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RELIGIOUS ASTROLOGY IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

THE "ART" OR "SCIENCE" OF ASTROLOGY, by which men observed the patterns of the stars and the motions of the planets and endeavoured to discover from them the imminent fortune of nations and individuals on this their own world, originated in ancient Babylon and was practised in the West until the seventeenth century. In examining its role in that time of European spiritual and intellectual crisis, the changing world-view of Western man can be seen within the context of religio-political upheaval and the growth of a purely rationalist scientific awareness.

In mediaeval Europe astrology was never really integrated into Christian orthodoxy, but astral portents such as comets were always seen as special evidences of divine providence. Certainly two of the greatest thinkers of the mediaeval West, Thomas Aquinas and Roger Bacon, agreed that celestial bodies influenced human passions and temperament. In the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation a widespread interest in astrology flourished in both camps of divided Christendom. Melanchthon, the leading theologian of the Protestant Reformation, upheld the significance of astrology; among Roman Catholics, the prodigious appearance of the "new star" of 1572-73 caused widespread speculation and prophecy of ultimate Papal victory. Official astrologers were regularly consulted at both the Imperial and Papal courts. In the early seventeenth century, astrological interest was intensified throughout the Christian world—yet it was destined to be the final epoch in which such a preoccupation filled a significant place in the European religious mentality. By the end of that age, rationalist science and rationalist theology had fragmented knowledge and destroyed the acceptability of astrology.

Amid the general crisis which afflicted Europe politically and economically, socially and intellectually, in the early seventeenth century, the quest for wisdom amid the stars could not be ignored.¹ The comet of 1618 evoked profound and widespread misgivings throughout Christian Europe and was believed to herald imminent conflict.² Its first red apparition over Bohemia and Austria was for

many earnest Christians a divinely-sent call to repentance and "a certain harbinger and forerunner of the Lord's high indignation". With the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War in 1618, Catholics and Protestants alike sought for hope amid the latest astrological portents and horoscopic predictions, but usually pessimism prevailed; "with the discovery of new stars, and particularly with the comet of 1618, science seemed to support the prophets of disaster."³ During that bitter war there were those who correlated its dreadful carnage and devastation with unusual occurrences in the heavens. In 1638 a keen English public was acquainted with the latest continental prodigies by *Warnings of Germany by Wonderful Signs*, a compilation from numerous German and Dutch sources. It traced the terrible happenings consequent upon the appearance of the 1618 comet and subsequent astral portents. Throughout the 1620's, all over Germany and Bohemia strange visions in the sky were reported. They were of armies battling in the heavens (Brunswick 1619, Linz 1623, Silesia 1624, Anhalt 1624), of bloody swords and sickles in the sky (Meyenfeld 1623, Malantz 1623), of triple suns and rainbows (Vienna 1619, Heidelberg 1622, Bohemia 1624, Hamburg 1627), and of many other portents such as thunderbolts and visions of blood. The devout and the credulous noted how major battles and terrible massacres seemed soon to follow such prodigious manifestations, and in the middle of the war German citizens confessed that their neglect of the heavenly wonders had caused war and epidemics to sweep their land. The *Lacrymae Germaniae* of Nuremberg, 1638, captured the spirit of the times:

It was our complemental, and not real, and formal religion which caused these plagues to fall so heavy upon us: we had formerly warnings by visible Signs and Meteors, and we neglected them, and sleighted them, as if they had not appertained to us; therefore we have been guilty of our own blood and destruction, for it was our neglect that caused these judgements to fall upon us.⁴

The leaders on both sides looked to their horoscopes and read the heavens anxiously. On the Catholic side, Count Wallenstein, commander of the Imperial forces of Ferdinand II, comes to us as "the soldier under Saturn" who employed the great astronomer Johann Kepler to interpret his horoscope:

