The fourth impostor

1 – The unfaithful apostle

The legend of a mysterious and unnamable book hunted for a long time the intellectual world of the Middle Ages. It was the bearer of a thesis so wicked that it could not even be mentioned - to refute it - without committing sin against the majesty of God. This book was the *Treaty of the Three Impostors*, more the idea of a book than a real one, the project of a virulent polemical pamphlet, which would have contained the first formulation of a charge of imposture leveled against the founders of the three Abrahamic religions (and indirectly, to the founders of religions in general). Since then the simple ideas attributed to the first version have disappeared and reappeared several times, like a karstic river, adapted to current philosophical sensibilities and gaining in complexity with every reappearance. A famous 1600s reincarnation of this text, for example, has been attributed to Spinoza. And a version of these extremely radical ideas can also be read in a late work of Jeremy Bentham, *Not Paul, but Jesus* (1823). This text had a complicated publishing history and was never published in full. In the part published in 1823, the charge of imposture only marginally regards the founders of the three great religions. With regard to Jesus, in particular, the published part of the book boasts a near-Orthodox respect (not so, as we shall see, in the unpublished part of the book). The charge is mainly directed against a fourth figure, whose inclusion in the ranks of the great religious impostors is the essential point of the peculiar slant that Bentham placed on the age-old imposture thesis.

At first sight, the published part of *Not Paul, but Jesus* seems to consist mostly of a discussion about the evidences for Paul's conversion to Christianity and his relationship with the apostles, by an investigator strongly prejudiced against the main object of his inquiry. The main thesis of the book is that the teaching of Paul is not to be considered part of the Christian religion. This thesis is founded on the charge of imposture against Paul, but also on a strong emphasis on differences between the moral teachings of Jesus and Paul. So for Bentham no point of doctrine that has only Paul's authority to support it can be considered a legitimate part of the Christian religion, any more than if it came from a man of our times.

To prove the insincerity of Paul's conversion and that it was a means to an end, Bentham focuses on the contradictions between the three versions of this conversion in the *Acts of the Apostles*. The first of these is a description by the author of *Acts*, which in this case speaks in first person and report the evidence which is in his possession. The other two, instead, are from speeches given by Paul himself, also included in the *Acts*. Bentham points out that the three different descriptions of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus are "sadly inconsistent." For example, a first striking difference concerns the instructions received by Paul: in the first version, he is just told to go to Damascus and wait there to receive further instructions, but in the second all the instructions are given immediately.

The contradictions between these different "testimonies" are important to Bentham, who considers that each version provided was adapted to the circumstances of its formulation, and therefore cannot be trusted, and indeed this contradiction is to be considered as indirect evidence of the insincerity of the person who has made that kind of testimony—as you would today, says Bentham, in the case of any criminal trial. On the other hand, the episode of the conversion is crucial to the entire Christian history, according to Bentham, not only as it describes a supernatural transition from being a persecutor to a zealous supporter of Christianity, but especially because it led to the formulation of a new body of doctrine, not taught by Jesus or the apostles. In these pages, Bentham refers repeatedly to the career of Paul as a persecutor of Christians, to give a description of a treacherous and cruel character, using more or less the same techniques that could be used in a courtroom to undermine the credibility of a witness or a defendant.

Bentham's insistence on the beginning of Paul's career as a cruel persecutor of the Christians serves to draw a baffling continuous between the anti-Christian Saul, prior to conversion, and his zeal as a "propagandist" of Christianity and organizer of the early church following his conversion. Bentham

argues that Paul's goal, both before and after his alleged conversion, had always been to have the Christians in his power, and that the version of Christianity propagated by Paul is indeed different, in many essential points, from that given by Jesus as a historical person.

An obvious problem for Bentham's interpretation was to explain the other apostles' friendly and cooperative attitude to Paul, if Paul was really the impostor that Bentham says he was, and if the apostles were not to be discredited, which Bentham was not yet ready to do. Bentham thus presents the apostles as faced with a proposal they could not refuse. Paul had the advantage over them, thanks to the fact that the Jewish authorities had entrusted him with the task of suppressing the new scandalous heresy. Paul exploited this advantage to offer the apostles to engage himself to have all harassment of their church stopped. He also proposed the admitting of new converts to their religion, and took it upon himself to propagate the new faith among non-Jewish nations. Paul could present himself as more apt a candidate to this end than the apostles themselves, who did not know Greek (the lingua franca throughout the eastern Mediterranean, also widely spoken by the educated classes of Rome). Furthermore, when Paul first came into contact with the apostles, the newborn Christianity had spread almost exclusively among the various Jewish communities of the Mediterranean, so the apostles may have thought that this was a small price to pay in exchange for the security of their communities.

