

# Contemporary Commentary

A Quarterly Review of Church Affairs and Theological Trends

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## THE RIGHT TO BELIEVE

**T**HE growth of religious toleration has been one of the great benefits bestowed upon the world by the rise of nonconformist churches in Britain in the seventeenth century and the emergence as a world power of the United States, originally colonised by men who were resolved to order their lives by the dictates of conscience. Freedom of religious association both for worship and for evangelism has been a hard-won liberty and there is continual need of vigilance lest it be taken away again. Men found it hard to believe, until the events of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Britain and America provided convincing evidence to the contrary, that the State could continue in safety if significant minority groups enjoyed the right to profess a different religion from that which was recognised by the community at large. The rationalism of the eighteenth century, culminating in the French Revolution, strove to vindicate the complete, religious liberty of the individual by declaring the religious neutrality of the State. The consequent principle of a free church in a free state is still the most widely accepted ideal of the American people.

The religious neutrality of the state carries with it as an inevitable corollary the implication that religion is primarily a matter of private and personal concern. But religion (and particularly the Christian religion) remains obstinately social in its significance. The state cannot, if it would, ignore this significance. The emergence of totalitarian governments in the modern world has demonstrated the futility of supposing that the state can long continue without a positive conception of the pattern of community life. Just in so far as totalitarianism is the political expression of a secular faith it raises the question of moral and spiritual freedom in an acute form. Contrary to the optimistic expectations of liberal thinkers in the earlier years of this century the modern world has witnessed a progressive curtailment of civil and religious liberties.

The late President Roosevelt included freedom of worship among the four basic freedoms which he advocated as fundamental necessities in a civilized life. But freedom of worship can be interpreted in a variety of ways. It can be and frequently is restricted to the bare permission to assemble for purposes of worship in a registered building. This is a very limited form of freedom which cannot satisfy legitimate Christian demands. As the Archbishop of York pointed out in a notable speech on the civil and religious rights of minorities, delivered in the House of Lords on December 4th, 1946, freedom must include the right to propagate a religion, " or, as the Christian would say, to

evangelize, as well as the right of individuals to accept or reject it as an instructed conscience directs." Religious freedom as a fundamental human freedom properly includes the responsibility of bringing up children in the faith of their parents, liberty to change religious allegiance, to preach, educate, persuade, publish, organize with others, enjoy full civic rights and acquire property to fulfil all these purposes. The Joint Committee on religious liberty set up by the British Council of Churches and the Conference of British Missionary Societies has recently issued a statement on *Human Rights and Religious Freedom* in which this fundamental human freedom set out in terms of particular civil rights has been embodied in a suggested charter of religious freedom.

The conception of rights contained in such a charter is comparatively modern and Western in origin and is not recognised as a basic requirement in the East. This is due partly to political and racial considerations. In Egypt attempts have been made to restrict and interfere with the work both of the ancient Coptic Church and the missionary societies. The policy of pressure which is gaining a thousand Coptic Christians every year for Mohammedanism, is inspired by the hope of absorbing the Coptic Church entirely into Islam. An Egyptian minister of State recently told the Bishop of Worcester, "We should be fools to allow freedom to Mohammedans to become Christians." Visas to enter the country are only granted to missionaries who come to replace those who retire. During the war, Turkey used her position as a neutral to restrict the freedom of the Oecumenical Patriarch and of the Orthodox Church. Christians suffer serious disabilities according to the laws of the land, but such pressure is inspired by a determination to keep close control over a community which might become a tool for the furtherance of Russian expansionist aims rather than by positive religious convictions.

Another factor of importance in the East, particularly in India, is the great solidarity of the social structure. A change of religion involves a complete break with the life of the social group in which the individual has previously had his standing and the adoption of a new pattern of life. Christianity inevitably appears in such communities as a disruptive force. "Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you nay; but rather division." Governments of such countries would be acting in accordance with the reaction of the bulk of the people in repressing Christian activity. Christian minorities have succeeded in establishing themselves in the East at a time when the Western powers could demand toleration for their own nationals who were missionaries and by implication for the communities they had gathered together. To-day, the Orient which does not profess the Christian faith has successfully vindicated its independence from Western nations, and the continuing freedom of the small Christian communities in these lands must remain uncertain for years to come. Probably the only way in which respect for the rights of minorities can be deeply founded in any nation, eastern or western, is by the emergence of an effective international standard of toleration embodied in some charter promoted by the United Nations to which every nation

is to be expected to adhere. Any invidious distinction between eastern and western nations in such a declaration would be fatal to the preservation of real freedom. To keep a watchful eye on these developments is plainly an urgent Christian duty.