Born under a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter . . . his was, so his horoscope informed him, a restless, exacting mind, impatient of old methods and forever striving for the new and the untried, secretive, melancholy, suspicious, contemptuous of his fellow-men and their convictions. He would be avaricious, deceitful, greedy for power, loving no one and by no one beloved, changeable in his humours, quarrelsome, friendless and cruel.⁵

On the Protestant side, prophecies of the victories of King Gustavus Adolphus of

Sweden in Germany derived their origin from as far back as 1572-73, and Tycho Brahe's comments on the significance of the "new star".⁶ Gustavus Adolphus' victories seemed to fulfil both biblical prophecy and astrological prediction: he was both "Lion of the North" and "Star of the North":

We can find no other fit subject of application than the new risen Star radiant in virtue and goodness, sparkling with the beams of Martial Valour, the prosperous and admired Gustavus Adolphus King of Sweden, who by his manifold and sudden conquests is now made the spectacle of the Christian World, beheld, and spoken of with no less admiration, than that new Star of the North, which seemeth to be his fore-runner.⁷

In England, the religious use of astrology as an aid towards a Christian understanding of politics was a facet of seventeenth-century Protestantism which kept people aware of the needs of their continental co-religionists. There was a ready public for accounts of the Thirty Years' War and of the strange signs in the heavens which accompanied or foretold its progress over central Europe. During the English Civil War, 1642-46, the astrological almanacks of William Lilly were widely followed.⁸ They related horoscopes to political and military events, and his predictions were not without seeming success: he prophesied the death of Charles I and the coming of the Great Plague. With the restoration of Charles II in 1660, Lilly managed to survive Royalist investigations into his loyalty, although under Cromwell he had been so strongly a Parliament man that at Colchester in 1648 his astrological predictions of speedy victory spurred on the Parliamentary forces in their battle. Lilly's international renown throughout the Protestant world spread to Sweden, where King Charles Gustavus awarded him a gold chain and medal for his complimentary horoscopes. The considerable standing of Lilly and the ready market in England, Holland, Denmark, and Protestant Germany for his spate of almanacks and astrological works such as *English Merlin Revived* (1644), *Supernatural Sights and Apparitions* (1644), and *Monarchy and No Monarchy* (1651), reflect the widespread interest in religio-political astrology within the orthodox Protestantism of the time.

In the years following the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648 there was a rapid diminution in the intensity of religious enthusiasm; it was displaced throughout Western Europe by a sense of exhaustion, an abhorrence of all extremism, the growth of toleration, and the slow emergence of rationalist science. Religious astrology withered in its content and narrowed in its appeal. In England the final outburst of horoscopic predictions of crises occurred when the country was threatened by Louis XIV of France. While *The Fortune of France* (1678) by Mr. Truswell,

the Recorder of Lincoln, and *The Nativity of Louis XIV* (1680) pondered the evidence of the stars upon that specific political danger, the *Vox Lunaris* (1679) of John Partridge, "student in physic and astrology", furnished credulous elements among the public with generalised prophecies of imminent changes in Church and State after "two moons" had been seen in London. Joseph Blagrave (1610-1682) of Reading, a student of astronomy and philosophy as well as a medical practitioner with a predilection for "astrological cures", typified in that age the final preoccupation of a minimally Christian astrology with purely private needs. The author of *Astrological Practice of Physics* (1671) and *Introduction to Astrology* (1682), he claimed to cast out devils by astrological knowledge and in the name of the Holy Trinity. In France, Pierre Borel (*circa* 1620 to 1689),⁹ a writer on astronomy and astrology, court physician, chemist, and naturalist, confined his astrology to cosmological speculations and eschewed political predictions. As with so many facets of the religious outlook of the West in the late seventeenth century, the real watershed of belief for Europe, astrology became personal and quietist.

