

Brexit – II

May 11, 2019

There is a deservedly famous English poem from the 19th century which throws much light on the huge fuss which has been stirred up by the attempt of the British people to escape from the trammels of the European Union. “Dover Beach” was written probably in 1851 by Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), and presents in four uneven verses his deep melancholy as he stands on the shore of the English Channel and listens to the unceasing beat of the surf on the beach in front of the house where he is staying for the night with his beloved, presumably his lawful wife.

The first verse is a beautiful description of the moonlit seashore and of the surf, concluding with the “eternal note of sadness” that he seems to hear in the surf. As an accomplished classical scholar, he recalls a quotation from the Greek playwright Sophocles (496–406 BC) who heard in the same surf ebbing and flowing on a similar beach thousands of miles away and more than two thousand years ago “the turbid ebb and flow of human misery,” and Arnold’s mind turns to the deep troubles of his own age, the Victorian age. Arnold was never a Catholic, but in the third verse he traces these troubles back to his 19th century’s loss of Faith, whose “melancholy long withdrawing roar” he seems to hear in the sound of the surf ebbing away before him.

In the fourth and least verse he presents the only solution that he has to the problem of the life ebbing out of what was once Christendom, and that is to turn to his beloved beside him and beg her to remain true to him, because all that they really have is one another. Thus in the poem’s dark conclusion, everything else

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

*Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

So Arnold had enough faith to see that the essential problem of his civilization was the loss of religious faith, but he lacked the faith to believe in the real and existing alternative to the resulting darkness and confusion, namely the Catholic Church. Similarly the Brexiteers have enough sane instincts left to sense that the European Union is going the wrong way, but they have even less religion left in them than Arnold had, and so they have even less idea than he had of how to avoid the “darkling plain.” Hence the Brexit debate continues to be a “clash of ignorant armies by night,” because everybody is framing the debate in economic terms, when in fact the real debate is religious, between the last vestiges of the Christian nations on the one side and the onset of the Antichrist with his New World Order on the other side. It is the religious dimension that gives to the debate its force on both sides. It is the lack of religion on both sides that gives to the debate its confusion.

For indeed God is the great Absentee from modern “civilization,” but as Cardinal Pie once said, if He does not govern by His presence, He will govern by His absence. Without Him, the Brexit debate is being conducted in largely economic terms, on the basis of which the Brexiteers are bound to lose. But are they willing to turn in the direction of God? That is the question.

Kyrie eleison.