

Contemporary Commentary

A Quarterly Review of Church Affairs and Theological Trends

BY THE REV. F. J. TAYLOR, M.A.

GROWING POINTS IN THE FRENCH CHURCH

ENGLISH churchmen in recent years have been made conscious of some remarkable and significant developments in Roman Catholic church life in France. The pastoral experiments and liturgical techniques described in *France Pagan* and in *Revolution in a City Parish*, have been enthusiastically acclaimed in many circles as the only realistic way of implementing the evangelistic task of the church in the mass industrial society of the twentieth century. Ecclesiastical authority has certainly shown an unusual and unexpected readiness to allow considerable experimentation and has encouraged the attempts of intellectuals to find common ground with non-Christians in every sphere. In 1947 the late Cardinal Suhard addressed a notable pastoral to his people, now available in English under the title *Rise or Decline of the Church*,¹ in which Catholic intellectuals were addressed in unmistakable terms. "Your task is not to follow but to precede . . . your loyalty will be unequalled except by your open-mindedness and effective co-operation with all seekers after the truth, even if they are not believers." If the letter found it necessary to restrain the belligerent progressivism of some active groups, it also found reason to rebuke the excessive traditionalism of others.

The ferment at work in Catholic religious thought in France can be illustrated by the number and diversity of groups which are struggling to interpret the meaning of contemporary history in the light of Christian convictions. A team of research workers under the leadership of a Dominican, Father Montlucard, produces a review entitled *Jeunesse et Eglise*. The general attitude of the group is critical of the entanglement of the church in an outworn and discredited social order, to the point of asserting that tradition has usurped the place of the Holy Ghost. It has as a consequence presented a demand for structural reform in the church. The traditional techniques of spirituality come under heavy fire and contempt is expressed for "spiritual ghettoites". The members of the group are struggling to formulate a pattern of sanctity possible for the layman who is taking a full share in the life of the world. Another group which sponsors *Economie et Humanisme* has attempted to evaluate the Christian significance of Marx and to practise a form of active collaboration with the communists, which has brought upon the members the official condemnation of the church. A third group, through the medium of *Esprit*, has been insisting on the primacy of human personality in all social, economic and political situations. In all these groups there are to be found persons who sit very loose to tradition, as well as those who manifest a lively desire for modernity in language and ideas with a firm adherence to the substance of the tradition.

¹ Obtainable from *Young Catholic Workers*, 106, Clapham Road, S.W.9.

A revival of biblical, patristic and liturgical studies has accompanied the efforts to come to terms with the modern world in the work of the groups just noticed. The results of this theological renewal have been published in such series as *Sources Chrétiens* and *Génie du Christianisme*, while Daniel-Rops, G. Bardy and Father Danièle Sainte-Père are among writers who have written scholarly popularisations of this specialist research work. Liturgical work has had its principal centres at Solesmes and Maredsous, with *Témoignages* as the journal in which erudite studies appear and *Maison Dieu* for the publication of the views and experiments of the *Mouvement de Pastorale Liturgique*. The emphasis on the use of the vernacular in the eucharist, on communion, on the corporate nature of Christian worship and the importance of the Bible, which are features of this movement, suggest that in France at least the Roman Church is beginning to reckon seriously with the witness of the reformation churches. The ecumenical spirit and work of Father Congar and others associated with him has given rise to the hope of closer relationships with Rome than have hitherto been possible. Other groups and journals are devoted to the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas and the attempt to demonstrate that all thought and action must still rest on that basis. *La Pensée Catholique* is a journal which gives expression to the views of those who are apprehensive of the tendencies of the newer critical groups. The discussion of eschatology and its bearing upon theology and social action is presented in the pages of *Dieu Vivant*.

The technique of frontier thinking has been adopted in the *Centre Catholique des Intellectuels Français*, where lectures, debates and public disputations are held for the purpose of expounding Christian faith and demonstrating its significance for every sphere of life. Teams of research workers in theology, philosophy, law and politics challenge each other in frank discussion on the method and meaning of their work. Much of this work naturally takes place in small groups without any publicity, but the annual *Semain des Intellectuels Catholiques* provides an occasion for the exchange of ideas in public comparable to the procedure of Church Congresses in England a couple of generations ago. These signs of widespread intellectual and spiritual revival are to be welcomed not only for the benefit they bring to the French church but for the influence which in time they may exercise on the development of western catholicism.

