of love which informs, animates, illuminates all creation, from the tiniest particle of insentient matter to the radiance of God's very throne" (p.184). Although he scarcely realised it at the time, this episode represented for him one of those deep changes that occur in life, "a kind of spiritual adolescence, whereby, thenceforth, all my values and pursuits and hopes were going to undergo a total transformation – from the carnal towards the spiritual; from the immediate, the now, towards the everlasting, the eternal. In a tiny dark dungeon of the ego, chained and manacled, I had glimpsed a glimmer of light coming in through a barred window high above me... it was the light of the world. The bars of the window, as I looked more closely, took on the form of a Cross" (p.185).⁸

Certain themes can be discerned throughout Muggeridge's writings and life. They are a continuing onslaught against materialism, individualist egoism and carnality; and a corresponding search for spirituality and goodness. He looked around him and found a western civilization that had become deeply secular, wealthy but spiritually and ethically desolate. Although a fierce critic of communism, he maintained a constant offensive against capitalism, its greed and vices, throughout his life. His diaries when in America reflected this, with him wavering between admiration and disgust for Americans and their way of life. On one occasion, 8 October 1960, he observed fellow passengers

⁸ Earlier, in 1936, he experienced an unexpected sense of happiness, a consequence of feeling himself in contact with God: "Suddenly, and for the first time, life has a significance for me other than just its horror, or bizarreness, or the sensations it offers. I see into the heart of it. I sense a purpose, and know that I am part of that purpose. I can measure what troubled or tormented me against this purpose, and it is nothing. The mystery of my own being is no longer oppressive or fantastic, but glorified, because belonging to the universal Mystery": 26 August, 1936, *Diaries*, p.149.

queuing for a plane at Newark airport, and thought of them as like animals, forsaking liberty for food and pleasure, “collecting their viands, and then passing through the wicker gate, where they paid. This is a freely constructed concentration camp”.

He noted the steep decline in churchgoing during the 1930s and 1940s, and the futile attempts of “trendy” clergy to revivify and modernise church life. This profoundly depressed him. He wrote in 1949: “Church services are very empty, and yet at their worst they have a kind of sweetness. Faces humbly downcast are more tolerable than when they are clamorous”. Even as an unbeliever he found beauty, and something beyond this, in church ritual – he always preferred traditional colour and ceremony to nonconformist plainness. The church service, he observed, was designed to still rather than inflame the will, “at least to settle the dust of living for a little while”. Candles shone like truth “and the wonderful phrases of the psalms and hymns and prayers and scripture tranquillize”.⁹ Predictably he liked the virile King James Version of the Bible better than the “flat-footed and banal” modern translations.

So profound was modern materialism and sex-worship, and so obvious the flaws of the churches, that he stood amazed that anyone still worshipped. It was nothing short of miraculous: “As Hilaire Belloc once remarked of his church, it had obviously enjoyed God’s special favour and protection; otherwise, in view of the inane and often mischievous hands controlling its destiny, it would long since have disappeared”.¹⁰ Throughout his life, and especially in his earlier years, Muggeridge was cynical about the abuses of church power, as he was about the use of power and those exercising power generally in history. This was so even after his conversion in 1982 to Catholicism. His attitude was that he embraced Catholicism as the mainstream Christian tradition, despite its faults, these being the faults of humanity at large. He wrote in 1983: “For myself the great boon and blessing of the Church is that it enshrines not a panacea for contemporary ills, or the promise of future happiness, but a mystery – that all creation, its totality, is one; the manifestation of a loving creator whose reach is between the furthestmost limits of the universe and the counted hairs of each individual head... Faith tells me it is possible to establish with this loving creator a living and loving relationship which makes all things joyously comprehensible and acceptable”.¹¹

On sex, Muggeridge had an almost Manichean suspicion of the flesh and of women as temptresses. He quoted from Augustine and Blake to make the point. He went so far as to name volume 2 of his autobiography *The Infernal Grove*, with these lines from Blake headlining the title page:

Till I turn from Female Love

And root up the Infernal Grove

I shall never worthy be

⁹ MM, “Dayspring From On High” (1949) in *Time and Eternity: Uncollected Writings 1933-1983* (New York, Orbis, 2010), pp.98-99

¹⁰ MM, “The Gospel of Jesus Egalite” (1972), *ibid*, p.213.

¹¹ MM, “Finding Faith”, (1983), *ibid*, pp.226-227. A major attraction of the Catholic Church to him was its official opposition to legalised abortion “and other aspects of the appalling, ostensibly humane, holocaust which turns hospitals into abattoirs wherein unborn children and the ailing old are systematically murdered” (p.226). He was a lifelong opponent of eugenics and euthanasia.