### IS THERE FREEDOM TO ERR?

**I**F the greatest threat to the essential freedom of human personality arises at the present time from the activities of totalitarian states, it would be foolish to ignore the persistent failure of Christians to practice toleration towards either other Christians or unbelievers. The case of Archbishop Stepinac, condemned to sixteen years' hard labour for crimes against the people, has directed attention to the attitude of an authoritarian state like Yugoslavia to any independent Christian action, and illustrates the inevitable clash of secular and religious totalitarianism. It cannot be said that the Vatican, in resurrecting the provisions of an old canon law prohibiting the trial of ecclesiastics by civil judges, has acted very wisely in this case. By implication this is a renewal of the old claim to immunity for the clergy from the processes of the civil law, which has not only been in the past productive of serious disputes but also frequently has led to an infringement of religious liberty.

The strange case of Dr. John Simcox (*Is the Roman Catholic Church a Secret Society?* Watts and Co., 2/-) illustrates the continuing claim of the Roman Church to possess the whole truth and to suppress what is regarded as error. Dr. Simcox was a professor in the Roman seminary at Ware when he became troubled by what he suspected was dishonest propaganda on the part of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in the education campaign of 1942 and 1943. He raised the question in the columns of *The Catholic Herald* whether the argument from parental rights continues to hold even "when the parents are in religious error and wish their children to be taught this error." As a professor of Canon Law he was convinced that according to Catholic doctrine there can never be a right to teach error or to have it taught. Such teaching can however be tolerated in certain circumstances to avoid greater evils. There can be no doubt that this is still Roman doctrine which has never been repudiated or modified, as the speech of Warren Sandell before the Catholic Society of University College, London, printed in this pamphlet serves to show. What is disturbing about the whole incident is the refusal of the Archbishop of Westminster and other Roman Catholic authorities to answer the question put by Dr. Simcox whether his reading of doctrine was correct or not. Clearly they would have been obliged to admit that he was right, but such an admission would have caused irreparable damage to the campaign for financial justice to the Roman schools, and they took refuge in silence while endeavouring to suppress any discussion of the affair. It seems almost incredible that a Church which makes such high claims to a teaching authority should be unwilling or unable to give an authoritative judgment on a point of doctrine. Can it be that the leaders are so opportunist in their outlook that they are prepared to cast into a temporary oblivion any doctrines which are out of accord with the

temper of the times, but to act upon them (as in Spain and Italy) when and where circumstances are favourable? The conception of liberty held by the largest body of Christians in the world is very different from that which is published in the statement on religious freedom put forward by the Joint Committee.

To claim an absolute monopoly of the truth, even if in practice this only results in stammering equivocal replies to questions, is to demand as implicit an obedience from the faithful as Hitler demanded from the German people. It is to claim the right to suppress all variations from the party line unless at any particular moment it is inexpedient so to do. This is the working principle of the Roman Church to-day as it was in the sixteenth century. To hold strong religious convictions and yet to act impartially towards those whose religion and culture are different, is one of the finest as well as one of the rarest achievements of the Christian spirit. Christians who are aware of the fact that they hold the truth imperfectly and are always in danger of distorting it, will be especially careful to promote a tolerance which is not indifferent to truth but arises from a true understanding of its nature.

