

The Free Churches and the State.

WE are the heirs of those who left the national Church on the ground that a national Church was a contradiction in terms, as matters stood then, and must always stand in this evil world. It was not that the ceremonial of the Church was not to their taste. Whatever antipathy they felt to that was secondary and derivative. They were not blind nor deaf to the charm and beauty of the Anglican service. They were neither stupid nor insensitive. Their controversy, as they declared, was not "about a fur, a cap or a tippet; but about great matters concerning the government of the Church of God according to His word."

The Church, they held, consists of converted people. It is composed of the truly converted everywhere. Who and where they are only God can tell. The Church is spiritual and invisible. It is represented, however, wherever a group of faithful folk meet to worship God through Christ. There the Great Church has a local habitation and a name. Such a group is entitled to liberty to plan its own life. Approaching God through Christ, its members are assured of His response. He is in the midst of them. They have His presence and His guidance. They will not fail then to discern His will. That is the foundation of congregationalism as a method of Church government, and not any particular faith in democracy in the ordinary sense. The Church is not a democracy. It is a Christocracy. Such a group, moreover, is entitled to liberty to act according to His will. That was as much as our fathers asked of the State. Having that, they were satisfied; and even when that was withheld they were not deeply cast down, for, in fact, they already had it. Governments could not break their fellowship with their Lord, though they might hinder the proclamation of His Word. When that happened, His followers must be content to suffer, and through their suffering He would speak to those who were willing to hear His voice.

We may contrast this conception of the Church with that of our friends of the Anglican communion, for whom the Church consists of those born into the Christian tradition or touched by Christian influence. Richard Hooker declared that in Britain "Church and Commonwealth are one." "The Church," wrote Mandell Creighton, "must not be placed in opposition to the State. They are the same. The nation looked at from the spiritual standpoint is the Church; looked at from the secular

standpoint, the State. Separation is impossible." The theory is not without charm, especially in the form in which it was modified by S. T. Coleridge. Coleridge, whose notions have lately been revived by Mr. T. S. Eliot, contended that there should be a National Church incorporating the best elements in the nation, including not only religion, but learning and culture. It should be led by the "clerisy," a body comprehending the clergy and the learned of every denomination and profession, whose function would be to protect and propagate what is noblest in the national heritage. It is a stimulating notion, though one wonders whether Coleridge was really concerned not with a Church, but with a Society for the Preservation of National Culture.

It is the necessity of conversion that is at issue. Is Christ unique? Is conscious contact with Christ essential to the health of the soul? Is there that in the soul that resents the suggestion, and rebels against His rule? If we answer in the affirmative, then surely we are bound to say that the Church, whilst asserting His right to reign in every heart, can admit to her own ranks only those who answer His call. It is a truth that Anglicans have recently felt bound to acknowledge. That is the meaning of the Enabling Act and the Parochial Electoral Roll. In 1928, however, our friends of the Church of England realised that even now they are not at liberty to pray as they desire. A national Church must accept the decision of the national Parliament, even in a matter as sacred and intimate. It is not a position in which we would wish to put the Church of Christ.

Must we, then, set the Church in opposition to the State? What is the State? It is a society living within defined geographical boundaries, organised for the conduct of such matters as are the common concern of those connected with it. The State is not necessarily good nor evil, Christian nor otherwise. Its character is determined by the moral quality of those controlling or, in a democracy, of those comprising it. To the extent that they are Christian the State will exhibit a Christian temper and foster the Christian manner of life.

Few would deny that centuries of Christian teaching have left their mark on the character of our own nation; and yet the fact is that in certain respects Britain is not as Christian to-day as when Hooker formulated the classical Anglican theory of Church and State. The Church and the Commonwealth are not now one. Many, perhaps the majority, of our folk are interested neither in Christian teaching nor in Christian practice. They are not without admirable qualities. Patriotism, however, is not peculiarly Christian, nor devotion to duty, nor courage. It was not to foster natural virtue that Jesus Christ was born into this world and died on a cross. If that is what we are after, Marcus

Aurelius is a sufficient saviour and guide. One is not thinking merely of the decay in the habit of attending Church, though common worship is an essential element in the Christian life. There are facts of graver significance. There is the fact that the faith is rejected by many who are accounted intellectuals amongst us. Coleridge's clerisy would have to find room for C. E. M. Joad, Julian Huxley, J. B. S. Haldane, and the great number of students and members of the teaching profession who have been influenced by them. There is the fact that the State is the custodian of a civilisation that, though far superior to the "New Order" of Fascism, is yet seriously unchristian in many respects, and perhaps in its fundamental nature. Students of this subject cannot afford to disregard the Marxian criticism that the State is always the organ of a privileged class. "The fact that renders much of our discussion irrelevant," writes Dr. Demant, "is the domination of governments by finance, especially in lands considered democratic." Over a great part of the civilisation we are fighting to defend might be inscribed the words: Man *can* live by bread alone.