To step into Eternity.

And from Augustine: "There's nothing so powerful in drawing the spirit of a man downwards as the caresses of a woman". In an essay on Augustine in *A Third Testament* (1976) he portrays him as peculiarly susceptible and knowing about all this. We realise that "to a temperament as sensual and imaginative as Augustine's, sexual indulgence makes the greatest appeal precisely because it offers a kind of fraudulent ecstasy – joys that expire when the neon lights go out... He was speaking from experience and I, for what it's worth, endorse his opinion".¹² Augustine had in his wild youth not been immune to the attractions of Roman games and theatre, wildly expensive spectacles of violence and eroticism, against which he later thundered. Muggeridge noted the parallel between the early Christian churches, finding it difficult to counteract "the prevailing atmosphere of luxury, violence and self-indulgence", and the present day crisis of western religion: "The similarity between his circumstances and ours is striking, not to say alarming. There is the same moral vacuity, leading to the same insensate passion for new sensations and experiences; the same fatuous credulity opening the way to every kind of charlatany and quackery, from fortune telling to psychoanalysis; the same sinister combination of great wealth and pointless ostentation with appalling poverty and unheeded affliction".¹³ Muggeridge knew of course that these things had existed to some degree in all ages. But it seemed to him that they were much worse in the Roman era and ours.

In their search for fulfilment humans had turned to a bewildering array of alternatives, not only to egomania and erotomania, "the two sicknesses of the godless", but to utopianism and science. All were false gods. Muggeridge, like his hero William Blake, thought notions of human perfectibility to be among the most dangerous forces in history. They had arisen out of the Enlightenment, science and the Industrial Revolution, and had spawned the destruction of the French and Russian revolutions. Blake had ferociously opposed William Godwin's vision of humanity perfecting itself through reason and technology (Godwin's daughter Mary Shelley got it more right in her prophetic novel *Frankenstein*). Blake rightly saw in Godwin's vision "all the dreadful potentialities of human arrogance and destructiveness whose fulfilment we have witnessed in our time". In the end Blake came to see "that the only true freedom is spiritual, achieved through the imagination, and that the notion of progress in the world of space and time is an illusion that beguiles mankind with false hopes."¹⁴

Christ and the Media (1977) printed three lectures he had given in London in 1976, in a series focussing on Christian thinking about contemporary issues, with BBC and other media people present and asking some very relevant questions afterwards. As some of them noted, despite his penetrating critique of television and other media, he seemed to fall into the trap of demonising technology in itself, especially the "the camera" and TV, rather than taking the more defensible position that technology was not good or evil as such but that it was the human use of it that was the key issue at stake. His wholesale condemnation of modern education and practices such as birth control (he refused to countenance any dangers to humanity in over-population), his social

¹² MM, *A Third Testament* (London, Collins, BBC, 1976), p.37.

¹³ Ibid, p.37.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp.80, 98, 100. In 1933 he wrote: "People who go all out for the scientific outlook end by producing the greatest of all absurdities – mysticised science; the worship of something idiotic like the [Soviet] Five Year Plan. After all, it is more sensible and more dignified to worship God than a Five Year Plan": *Diaries*, 6 January 1933, p.62.

censoriousness, also laid him open to charges of lack of balance, even extremism and bigotry. Nevertheless Malcolm the Jeremiah had some piercingly acute observations to make about modern capitalist civilization.

Evoking the famous scene in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* between the Grand Inquisitor and the returned Christ, Muggeridge saw modern humanity embracing rather than spurning the temptations held out by the Devil, embracing the kingdoms of the earth rather than of heaven: "Have we not been shown in the most dramatic manner how economic miracles end in servitude to economics? How the glorification of Man leads infallibly to the servitude of men, and his liberation through power to one variety or another of Gulag Archipelago?"¹⁵ What to make of a civilization materially so rich and powerful, yet spiritually so impoverished and fear-ridden? We had made remarkable inroads into discovering the secrets of nature and unravelling the mysteries even of the universe, developed massive powers of production and consumption, able "to transmit swifter than light every thought, smile or word that could possibly entertain, instruct or delight us...opening us possibilities beyond envisaging", yet haunted by fears of global swarming and nuclear destruction, and promoting conspicuous consumption by the affluent alongside ever-increasing hunger among the rest of humankind. With all of science and technology at our backs, and intent upon the pursuit of happiness – or at least pleasure – the west was taking the opposite course, "towards chaos, not order, towards breakdown, not stability, towards death, destruction and darkness, not life, creativity and light" (p.54). The West, he said more than once, with its rampant but ethically debased capitalism, its worship of pleasure and violence, its neuroses and false gurus, its vulgar culture and conformism, had embraced Freud's "death wish". There are significant parallels here with G. K. Chesterton's concept of "the servile state", and the criticisms of C. S. Lewis and George Orwell.¹⁶