In Bentham's reconstruction, from that moment onward the relationship of Paul and the Apostles was reduced to irrelevancy. Bentham mentions four visits of Paul to Jerusalem during the entire period after his conversion, during none of which Paul met all the apostles, and during which the relationship had deteriorated from the initial coolness, due to Paul's earlier career (which amply justified apprehension and fear on the part of the Christian community) to the open hostility that characterized his last visit, a visit that the apostles somehow tried to prevent (traces of this futile attempt being also found in the *Acts*). In Bentham's reconstruction, during that visit Paul tried to assume the spiritual and political domination of what was then the center of Christianity, "taking it from the gentle sway of the apostles."

2 – Inquisitorial hermeneutics

The text we are examining is humorous and aggressive, a way of writing certainly appropriate to Bentham's mood and ideas about religion during this period. Skimming the text of *Not Paul*, examples of forensic irony abound, and even more if we look at the preparatory manuscripts that were not included in the published work. In these we find pages such as the one where Bentham gives directions about how to set the stage for a vision, in order to better deceive the most credulous witnesses, "the best, if not unique, is to throw down your faces, so you can go into a trance, and as long as it suits you remain in that state, you can have all the visions that you want ... plus you also have plenty of time to think well about what they should be. "

Even in the published text, however, the irony is clear in many cases, such as the page where, wanting to diminish the importance of one of the alleged miracles of Paul, who in the story told in *Acts* was left unharmed by the bite of a poisonous snake, Bentham ironically reduces the reptile to the size of a leech, with an inevitable result of comicity.

All this is more or less remarkable, but it becomes much more so if we do not stop at the text actually published by Bentham, but also consult its preparatory manuscripts, which are held in the Special Collection Room of University College in London. These manuscripts includes long sections that Bentham decided to leave out of the text published in 1823, with the idea of possibly publishing them at a later time. In those manuscripts, the virulence the published work directs against Paul is also extended to the apostles, and even to Jesus himself. According to Bentham, the real purpose of Jesus' mission was not to establish a new religion, or to amend an existing one, nor to be a proponent of a new form of morality. Jesus' purpose was simply to gain political power over the Jewish nation, or to be precisely that liberator (from the Romans) that many of his contemporaries believed and hoped he would be. The notion of a purely spiritual kingdom, which also undoubtedly appears in the words of

Jesus, was developed only when his liberation movement was confronted with increasing difficulties, and served only as a clever cover to conceal the real, politically revolutionary project of his movement. These manuscripts thus give us a clearer understanding of Bentham's endeavor, which we can see as an attack on the historical origins of Christianity, which he interprets as an essentially political movement, inseparable from the Jewish-Roman context in which it arose, and whose moral directives, which had a mainly tactical and contingent motivation, should not be unduly generalized.

3 – Why Paul?

As for the specifically Pauline moral directions, Bentham believed (in the wake of a robust tradition of interpretation) that Paul's insistence on salvation by faith (and not by works) might be seen as ethically disruptive and anarchic, as antinomian currents often did. Anyway, in Bentham's analysis, Paul's antinomianism has an important exception, regarding sexual morality. Bentham thought, in accordance with the tenets of hedonistic calculus, that sexual acts, if consensual, are - all of them - innocent pleasures, especially if not procreative. Masturbation, contraception, sodomy are thus pleasures without consequences, i.e., "pure good". But the sexual taboos most strongly enforced by Paul concentrated precisely on these less noxious pleasures. Paul found it difficult to accept even the sexuality "necessary to the existence of the species". Toward "the irregular form," he was "an implacably condemning judge."

Bentham's evaluation of all this could be nothing but negative. In his opinion, Paul was, as Crompton said some years ago, "the antiutilitarian par excellence". In Paul he saw fear and distrust of pleasure in general, a position which, in Bentham's view, did not at all agree with Jesus'. This interpretation of the Pauline legacy is the main focus of the unpublished part of *Not Paul, but Jesus*, the part which at the moment we can only read in manuscript form.

4 – The liberty of taste

The criticism that Bentham leveled at Paul in his manuscripts specifically regards the spurious ascetic element, in matters of sexual morality, which Bentham regards as an improper addition to the teaching and practices of Jesus. This part, in Bentham's intentions, was to be the last section of his work on Paul, and would have contained one of his main arguments, namely, a defense of sexual freedom.

