

Intelligent Paganism

November 22, 2008

Of the famous Roman satirist, Juvenal (67–130 A.D?), there are two especially known quotes: “Bread and circuses,” and “A healthy mind in a healthy body.” The context of this second quote is truly interesting. Here is the whole passage from the Tenth Satire, in a free translation:

“Should men then pray for nothing? Take my advice,

And let the gods themselves judge what is nice

For us and our affairs, since they will heed

Not what we like, but what we truly need.

Dearer to them than to himself is man

Who driven by vain desire, blind worry, can

Beg for this kind of child, that kind of wife

When the gods alone can shape a happy life.

“But beg if you must for something at each shrine

Where you feel bound to offer guts of swine,

Pray to the gods for this – a healthy mind

In a healthy body. Pray that death may find

Your spirit unperturbed, not wishing to live

Any more than Mother Nature wants to give,

A spirit ready to bear all kinds of pain,

Forsaking anger, free from desire of gain,

Preferring heavy and noble work to all

The pleasures available at the local mall.

All this lies in your power – your own virtue

Is the only path to a happy life for you.

Whoever has good sense will never be stuck –

‘Tis we who place in Heaven a god of luck.”

What is remarkable here is how the pagan Juvenal says so many things that the Christian writers say. For instance, how we men are loved from above more than we love ourselves, how the powers above know better than we do what we need, and will only give us what we really need. Also how virtue is the only path to happiness, and how it depends upon ourselves to live wisely, and not upon our stars, or whatever.

There are at least two lessons to be drawn by Christians from the Roman satirist’s wisdom. Firstly, grace is in line with the nature that God gave us, and does not come down, like on a parachute with a machine-gun, to get nature into line. When the pagan writer without grace can see so many spiritual truths from nature alone, it proves that nature and grace are aligned, even if grace is infinitely far above nature, and nature has no claim at all upon it. Too many Catholics see the grace of our religion as a kind of policeman with a truncheon to beat us into shape. Similarly law (good law) is a friend and not an enemy of nature!

A second lesson might be that the pre-Christian pagans, like Juvenal, have rather more grip on reality than the post-Christian pagans of our own time. Apostates of today are washing out both grace and nature, in such a way that they would never utter the good sense that Juvenal here utters.

Kyrie eleison.