Astrology was also less and less religious. There were mounting pressures from rationalist philosophy upon all religious and supernaturalist credence. Astronomy and astrology became finally separate fields of enquiry. By the close of the seventeenth century, European Protestantism had formally accepted the Newtonian scientific revolution, and with it its rationalism and empiricism. As Protestantism sought to accommodate itself to the new science, it did so at the cost of accepting the fragmentation of knowledge, and of discounting traditional intuitive, non-rational modes of perception of truth. In a Christian theology which fully took within itself Newtonian physics, there was no place for religious astrology, for Newton's mathematically-based vision of the ordered universe moving predictably in accord with divinely-ordained laws seemed to leave no place for mystical perception or for any divine revelations to men by heavenly portents.

How are we to understand the religious basis and appeal of astrology during the period from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries, when for many Protestants a keen interest in horoscopic divination of earthly events was not merely not incompatible with Reformed Christian orthodoxy but veritably an integral adjunct to it?

The Preface to *Warnings of Germany by Wonderful Signs*, by Captain L. Brinkmair, who was probably an English Puritan soldier-of-fortune in the Thirty Years' War, gives insight into some concepts of God and the natural order then current. In Nature men saw the working of Divine Providence, its order mani-

festing the wisdom of the Ordainer. This, of course, was a traditional and orthodox theological standpoint:

Nature is that constant order of being and working, which God hath appointed for the creatures. Where there is order, and that order constant, and both determined by an infinite wisdom, there must necessarily be some good end propounded by the Ordainer, and all motions effectual for accomplishment. Yet the course of Nature is subject to many alterations, because there is a God above nature, who hath set bounds for the creatures, but none for him save the counsel of his will.¹⁰

It was with the "alterations" that religious astrology was concerned, for it was through the miraculous, the unusual, and the inexplicable that God was believed to speak to discerning religious men in a very special way. "Those things which are more rare in the course of nature, divers, contrary or above, are more than ordinarily to be thought of." Prodigious apparitions in the heavens were prophetic indications of the divine will: "Signs and wonders wrought by God immediately, or by others at his appointment, to signify his pleasure beforehand touching some special mercy or judgement ensuing." Hardwick Warren, author of *Magic and Astrology Vindicated* (1651), shared this concept of the divine will for men expressing itself through both the ordered and the unusual in Nature: movements in the heavens revealed the movements of God's purposes. Influenced profoundly by William Lilly, Warren typified those who sought to understand history with the key of religious astrology:

Did not the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the year 1425, which were in Scorpio, a treacherous and false Sign, find us in England engaged in a war with France, Spain at the same time in division about a successor in the royal power, and under the effects of the same conjunction Henry VI was crowned at Paris? Also under the conjunction of the two superiors in the year 1603 in the Sign of Sagitarius, did not James King of Scotland come to be King of England?¹²

The function of the astrological art was

to know what the significations and effects of the several motions, aspects and positions of the heavenly bodies do hint unto us in reference to the World in general, and to Kingdoms, States, Cities, Families, and the particular fate of every man.¹³

Yet for Warren this astrological concern was simply a part of a total religious outlook which clearly owed much to the influence of Mirandola and the school of Jacob Boehme and Valentin Weigel. Within Warren's mysticism, the influence of the heavenly bodies upon men was but one channel of the divine will in the natural order, for all Nature was, under God, inter-related and inter-reacting with mystical "sympathies" and "influences". He saw God as the first Cause, continually

creating and sustaining the whole natural order by means of "ministering powers" and "intelligences" among which were the heavenly bodies:

. . . Ministering Powers which God, the first Cause, hath set up under himself, for the regulating and governing of these inferior things (stones, herbs, metals, living creatures). . . For God, the chief Cause and Original of all Virtues, affords the seal of the Ideas to the Intelligences, his Ministers; who, like faithful Executors, do seal everything committed to them, with the Ideal Virtue, by the Heavens and Stars, as it were Instruments.¹⁴

The vision of the mystic pantheist seeing all creation throbbing with divinely-given vitality, and the Christian astrology of the orthodox Puritan keen to discern the revelations of the divine will in starry prodigies, were thus united in the outlook of such men as Warren.