#### A NEW OXFORD MOVEMENT.

IN common with most other Universities at the present time, Oxford is both uncommonly full and uncommonly serious in its outlook on life and work. The Dean of Oriel College, himself an ex-chaplain, found himself the centre of a strong group of committed Christians, most of them recently returned from the forces. Their war time experience led them to try to incarnate their Christian faith in all the activities of college life. The reading of that notable tract *Our Threatened Values* by Victor Gollancz, who since the war has proved himself to be the most effective mouthpiece of the Christian conscience in Great Britain, was a turning point in the life of this college group. The members came to the decision that they were being led to organize a public meeting in Oxford, which would be a call to Christian action in public affairs. In the face of opposition and difficulties the meeting was planned and carried through on December 5, 1946. Despite pouring rain the Town Hall was packed before the advertised time and an overflow meeting was hurriedly organised in St. Mary's Church to which the speakers migrated from the Hall and repeated what they had said at the main assembly. The purpose of the meeting had been well publicized and most of the audience (between 2,000 and 3,000 in number) had already received copies of the resolutions they were to be asked to support. The meeting *as a meeting* was a triumphant success.

The Bishop of Chichester took the chair, supported by an impressive array of Oxford notables, and in his speech declared that "those who acknowledge faith in God can never rest until they see it fructifying in society and little by little regenerating and transforming the social order. It is the object of this meeting both to proclaim this truth and to summon those who call themselves Christians to commit themselves to its practice. We are calling Christians to Christian action and we do this on the basis of the common ground on which Christians stand."

The first resolution, proposed by Sir Richard Acland, seconded by

Mr. Roger Wilson of the Society of Friends and passed by the meeting, called upon Christians to acquire clear conceptions of Christian principles as they bear upon the problems of society and to engage actively in public life as a necessary way of fulfilling Christian discipleship. The second resolution, proposed by Miss Barbara Ward and seconded by the chairman of the Oxford Conservative Association, called for the formulation of a positive Christian aim in dealing with German problems, "for the help of H. M. Government and for sustained effort on the part of individual Christians to do what they can to implement such a positive Christian aim."

The meeting was a striking witness to the determination of Christians of every denomination and political allegiance to make the insights of their faith effective in every part of national life. But there have been many other great meetings when Christian principles have been expounded and Christians summoned to translate their faith into action. Only continuing action through ever widening circles can avoid the frustration and disappointment that frequently are the chief results of such a meeting. Can this meeting make history? The promoters are concerning themselves about the next steps, waiting upon the Lord for His guidance. Certain encouraging features are to be noted. The whole affair was organized on a Christian basis and the resolutions had been publicized beforehand. The initiative and drive came from the rank and file and was based not upon an elaborate organization but on personal relationships. If cells of Christians, ready to take an active part in public life can be brought into being all over the country, a worth while result will have been achieved. Meantime Christians should not only obtain and study for themselves the pamphlet *A Call to Christian Action in Public Affairs*, but take the initiative in their own local churches and municipalities. There has been too much reliance on pronouncements by ecclesiastical leaders and too little disciplined listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit on the part of the ordinary Churchman.

#### EDUCATION FOR SURVIVAL.

**I**T has been commonly recognized that August 6, 1945, the day on which the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, inaugurated a new era in human affairs. The knowledge of natural processes had been developed to such a pitch that man's mastery of nature had precipitated the greatest crisis mankind has yet had to face. At the moment when the barriers were down and vast new possibilities of material welfare appeared to be at hand, men were faced also with the most serious threat to mere survival. Of what use would be those latest developments if within a few years at the most civilisation would be in ruins and a new race of cave men the only survivors of the most terrible conflict in all history? The sharpness of the threat facing mankind was aggravated by the fact that the bomb had been manufactured and used by the allied nations who in opposition to their enemies had professed a regard for right and wrong, for the subordination of power to law and mercy. Yet when power came into their hands they had shown themselves bound by none of the customary

restraints in its use. The saturation bombing of Germany made the atomic bombing of Japan almost inevitable. The effect of such terrible weapons upon those who used them is, from the point of view of the future of mankind, just as important as the injuries inflicted on those who received the full weight of the attack. The ruthless almost amoral efficiency of Bomber Harris is to be contrasted with the terrible sense of responsibility felt by Group Captain Cheshire, one of the airmen associated with the dropping of the atom bomb.

Theologians and publicists on both sides of the Atlantic have done their best to rouse the people to an understanding of the threat to their existence. The Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America and the British Council of Churches have both produced notable reports on atomic power and atomic warfare. Neither of those reports issues an unequivocal condemnation of the use of the bomb and in face of the relentless drive of scientific and technological development can do no more than recall men to fundamental Christian affirmations which alone can give a creative interpretation of political and economic activities and of the true ends for which in those activities they are often unconsciously striving.