THE DRIFT TO WAR

THE serious aspect of our affairs presses hardly upon all considering churchmen at this time. It is not only that in common with all other citizens they shrink from contemplating the fearful consequences of world catastrophe which another war would entail, but that they must struggle unceasingly to interpret to themselves and to the world the will of God in the context of contemporary history. A recent pamphlet, *Christianity and the War Crisis*,² written jointly by Canon L. J. Collins (the founder of Christian Action) and Mr. Victor Gollancz, presents in forthright and vehement terms a plea for what it calls a revolution "both in the thinking and feeling of each one of us and in

² Gollancz, 6d.

the whole conduct of public affairs". The authors are at pains to remind the reader that they use the word 'revolutionary', not in the sense that what they propose has never before been advocated, but that "it has never yet been practised".

Part of the stock in trade of the general run of Christian publicists and preachers is to insist with wearisome monotony that if only men would accept the ideal of Christ and put their trust in Him, we should be well on the way to a solution of our problems. The ordinary Christian, who may be aware of the futility of such counsel in the face of decisions that have to be made, is also very much perplexed by the fact that most ecclesiastical pronouncements on public affairs either echo with pious verbiage the sentiments of general opinion or manifest a singular lack of understanding of political and economic realities. This pamphlet does at least avoid, with the exception of one passage, such vulgar errors, and its contentions ought to be taken seriously. No doubt as a cry from the heart for Christian initiative in face of the drift to war, it is not intended to be a final statement. Moreover, events move too quickly for that final statement on Christian participation in modern warfare.

The suggestion that there ought to be a Peace Office does seem to ignore the fact that the constructive social and economic work which alone can make peace a reality, is undertaken by several other ministries. Perhaps the existence of the War Office is silent testimony to the fact that war (the shooting or hot war) has, until the present, been regarded as an occasional interruption of the ordered procedures of civilised life, whereas peace (the absence of shooting) has been regarded as the normal condition of human affairs which scarcely needed organizing in any direct way. Peace is a by-product of justice and righteousness and is apt to elude those who concentrate on seeking it. It does not appear that the authors have been wise in suggesting that the idea of a nation is an unreal abstraction (for which they could claim little support either in history or in the biblical testimony), or in blurring the fact that the first duty of a statesman is to consider the well being of his fellow countrymen. He has a peculiar responsibility to them, which will often be difficult to harmonize with his duty to the world community.

Three further comments may be allowed. In the first place, the pamphlet performs a valuable service in urging the Christian to think imaginatively about what would happen to people and civilization in another war. It is fatally easy for our moral judgments to be blunted by the constant use of abstract and impersonal terms to describe relations between persons. Nevertheless relations between whole communities are not personal in the same way as relations between two people or even between small groups. In these circumstances justice must be the form which love takes. Secondly, it is plainly a part of Christian duty to repudiate the doctrine, "my country, right or wrong", and to examine critically the motives and policy of his own government. Justice also requires of us the effort to understand the feelings and situation of other governments. This is particularly necessary at the present moment, when public hysteria may delude many into thinking that there is nothing to be learned or

received from communist experience. The brief studies of China, Russia and America undertaken for this purpose are the best things in the pamphlet and show what any Christian can set himself to do and so begin to be a peacemaker. Thirdly, the pamphlet has been written jointly by a Christian and a Jew, yet the reader is scarcely conscious of any constraint in the writing. Christians have to learn to co-operate with men of other faiths, or no faith, in making possible obedience to the will of God in the confusions of the modern world. They cannot refuse to work except with those who share the same theology. True Christian obedience does not demand a Christian closed shop of that kind.