Clearly astrology was not simply a private preoccupation with calculating the positions of the stars to determine personal horoscopes. That latter practice was fashionable both among leading astronomers and court charlatans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and its validity was accepted even by those who criticized astrological practices as being anti-Christian. "I deny not that the Heavens have influences upon Men's bodies", wrote John Allen in *Judicial Astrologers Totally Routed* (1659).¹⁵ For many in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, astrology as a means of plotting and foretelling divine direction and intervention in human affairs became an apparently valid element of their religious experience, integrated to an unprecedented degree into their Christian theological system. Living amid conditions of religious and political crisis, they sought to understand any and all possible manifestations of the divine will. Living in the era of scientific revolution—the century and a half marked by the names of Copernicus, Kepler, Brahe, Galileo, and Newton—with its ever-widening awareness of the physical universe, many of the religiously devout sought that divine will amid the unusual and seemingly inexplicable phenomena of nature in the heavens. The astrological preoccupation represents in a very real sense the response of a seventeenth-century Protestantism highly charged with political dynamism and prophetic expectancy to the challenge of making a synthesis of theology, astronomy, and history; it was a first-stage, crudely "scientific", and unsophisticated response. Containing elements both of Calvinistic determinism and the nebulous optimism characteristic of God-in-nature pantheism, Christian astrology in its form and content had also within it the stirrings of the new scientific awareness.

This inter-reaction of intense "crisis" Protestantism and the emergent scientific consciousness is seen in various otherwise apparently bizarre religious preoccupations

which flowered alongside astrology in the seventeenth century. The detailed study of prophetic scriptures, close investigation into the "mathematics" of such biblical books as Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation, and the search to clarify the mystical symbolism believed to be enshrined in their use of numbers, all reveal a common enthusiasm.¹⁶ From the late sixteenth century until the mid-seventeenth century, Protestant Europe witnessed a keen academic and homiletic interest in the apocalyptic paralleled by a mounting popular chiliasm. Before religious civil war provided the hothouse atmosphere within which chiliasm flourished, college theologians and country parsons alike delved mystically and mathematically into apocalyptic scriptures seeking "the key" to understanding their own times. In 1582 James Sanford translated from the French Brocard's *Revelation of St. John* for the benefit of devout Elizabethans; by 1617 Richard Bernard, "preacher of God's Word at Batcombe in Somersetshire", could publish *A Key of Knowledge for the Opening of the Secret Mysteries of St. John's Mystical Revelation* in the sure knowledge of a ready readership. Bernard's work, a discussion of the mystical and mathematical significance of the biblical number 666 as the key to understanding Revelation in cataclysmic anti-Catholic terms, was typical of the steady flow of apocalyptic exegesis of the time: its sub-title, *The New Jerusalem . . . framed in the number 144,000*, was equally representative of Protestant interest in scriptural arithmetic. This interest was international. In Germany, Abraham Franckenberg (1593-1652),¹⁷ alchemist and mystic, typified those itinerant Protestant laymen of eclectic religious sympathies whose search for "the key" of universal understanding ranged through speculative science, cabbalism, Copernican astronomy, astrology, and the symbolism of numbers. Franckenberg's personal contacts included Jacob Boehme and Johann Hevelius, the Danzig astronomer. In *Raphael the Archangel* (1639) is revealed Franckenberg's comprehensive fluidity of mind which simultaneously embraced magic and mysticism, medicine and mathematics. In such minds there existed no conflict between the rational and intuitive modes of perception; biblical mathematics, like religious astrology, represented a synthesis of traditional mysticism and new scientific awareness.