Muggeridge brilliantly ridiculed the absurdities and banalities of things such as advertising and television, dominated by money and ratings, distorting reality. In the place of Christianity, a cult of consumption had been founded upon the mystical basis of sex, "the mysticism of materialism" as evidenced by "the superabundance of erotica" in books, newspapers, films, theatre and TV, "all impediments and restraints swept aside, no moral restrictions, no legal ones either. And then, with the coming of the birth pill, the crowning glory, the achievement of unprocreative procreation" (p.57). It has to be said that, in the end, Muggeridge, albeit grudgingly, thanked God for the media, with all its capacities for corrupting fantasy and deception. He thanked God indeed "for everything, since everything that has ever been, is or ever will be manifests his existence and is part of the totality of his love" (p.59).

¹⁵ *Christ and the Media* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p.39. Following references in text to are this source.

¹⁶ On this see Adam Schwartz, "Conceiving a Culture of Life in a Century of Bones: G.K. Chesterton and Malcolm Muggeridge as Social Critics", *Logos*, 11(2008), pp. 50-76, especially pp.59ff. Muggeridge was well aware of the ideas of Chesterton, Lewis and Orwell. Generally kind about GK, he was capable of cruelly debunking the others. As Swartz points out, Muggeridge saw the welfare state as a manifestation of capitalist materialism's deadly cultural ramifications: "concentrating state power further to facilitate social security would exacerbate the self-enslavement already fostered by dependence on oligopolies for an everlasting stream of consumer goods and the financial wherewithal to purchase them, leaving Westerners 'sleepwalking into our own Gulag'... capitalism also spawned an inhuman homogenization and humorlessness, a utilitarian aesthetic inimical to genuine imaginative art, and an unjust distribution of wealth..."(p.61).

Even the terminal decline of the west had its ultimate compensation. In the breakdown of power we could discern its true nature. Jesus was the prophet of the loser's, not the victor's, camp, "and proclaimed that the first will be last, that the weak are the strong, and the fools, the wise. Let us then, as Christians rejoice that we see around us on every hand the decay of the institutions and instruments of power; intimations of empire falling to pieces, money in total disarray, dictators and parliamentarians alike nonplussed by the confusion and conflicts which encompass them. For it is precisely when every earthly hope has been explored and found wanting... it is then that Christ's hand reaches out, sure and firm, that Christ's words bring their inexpressible comfort, that his light shines brightest, abolishing the darkness for ever" (p.77). Then humans could again be caught up in "the wonder of God's love flooding the universe, made aware of the stupendous creativity which animates all life, of our own participation in it – every colour brighter, every meaning clearer, every shape more shapely, every note more musical, every word written and spoken more explicit: above all, every human face, all human companionship, all human encounters recognisably a family affair" (p.75).

Muggeridge was a depressive personality. This is abundantly evidenced in his autobiography, diaries and writings. Apart from momentary periods of happiness and peace, he was morbidly gloomy about the world and his personal life. He constantly talked of ending his life because of its worthlessness and insignificance. One could quote almost randomly from his diary to illustrate these melancholy themes. Take for example these entries for 1945-46. In December of 1945 he spent two days (14-16) in the House of Commons to report on the debates. Predictably he was unimpressed (very little, one might say, ever impressed him, either fact or fiction). The debate, he said, "was extraordinarily unreal, even absurd, and shabby.... It struck me then, as so often, how in my life everything I have seen or been connected with has given me that feeling of something past its prime, running down, growing shabby and decrepit". A week or so later (23 December), on his way by train to Battle for Christmas, he "suddenly began to be alive again... Even the landscape, which had seemed dead, recovers its life... I kept thinking of all the lives I might have lived – a left-wing life, or a life of devotion to writing; all that I might have done, and understood that life was so insignificant that it didn't matter, or so significant that it didn't matter". (He admired Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*, and one suspects that he would have felt some affinity with the key character in it, the nihilist Bazarov). By March of 1946, well advanced on his edition of Ciano's diary, he was convinced that Europe was about to be conquered by the Bolsheviks: "Their triumph is coming, and is comprehensible, but still disagreeable for us and for England. Perhaps it is necessary... I have always known that what I belonged to was doomed, going down hill. The smell of decay was abroad. Even so, I belong to what is decaying and I will go down hill with it, not despairing, because it doesn't matter. Everything decays and in its decay fertilizes new life" (8 March).