THEOLOGICAL REVISION

THE epithet 'modernist' has been bestowed upon those persons who have been foremost in emphasising the need for defining Christian doctrine in categories which may be intelligible to modern thought. It has been eagerly accepted by them and so become both the cherished label of a party and an offence to many other churchmen. The persistent tendency of the ecclesiastical mind, clerical or lay, to categorise people, if such a barbarism may be allowed, obscures the fact that it is the plain duty of theologians and of simple believers to be modern Christians. The contemporary Christian neither can nor should attempt to live in any other age than that in which by the grace of God his life is set. He must live as a twentieth century man and rid himself of that harmful ecclesiastical mythology which looks back to some imaginary golden age in the past which answered all the vital questions and solved the difficult problems. On the Christian thinker to-day rests the responsibility for trying to reverse that development which has shut up scientists, philosophers, sociologists and theologians into separate intellectual enclosures and deprived them of the means of understanding one another in a universe of common discourse.

There is in the history of Christian theology a perpetual tension between the given-ness of the authentic gospel, an unvarying factor in every century, and the changing intellectual climate of successive ages and cultures. Dr. Emil Brunner in the first volume of his *Dogmatics** is as emphatic as any biblical fundamentalist could wish in stating that "the Christian Church cannot recognize any progressive revelation". He insists on the once-for-allness of the revelation and reconciliation accomplished by Christ, so that the truth given to the church "is at all times until the end of history, the same". It is not exposed to the law of historical relativity as are the ideologies of men.

Nevertheless the doctrine of the church must never be identified with revelation, and the New Testament itself points to this conclusion since "John speaks a different language from Paul : Paul uses different terms from Matthew". The theologian is bound to use ideas which are familiar in the vocabulary of the modern world if he is to make plain to himself and to his contemporaries the Gospel of God which was expressed in other terms by his forefathers. Dr. Brunner cites with considerable effect the example of Karl Barth who, though expressing himself with great vehemence on the need to avoid alien

* E.T., Vol. I, *The Doctrine of God* (Lutterworth Press, 1949), pp. 67-72.

categories in the formulation of Christian doctrine, yet has made extensive use of the idea of 'subject' to clarify problems, an idea never before used in this way by theologians and derived ultimately from idealistic philosophy. What is required in every age is a work of translation, a work which must be undertaken at a deeper level even than the "missionary translation" of the Bible and the creed into fresh language. Brunner considers that this is a task which the church ought to take far more seriously than it has done in recent times. It may be pertinent to remark that Biblical Theology will lead some of its devotees astray if it fails to make clear to them that the determination of the meaning of biblical language and insights is but the first and essential step in the process of discovering how the Gospel is to be expressed in the world of to-day.

There is, of course, an insidious danger that in the fulfilment of this work of translation the central concern of the Bible may be overlaid or transformed in the process. To be aware of the danger is important, but this awareness must not be allowed to prevent theologians from the struggle to make clear to men in intelligible terms, the meaning of Christian faith. Brunner suggests that the test to be applied to such work is whether it produces a rigid unity of thought, a system of ideas into which the biblical material is forced as into a mould, or allows the richness and diversity of primitive Christian thought to be expressed in the language of the twentieth century.

PARISH AND PEOPLE

A PROMINENT characteristic of English Church life since the beginning of the nineteenth century has been the number and variety of voluntary societies designed to unite groups of Anglicans for the furtherance of some common interest. Temperance, education, social reform, overseas missionary endeavour and church unity have been among the causes which have been served in this way. Other societies have had as their concern the expression of distinctive theological convictions which the members of these societies have frequently claimed as the only legitimate formulation of the Anglican tradition. The witness of these groups has helped to preserve from oblivion essential elements in that tradition, but their work has commonly been done not only in isolation from each other but with the intention of excluding other interpretations. They have disunited Anglicans and corrupted theological tensions into sordid ecclesiastical conflicts. To many Anglicans of the younger generation, conscious of the new theological climate and of the social revolution of the times, such societies often appear as unhappy survivals of a rude and unenlightened epoch in Anglican life.⁴ No doubt every generation is disposed to pass more severe judgment upon its immediate predecessor than the subsequent verdict of history will allow, but it is evident that the existing societies do not meet the felt needs of a large and growing body of Anglican clergy, nor do they serve as a means of bringing together in fruitful intercourse men of different backgrounds and divergent theological traditions.