Denunciation of religious astrology as heretical, un-Christian, un-biblical, and tantamount to demon worship was not unknown in the early 1600's; by the end of the seventeenth century such attitudes predominated. Some classed it with black magic as a practice under satanic influence: "They that addicted themselves to the practice of divining astrology, the Devil did at first send his secret assistance, and at length entice them into a contract."¹⁸ John Allen's words were supported by John Brayne, a former Christian astrologer who had come to renounce astrology on con-

cluding that all planetary motions were under diabolic control.¹⁹ Yet it was above all the triumph of rationalistic science and its acceptance by Protestant orthodoxy which destroyed the theological basis for religious astrology, made the distinction between astrology and astronomy final and irrevocable, and debased the mystic-intuitive mode of perception of truth in Western civilisation:

Astrology of old was no more than Astronomy, an ingenious and laudable science, leading a man to the knowledge of that which may be known and ought to be studied, viz. the Greatness and Wisdom of God, manifested in His works. But Astrology is Science falsely so called, teaching men vainly to pry into that which neither can be known nor ought to be sought after, viz. contingencies to come, which belong only unto God to know and reveal.²⁰

Astrology became condemned as non-Christian because it was non-rational.

In conclusion, it is clear that the decline of religious astrology by the end of the seventeenth century reflected the accelerating fragmentation of Western Man's understanding of the universe. In his spiritual and intellectual development that was the age *par excellence* of crisis and conflict leading to new clarification and synthesis. Rationalist science implicitly denied the necessity for a synthesis with spiritual perception of the natural world. Such a synthesis religious astrology had temporarily represented in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Essentially mystical while striving also to be empirical, religious astrology interpreted the heavenly movements as providential manifestations to be understood and correlated on a factual basis of observation with reference to critical events in the religio-political affairs of men. In fact, the religion of Western Protestant Man became so concerned to purge itself of all non-rational elements that for half of the eighteenth century it virtually lost all grasp of the supernatural, as Deism and anti-Enthusiasm held sway. The West still seeks a religio-scientific synthesis.

NOTES

1. H. R. Trevor-Roper, "The General Crisis of the 17th Century", *Past and Present* (Nov., 1959), pp. 31-32, and R. Mousnier's comments in *Past and Present* (Nov., 1960), pp. 23-24.
2. *The Warnings of Germany by Wonderful Signs and Stranges Prodigies seen between 1618 and 1638*, ed. Capt. L. Brinkmair (London, 1638).
3. Trevor-Roper, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
4. *Lacrymae Germaniae* (Nuremberg, 1638), p. 59.

5. C. V. Wedgwood, *Thirty Years War* (London, 1938), pp. 171-2; also, Helbig, *Der Kaiser Ferdinand und der Herzog zu Friedland* (Dresden, 1852), pp. 62-71; F. Watson, *Wallenstein, Soldier under Saturn* (London, 1938).
6. Tycho Brahe, *De Nova Stella Anni 1572*, Eng. trans. (London, 1632), pp. 2-14.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
8. H. Warren, *Magic and Astrology Vindicated* (1651) p. 16 ff.; W. Lilly, *His History of His Life and Times* (1715); *Dictionary of National Biography*.
9. Borel's works included *Bibliotheca Chimica* (Paris, 1654); *Multiplicity of Worlds* (London, 1658); *De Curationibus Sympatheticis* (Nuremberg, 1662). See Michaud, *Biographie Universelle* (Paris, 1855), Vol. V; Didot Frères, *Nouvelle Biographie Générale* (Paris, 1855), Vol. V.
10. *Warnings of Germany*, pp. 1-2.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
12. Warren, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
15. J. Allen, *Judicial Astrologers Totally Routed* (1659), p. 12.
16. See my article in *Aryan Path*, April, 1961; A. Hunter, *The Last Days* (1958).
17. Franckenberg's many works included *Via Veterum Sapientum* (Amsterdam, 1675), and *Nosce te Ipsum* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1675); see notes in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (Leipzig, 1878), Vol. VII, pp. 243-4, and *Neue Deutsche Biographie* (Berlin, 1961), Vol. V, pp. 348-9. I am indebted to Miss R. Eichhoff of Munich for advice on Franckenberg.
18. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
19. J. Brayne, *Astrology the Old Doctrine of Demons* (1653), pp. 5-8.
20. "J.S." *The Star-Prophet Anatomised* (London, 1675), p. 3.