In presenting the second part of his work, Bentham described the whole project in the following terms: "… a work which has for its object the defense of the principle of utility as regards freedom of taste, against the joint hostility of the ascetic principle of antipathy. " By "freedom of taste", Bentham is explicitly referring here to what he calls "the pleasures of the bed", pleasures which, if enjoyed without harm to others and for themselves, and by mutual consent, are among the most obvious ways to "maximize utility". This applies both to heterosexual pleasures and to homosexual ones, and indeed the latter, in Bentham's view, are closer to the notion of pure pleasure, as they are less susceptible to unpleasant consequences (Bentham makes the explicit example of unwanted pregnancies).

Bentham's publishing project was both ambitious and cautious. The idea was to gradually prepare the public to the most controversial (and indeed scandalous) part of his argument, and he reserved the right to play the last cards in his hand, in his view the decisive ones, only when he felt that the time was fit for them. These pages, when published, would have unveiled the meaning of the whole operation, and then the first part (the only one that ended up being actually published) would have been shown to be only an introduction of historical nature.

The project as a whole, as Bentham understood it in the first phase of the composition of *Not Paul*, we can derive from one of the preparatory manuscripts, dated March 17, 1818. We find here an outline of the whole work, divided into three parts: the first part corresponds to the published part of *Not Paul* (the text of 1823), which should have been followed by a second part, which in this manuscript is

tentatively titled "History: viz. History of the Church ", dedicated to the history of the early church during the period covered by the narrative found in *Acts*. (Part of this material was put by Bentham in an Appendix added to *Not Paul*.) Then there was to be a third part, entitled in this manuscript "Doctrine: Concerns pointing off so much as the subject of asceticism."

A large part of the manuscripts of *Not Paul* can be ascribed to this third part. They try to emphasize that Paul artificially superimposed the ascetic principle on Jesus' teachings, with deep deception. Jesus was not, in Bentham's description, a very rigorous thinker, but he was also a being of "extraordinary freedom". He not only tolerated the promiscuous sexual conduct of Mary Magdalene, but also allowed the presence of many homosexuals in the group of the apostles and of his first disciples. Indeed, according to Bentham, Jesus was himself a bisexual, and the apostle John was one of his lovers. On this essential point, namely the wide latitude of Jesus on sexual freedom, Bentham even waxes lyrical in his manuscripts: "Jesus, from whose lips not a syllable favourable to ascetic self-denial is, by any one of his biographers, as represented having ever issued. Jesus who, among his disciples, had one whom he imparted his authority and another on whose bosom his head reclined, and for whom he awoved his love: Jesus who, in the stripling clad in loose attire, still found a faithful adherent, after the rest of them had fled: Jesus, in whom the woman taken in adultery found a successful advocate: Jesus, on the whole field of sexual irregularity preserved an uninterrupted silence ".

As Crompton observed some years ago, Bentham in this page is busy in forging a counter-myth, 'which would have been supremely blasphemous to the ears of his contemporaries, the myth of "Jesus, the lover of men",' which is in total opposition to the myth the Middle Ages had kept alive, the legend of a Christ at whose birth all homosexuals died.

In comparison with the teaching and practice of Jesus, the severe asceticism imposed by Paul was therefore something more than a travesty, it was a real reversal, which changed the orientation of the doctrine ("Jesus was one person, Paul was another. The religion of Jesus was one thing, the religion of Paul was another," we read a little further in the manuscript just mentioned). Ideas like these, had they been published, would reserve today a place of great evidence for Bentham on the shelves that libraries assign to "queer studies". But it is obvious that, in the England of King George III, Bentham could never find a publisher willing to publish such a text, which would have been a pretty obvious target for the application of the law on blasphemy. And we can certainly agree with Lea Campos Boralevi that, if one of these writings on sexual eccentricities had reached the public of his time, all hope of approval for the projects of political and social reform sponsored by Bentham, from the Panopticon for prisoners to the constitutional reform, would have been abandoned forever.

What are we to make of all this? I think we can agree with Crompton when he says that "Bentham's interpretation is neither probable nor impossible". But I am more perplexed when he says that "most responses to Bentham's theory, however, will be less a response to the evidence than an indication of one's feelings about homosexuality, or, for that matter, about ascribing sexual feelings of any sort to Christ". I come from Italy, a country which I expect in some quarters could be strongly suspected of a prejudiced view of a hot issue like this one. And I don't intend to deny that there are many, in my country, who would gladly and rapturously grasp the opposite flags of sexual liberty and of the dignity of the holy person. But the academic debate is usually more clear-headed, and we can dryly observe that when we read Bentham's pages about Jesus, even if less inclined to denounce the scandal than his contemporaries, we are impressed by the scanty probative basis on which Bentham founded his affirmations on this point, which is indeed amazing in a refined theoretician of the most suitable and rational ways for harvesting proofs, such as Bentham was for all of his life as a scholar of the law.