⁴ Vide H. H. Henson in *Ad Clerum* (1937), pp. 191-8, 205-6.

The theological revival of the last two decades has brought the biblical witness to the nature of the church and the structure of its life to bear on the concrete realities of local churches as we know them. The cry which was raised in 1937 at the time of the Edinburgh and Oxford Conferences, 'Let the church be the church!' is now struggling to find expression in the forms of parochial life. A new association of Anglicans came into existence last year under the title "Parish and People",^a although its roots go back much further amongst those who for some years had been pioneering with Parish Meetings, Parish Communion, Christian Cells, Christian Initiation, and Adult Religious Education. Its manifesto sets out four main concerns to be interpreted in the context of parochial life—Biblical Theology, the Christian Community and its common life, Liturgical Worship, and the Christian obligation to society. These are themes which have claimed the attention of theologians in every communion in this generation and the time is overdue for a resolute attempt to mediate the fruits of their work to the ordinary Christian in the parish. Such an association deserves to be taken seriously, for it might do much under God to quicken the life of the English Church.

It may not be out of place to suggest that its usefulness will depend to no small degree on the success or failure it experiences at three important points. First, to be of value to the Church of England at this juncture it must provide a real meeting place for men of different traditions, who will both give and receive in their common meeting. This is a very different thing from becoming a 'non-party party'. Secondly, it must discover a pattern of pastoral activity which, while remaining true to the authentic pastoral tradition of the church as it has been received in the Church of England, is yet seen to be realistic in the face of the changed social structure of the middle of the twentieth century. Thirdly, the title "Parish and People" carries an implication which will in the end be a mockery unless lay people who have some understanding, however rudimentary, of its basic concerns, are associated with the clergy on the ground floor of the movement. To discover the meaning of common life and to express it in liturgical worship is impossible without the active participation of the people of God. A merely clerical movement, however theologically minded, will be of little use to the church in the world to-day.

DOCTRINE AND UNITY

THE recent promulgation by the Pope towards the close of the Jubilee Year, of the dogma of the corporeal Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary as an essential part of Christian belief has aroused comment and criticism in all the non-Roman churches of the west. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York in public statements, the bishops of the Church of Ireland in a pastoral letter read in all their churches, and prominent dissenters have repudiated the action of the Pope and deplored the consequences that are likely to flow from it.

^a The leaflet *Parish and People*, describing its aims, may be had from the Hon. Secretary, the Rev. K. G. Packard, Fenny Compton Rectory, Leamington Spa.

It has undoubtedly widened the breach between the Roman Church and other Churches at a time when it might have been expected that Rome would have been seeking, by some conciliatory gesture, allies in its struggle with continental communism. It had indeed been widely anticipated that the Jubilee Year would have presented an opportunity for some pronouncement with which Christians of other traditions could readily have associated themselves.

It is a curious reflection on the claim of the Roman pontiff to be the universal and infallible teacher of the Christian Church that his definition of the conditions of salvation should be the result of organised pressure from below. It appears that despite the far-reaching claims of his office implied in the definition of infallibility, the Pope is only disposed to exercise his authority in this way when already assured of widespread support for his action. The new dogma can be interpreted as a concession to the unthinking masses, but there can be little doubt that the intellectual will have to pay the price.

The critics of Roman action have supported their case by reference to the well known facts that neither Scripture nor the first six centuries of the Church contain any sufficient theological and historical justification for the promulgation of such a dogma. To erect pious opinions, however widely held, into things necessary for salvation is to trifle with history and reason, to wound the unity of the church and to invade the proper liberty of the Christian man. "May we not think," once asked Dr. Bigg, a former Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Oxford, "that the direst offence a man can commit against the unity of the church is to define what God has not defined and to restrict Christian liberty by adding to the conditions of salvation?"^a Perhaps the most significant feature of the whole episode lies in its disclosure with brutal frankness of the existence of a conception of authority in the church which, so long as it is in active use must continue to divide the church.

^a *Wayside Sketches*, p. 178.