Yet the State exists along with the Church, and inevitably they touch and interact in actual life. We are citizens of Britain as well as of the Celestial City, and difficult problems of adjustment are bound to arise. What is to happen when the demands of the one conflict with the claims of the other? One must obey God rather than man. The fact remains that we have a duty to the State as long as we are living under the protection of the State, and there are occasions when the State demands an absolute allegiance. Some contend that if we cannot concede that claim we had better contract out of it. That is the position of a few on each side of the fence. The ardent patriot exclaims that if we cannot conform to what the State demands we are not entitled to the benefits the State confers on us. The earnest idealist feels that he is compromised by association with a State, that is at best a sadly imperfect thing. He has been told by such thinkers as Dr. Niebuhr that "all politics are power politics; that nations never seek moral ends except when these subserve their material advantage." What, then, is he who would live always by the laws of Christ to do? For many, this is now a burning issue. The "community" movement is spreading, influenced particularly by the feeling that the kingdoms of this world are implicated in an evil civilisation, doomed to destruction, from which Christians should withdraw, in as far as withdrawal is possible. This is a position to which the present writer cannot subscribe. The State under which we are living and to which we belong is not entirely evil, though there are elements of evil in it. It contains much good, and the promise

of much more. It is at least a "neighbour" that we are bound in charity to serve. Our task is to foster what is good in it, co-operating with others to that end; but *remembering always that we are charged with the special responsibility* of bringing the mind of Christ to bear upon its problems, and seeking to show that only in His light can we find the answer to them.

There is, again, the problem of the education of the child, a potential Christian to the Church, and a potential citizen to the State. It is beset with difficulties, and the sectarian is the least of them. There is real danger that a State that controls the schools may be tempted to prostitute education and the child to its own ends, political or economic. It has happened in Germany and Russia. It might easily happen here. For that reason we should encourage the establishment of as many free schools as possible. There are regions in which the State may properly interfere. They are generally such as are concerned with our material needs and welfare. There are regions in which the State is not fitted to interfere. They are, especially in existing conditions, those that closely affect our personal development and our reaction to God and the universe. Economics should be brought increasingly under the control of the State. Education, beyond the most elementary kind, is best left to voluntary associations, subsidised by the State, as they might properly be in recognition of the fact that they teach its citizens to read and write. Such a policy would do justice to the fact that education must be based on a philosophy of life, and that our citizens are not agreed in their philosophy of life. It would, moreover, prevent the standardisation of personality, which is among the gravest perils confronting us. It would not make for unity in the State! Possibly not, but our position as Free Churches means that our primary concern is not to promote unity in the State. It is to preserve spiritual liberty, and to that end we have always contended that we need not fear such risks as we may need to take. It is impossible! That it may be, but this is certain, that in the development of most human beings the school counts for more than the Church, and often for as much as the home. It might have been wiser to have built fewer churches and more schools for the children of our people. In any event, we must surely agree that if spiritual education is to be given in State schools, we must aim at making it enlightened and free. To that end, the recent proposals of the Archbishops probably represent the best policy at present attainable. But the matter is not easy and simple. The aim of religious education from our standpoint is the conversion of the child; but many parents would not wish for that, and parents have their rights; whilst many teachers who also have their rights neither would nor could work for

it. Christians are a minority, and the position cannot be easy as long as they take seriously a religion that the majority regard with little more than a kindly tolerance. In the end, perhaps, we can but say of this matter of Church and State, what Mr. Shaw says of the related problem of liberty and order: that they must exist side by side in uneasy but fruitful tension, a tension that will persist until at last the kingdoms of this world have become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ.

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IN THE THIRD DECADE of the last century, in an effort to revive interest in the London Association of Ministers and Deputies of Particular Baptist Churches, Dr. Newman, then Principal of Stepney College, was invited to provide a list of subjects suitable for discussion. On the 21st November, 1826, he produced the following:

1. Is the practice of keeping a Diary of Religious Experience worthy of recommendation, or otherwise?
2. The female members of our Churches, have they the right of voting in Church Meetings, and, if so, how far does it extend?
3. The observance of the first day of the week as a Sabbath, has it a Divine sanction, and, if so, what is the nature of that sanction?
4. The ordination of Pastors and Deacons as now generally conducted, has it any Divine authority?
5. What is the nature and what the extent of the Deacons' duties?
6. Is it expedient in our Monthly Association to keep a register of members, increasing or decreasing, in the several Churches?
7. Our Academical Institutions, have they any sure Divine sanction?
8. The Dissenting interest, is it rising or falling?
9. What is the best mode of catechising the rising generation?
10. Is it expedient to apply to the Legislature for an authorised register of births, a new Marriage law, and the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts?

Perhaps Dr. Wheeler Robinson, Dr. Newman's successor in the Principalship, will suggest a list for to-day.