Another influential voice has been raised in warning by the publication of Mr. Lewis Mumford's tract, *A Programme for Survival*. He has devoted his life to the study of human nature in society and its characteristic expression in civilisation and now sees all that massive achievement threatened with irretrievable disaster at one blow. Recalling the story of Leonardo, who suppressed his own invention of the submarine as too dangerous a discovery for man to use, he urges us to be ready, if need be, to extirpate every item of scientific knowledge accumulated since 1600. When once success becomes the criterion of action there can be no conceivable limits to human devilry. Moral nihilism is the contemporary social counterpart of the atomic bomb.

The voice of the scientist has not been silent on this urgent issue. There has recently been made available in this country a volume prepared by many of the American scientists who were concerned in the research that produced the bomb. *One World or None* (Latimer House, 7/6) describes with a scientific detachment which makes its implied warning all the more impressive, both the recorded results of atomic bombing and the probable developments of the near future. No protection can be devised against it. The bomb will be cheap to produce, easy to transport, and it is quite impossible to suppose that the secret of production can remain a secret much longer. "Potential booby traps have been planted behind every closed door." Nothing less than survival itself is at stake and the significant thing is that at last not theologians or philosophers but the scientists themselves are giving the most solemn warnings. The men who carry the technical responsibility for producing this nightmare weapon with its far reaching social consequences are drawing attention to the moral and social responsibility not only of the scientist in his research, but of every man and woman for survival or disaster. "The nations can have atomic energy and much more. But they cannot have it in a world where

war may come." Such words convey a warning which becomes still more impressive when it is recollected that they were issued by the Federation of American (Atomic) Scientists. The book *One World or None* drives home by its sober factual survey the truth of such a statement. If only for that reason it ought to be read, marked, learned and inwardly digested by every Christian.

The theologian in the middle of the twentieth century is thus receiving unexpected assistance in his task of rebuking human pride and recalling men to obedience to the laws of God. The structure of life means that life will really only work one way—the way the Creator planned. What the theologian dare not do is to rejoice in the predicament of modern man as though history were obligingly providing the Christian Church with a long awaited justification. The theologian is himself involved in this predicament and bears his share of the responsibility for it. To him is committed the grave responsibility in common with the men of science of leading what Lewis Mumford has aptly called "mobilisation for survival." The scientist and the sociologist can speak of the need to overcome "our frustration, our hatred, our aggressiveness by removing both the inner and the outer blockages to sympathetic understanding and loving co-operation," but it is the theologian who is to bear witness to the only way in which the flood waters of hate and aggression can be controlled. If it is true as Mumford asserts that when society is in danger it is the individual who first must be saved then the theologian has been given his cue by modern society. Responsible speech is his solemn calling in the modern world.

## BOOK REVIEWS (*continued from page 96*)

### THE GOSPEL AND THE LAW OF CHRIST.

By C. H. Dodd. 22 pp. Longmans, Green. 1/6.

What is the relation of Law and Gospel in Christianity? For the Faith is not only Gospel but also a system of moral obligation. Is the duty of a Christian man dictated by "inner light" or by the recorded teaching of Christ and the Apostles? Are the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount practicable rules for daily conduct? What is the relation between the Law of Christ and "Natural law," and what is the authority of the latter?

This is a slight pamphlet, but is weighty in thought and insight, out of all proportion to its size. There is more honest biblical exposition and spiritual perception in it than in many theological books which sell at 8/6! There is a steady progress of thought from the opening statement of the embodiment of the Gospel in the apostolic *kerygma* to the argument that Gospel and Commandment are "two sides, or aspects, of a single reality, or rather activity, which is *agape*, the love of God, the divine charity; and *agape* in action is the glory of God revealed, whether it be His own redemptive act in Christ, or the simplest act of charity, which His lowliest creature is enabled by His grace to perform." There are two memorable little flashes of illumination on the biblical idea of covenant as "bi-lateral agreement"; and on conscience as "a kind of palimpsest."

Enough. If the appetite is whetted, let it be satisfied. If the phrase may be allowed, the expenditure of 1/6 will be a very good Dodds-worth!

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