He went to America in late March as the Washington correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, worrying whether he was happy with Kitty, whether he was doing the right thing. Again, on the boat, he felt a moment of joy: "Every now and again all my life I'd had a sudden mood of happiness, a kind of humility, a release from all fear, an awareness of the mysteriousness of my own being in relation to the universe. In such moods I recite the Lord's Prayer to myself, finding great comfort and delight in its words... 'Terrible is earth' is a phrase Hughie Kingsmill quoted to me once – terrible because of passion, which means the same as suffering. The realization that it is so implies a promise of release – to be patiently awaited, like sleep, and not angrily sought. I cannot be interested in anything except this reality, and if I had the courage I should give myself wholly to its pursuit" (30

March.) Although he liked Washington, “I cannot shake off deep undercurrent of melancholy; seldom, if ever, had less zest for life than these days” (27 April). In May he lunched with William Bullitt, a former American ambassador, who still believed that global problems could be sorted out through personal contacts and playing politics. This was an illusory belief Muggeridge felt: “Always a failure because the world’s troubles are a consequence, not of circumstances and individuals, but of the collapse of a moral synthesis, and of the authority and power this synthesis generated. This chaos must go on spreading; the breakdown, economic and social, must get worse. There is no reason why it shouldn’t” (11 May). A few days later a conversation with Wilmott Lewis of *The Times* “made me realize that the appalling melancholia induced by this country is due to the fact that the light of the spirit is quite out, making a kingdom of darkness, and my own spirit was correspondingly lightened” (18 May).¹⁷ A psychiatrist would find rich pickings here (in fact Muggeridge consulted psychiatrists at various stages of his life but was not forthcoming about their analysis of him).

Had Muggeridge anything to say about the decline of religion in modern times? He certainly believed that he was living in an age of terminal collapse of religion. The erosion of Christianity was, in his opinion, the critical cause of the impending death of western civilization, because its bedrock had been Christianity. To quote his biographer Ian Hunter, who observed that Muggeridge was obsessed by the idea of living in the twilight of a spent civilization: “a civilization, like a dwelling, must have a stable foundation or it collapses. Christianity was the foundation on which laws, customs, and regulations – a whole civil order, as well as our art, music and literature, rested. In other words, it provided the moral imperatives from which civil authority derived; destroy that foundation and the whole edifice topples. ‘Where there are neither religious values nor an accepted manner of behaviour to impose a moral pattern on life, all that is left is the pursuit of power as such’”¹⁸

Christianity had admittedly often succumbed to the temptations of power. Its fatal flaw was that it had allied itself with the pagan forces of the world, had been swept up in the tsunami of secularism, and had turned to stunts and trendy reform issues. Nevertheless Christianity expressed a higher truth altogether in its essential teachings, as had been taught by thinkers that Muggeridge admired such as the church fathers, Augustine and Pascal. Again quoting Hunter: “Undermine Christianity, venerate humanism in its place, and a true, immutable foundation capable of withstanding the buffeting tides of history, has been replaced by a false, shifting one. Instead of life being understood as a pilgrimage and man as a wayfarer, seeing at best through a glass darkly and fitfully, yet with a sure guide and a certain hope – a sojourner in time whose true home is eternity, humanism proclaims that life is a contest for survival in which man, having proved the fittest, has come of age and is capable of charting his own course, master of his own destiny. On such a foundation, Muggeridge contends, nothing can be constructed except fantasy; and there is no power, whether derived from wealth or arms, which can for long sustain fantasy”¹⁹

This places Muggeridge squarely in the traditional historiographical school that explains religious decline as the product of historical factors such as the Renaissance, the rise of capitalism and industry, science and evolution, liberalism and socialism – factors that bred materialism, excessive

¹⁷ These entries may be consulted in *Diaries*, pp204-222.

¹⁸ Ian Hunter, *Malcolm Muggeridge: A Life* (London, Collins, 1980), p.155.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.155.

individualism and secular hubris.²⁰ He spilt much ink attacking these targets, but we look in vain for any systematically sociological explanations of religious decline, such as those much favoured in more recent historiography. Muggeridge's insights were based on his own, very idiosyncratic, experiences and an imaginative feel for the current Zeitgeist.

²⁰ In 1961 he had a swipe at "Rationalism, ethical societies, all the various organizations which sprouted out of Darwinism, fertilizers of the decay of the Anglican Church": *Diaries*, 23 April, 1961, p.523. He never analysed in any depth the impact of Darwinian theory on religion, despite the fact that his great friend Alec Vidler had done so in his various writings, noting the complexity of the relationship.