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The Laymen on the Frontier

A Discussion

BY CANON D. R. VICARY, M.A., B.Sc.

ALTHOUGH we, in this island, have not suffered political upheaval, and although we seek change by peaceful means, the last two generations have seen changes which merit the word : Revolution. The effect of public education since 1870 has been styled "the silent social revolution". That old friend of the history books, "the Industrial Revolution," is no mere thing of the past. The effects of the machine are increasing. They dominate life more and more, both in the way we work and in the way we enjoy ourselves ; and they present us with many of our social, political and international problems. The revolution in thought that came with Copernicus is now replaced by the new cosmology, which is as revolutionary as its predecessor. Furthermore, these changes have taken place in a world where two major wars have raised the deepest issues concerning the purpose of human society. In this context, it is worth asking what is happening to the intellectual leadership of the Church in its relation to the world.

The first thing to notice is that this leadership is placed in a different position to-day from that in which it was exercised a generation ago. At that time, it might be safely assumed that Christian and non-Christian would accept a considerable area of common values. The advance of secularism has changed this. We are now living in a time when a large number of our fellow-countrymen belong to the second generation of non-Christians ; for it is clear that nominal Christianity does not breed at all. The cleavage between the Christian and the secular outlook has now become more explicit. The old agnostics wished to save Christian morals apart from Christian faith. The new secularists see no need to do this. This change of climate in thought has been paralleled by a change in the position of the Church in the world. Political revolution has, in the last fifty years, put the secular state over against the Church. The Christian leader now has to speak, therefore, across a frontier—a frontier of common life, political, social and industrial, shared with the non-Christian who does not share Christian assumptions about the meaning of human life.

T. S. Eliot observes, in his *Notes towards a definition of Culture*, that "the deepest causes of division may still be religious, but they become conscious, not in theological but in political, social and economic doctrines". If this is true (and our present conditions would indicate that it is) then we shall not necessarily look among the theologians for our leadership. In every period of upheaval, it is the glory of the Christian Church that it has had its giants in the world of thought, and this century is no exception. In the various parts of the divided Body of Christ there have been, and are, men who compel a hearing across the frontier, such as Niebuhr, Barth, Brunner, Maritain, Temple and Berdyaev. There is, however, a different picture when we examine

our domestic situation in England. The frontier is marked now by the disappearance of the dignitaries and the emergence of the laymen. The names of a generation ago, such as Inge, Temple, Headlam, Gore and Henson are now replaced by H. A. Hodges, Dorothy Sayers, T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, Sir Walter Moberly, M. V. C. Jefferies, and the late Michael Roberts, to mention only a few.

The causes of this situation are complex. Two world wars have taken their toll of Christian leaders. But there have been long-term processes at work which have influenced the ministry of the Church. There is a social change. Increased public administration and scientific research have provided many with a sphere of service and devotion, and have become, humanly speaking, the market for the best brains. There is an academic change, too. The increase of specialization in every branch of knowledge has meant that the whole-time worker is increasingly far in advance of the amateur student. In addition, the burden of increased administration has crowded out much of the time that clergy might have given to thought and study. It is the Christian layman who, as an expert in his own field, and working alongside non-Christians, has the great contribution to make to the Church's leadership in thought at the present time.

It may be asked : what, then, is the contribution of the professional, whole-time, theologian? This contribution is all-important. It cannot be overrated, for a Church which is not nourished by deep theological thinking is adrift. But the theologians are doing "long-range" work. As Forsyth put it, "theology means thinking in centuries". For this reason, the professional theologians have not often a "short-range" message, whose relevance is immediately apparent.

A further reason for the fact that the theologians are not yet making themselves intelligible across the frontier is that much of their work at present is re-discovery and adjustment. We have not suffered so much as some countries from the *trahison des clercs*, but there is lee-way to be made up in providing the distinctively Christian critique and contribution in modern culture. The recovery of the Biblical emphasis after the decay of the Victorian world-view, and the re-interpretation of the categories of revelation and imagery, of personality and community in the face of an un-poetic, depersonalised and unbelieving world make theology to-day a vigorous and exciting subject. But its major minds are not yet translating their work for those brought up in other disciplines. Specialization is as dangerous in theology as it is anywhere else, save that the theologian ought so to be continually confronted with the truth of all existence that his perspectives ought to be less narrow than those of specialists in other subjects.

The work of speaking across the frontier demands an understanding of what lies beyond it. This is one aspect of the missionary situation of the Church in the Western world. We need men and women with a grip on the language, categories and mental disciplines of those outside the fold. There are two groups of people with a special opportunity here. First, there are the laymen on the frontier whose witness, intellectual as well as practical, keeps the outposts of the Church alive. Secondly, there are the clergy who have special opportunity as "middle-

men". They have had a grounding in theology which should enable them to keep abreast of the leaders; they also have the pastoral experience which keeps them in touch with the world on the frontier. They have been commissioned as "watchmen and stewards of the Lord"; but as Brunner has said in his book, *Justice and the Social Order*, "Only the man who can look beyond frontiers can be their watchman".

Evangelical Unions in the Universities

A Symposium

IN the past year much discussion has centred round the function and value of Christian Unions (or Evangelical Unions) in the universities. Three writers have been asked to put forward their views. The first is a senior student who recently graduated with a First Class at one of the older universities. The second is an ordained graduate now in his first parish as an incumbent; and the third, previously a college chaplain, is now incumbent of a parish in a university city.

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A SENIOR STUDENT

The late Professor Rendle Short, who had wide experience of the work of the Christian Unions in the universities over a period of many years, commented a short while ago on their remarkable growth and development throughout this country. Steadily they were becoming the predominant Christian organization, if not numerically, then at least in influence. And the process continues. They can no longer be discounted, but are a prime factor to be reckoned with in any discussion of the religious life in the universities.

Inevitably this raises questions in people's minds. There are many to-day of the older generation who look askance at this movement, because they fail to realize how great have been the changes during the last twenty-five years. Instead of small groups struggling for survival, large and well-organized Christian Unions exist in several universities; this is especially true of Oxford and Cambridge. The wild methods of the past have been replaced by an altogether saner outlook. Policy is more far-sighted and particularly concerned with the follow-up of converts. Tact and diplomacy are taking the place of the battering-ram technique. Scholarship is not despised but encouraged.

Nevertheless someone may well ask what special advantages membership of a Christian Union is likely to bestow. For my part, I would say that they are threefold. First, it provides an opportunity to join other Christians in a vital, active fellowship. The help derived from meeting together regularly for Bible study and prayer in an informal atmosphere is invaluable. I knew an Anglo-Catholic who, in spite of his background, decided to join the Christian Union after trying out all the religious societies, because there alone he found the fellowship he was seeking. Secondly, the Christian Unions are unashamedly evangelistic.