

THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY¹

JAMES LANGDALE

THE rise of Christian Democracy is, as Professor Fogarty rightly says, 'one of the major social movements of modern times', yet it is surprising how little has been written about the subject up to now. The 'People and Freedom Group', the only Christian Democratic society ever to exist in this country, of which Professor Fogarty was a distinguished member, did a great deal before and during the war to make known the aims and ideals of Christian Democracy, then very much discredited. Apart, however from the excellent study of *Christian Democracy in France and Italy*, by François Goguel and Mario Enaudi, published in 1951 by the University of Notre-Dame, Indiana, nothing further has appeared in English on the subject, and Professor Fogarty's scholarly and exhaustive study is therefore particularly timely and welcome. It should do a great deal to dispel the astonishing—and indeed disgraceful—ignorance of both Catholics and non-Catholics in this country regarding the political history and beliefs of Catholics in Western Europe.

Those who consider Christian Democrats to be 'right-wing clerical reactionaries' as well as those who are honestly if naively convinced that Catholicism flourishes best under an authoritarian régime, have a great deal to learn from Professor Fogarty, and his book should not only find a place on the library shelves of every educated English Catholic, but should also be made compulsory reading in every Catholic Secondary and Public School.

Professor Fogarty's definition of Christian Democracy is very wide and far-reaching. He emphasizes in his introduction that his book is not particularly a study of the political parties or even of current political and trade union tactics. The Catholic social movements and the movements of Catholic Action are in his view the weightier part of the Christian Democratic iceberg. This enables him to include in his survey practically every Catholic or Protestant movement and it is not until he comes across the 'Catholic Society Girls in France' and the 'Catholic

¹ *Christian Democracy in Western Europe 1820-1953*, by Michael P. Fogarty. (Routledge and Kegan Paul; 45s.)

Young Ladies of Italy' who have the thankless task of converting the upper middle class and aristocracy that he admits, with regret, that this is leading him 'too far out of the way of Christian Democracy'!

The description of the Catholic social movements and of Catholic Action certainly form the most impressive part of the book. The immense success of these movements, the extent of their influence and achievement, will astonish English readers, and it is from them that the Christian Democratic parties have recruited and still recruit their best elements.

It is questionable, however, whether under present circumstances such movements can be termed 'Christian Democratic'. This description might have been applicable at the time when Leo XIII wrote the Encyclical *Graves de Communi*, when Democracy was a political system obnoxious to the vast majority of Catholics and political parties openly boasting that they were Christian *and* Democratic did not exist at all. It is hardly correct today when the term 'Christian Democracy' quite definitely means—not only for the British Press and public, but also for the whole of the Western world—the group of political parties whose rise to power and influence has been one of the most striking political features of the post-war world.

As the Catholic social movements and Catholic Action are not political, they have flourished and still flourish in countries where Christian Democratic parties are banned. They owe much of their success to the support of all Christians whether democratic or not, and it would be dangerously misleading to enrol them under the banner of Christian Democracy. This is particularly so in the case of Catholic Action (which Professor Fogarty, to placate Protestant sensitiveness, calls Christian Action), a movement clearly defined by Pope Pius XI as the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy, and which should therefore not have political aims or associations. Professor Fogarty is, of course, acutely aware of this danger. He disclaims explicitly in his introduction any intention of including Catholic Action as a Christian Democratic movement, but the space which he devotes to it in his book may unintentionally give an entirely wrong impression to an English public, which is alas only too prone to confuse politics and religion. Members of Catholic Action are not above making such a confusion themselves, and

the French Hierarchy have recently had to remind them of the strict limits of their movements.

Professor Fogarty is impatient with the Christian Democratic politician in France or Austria or Italy, who 'may protest indignantly that he has nothing in common with the Christian monarchists or anti-semites or clericals of seventy years ago' because 'monarchists, anti-semites and clerical politics is one of the stocks out of which Christian Democracy has grown'. But it is possible that the Christian Democratic politician may know more about his ancestry than Professor Fogarty. The struggle amongst Catholics in the last century was between two groups—the Christian Democrats and the social Catholics. The original intention of the early Christian Democrats was not to found political parties at all, but to reconcile the Church with Democracy. They wanted power to be entrusted to the people and believed that a system of government based on such a principle was perfectly in accordance with Christian teaching. The social Catholics, on the other hand, rejected all political systems not based upon the principle of hierarchical organization, and contended that only a monarchical or aristocratic system was suitable to a Christian state. Although the social Christians thought that the people could not be trusted with power, they were acutely conscious of the misery of the working masses. Especially after 1848, when the early Christian Democratic movement was practically annihilated, it was the social Catholics, men like Albert de Mun, Armand de Melun, La Tour du Pin, Ketteler and Vogelsang, who developed Catholic social thought. But these good and charitable men were never really convinced democrats. They did not trust the people and in consequence the people did not trust them. They failed to attract the loyalty of the workers and were powerless to stop the great scandal of the nineteenth century—the loss of the working classes to the Church. As François Goguel says in *Christian Democracy in France*, the distinction between these two currents, that of the Christian Democrats and that of the social Catholics, is not always easy to make, but it is crucial. Occasionally these two currents have united, at least on the surface, but almost always only to separate quickly again.

By far the most important and interesting—though perhaps, alas, the less impressive—part of Professor Fogarty's book deals

with the rise and development of the Christian Democratic political parties. He has much of interest to say about Holland and Belgium, but he is probably a little over-generous in calling the Catholic Parties in those countries 'Christian Democratic'. These old-established parties were founded more for the protection of Catholic sectional interests, such as the schools, than for the propagation of the principles of Christian Democracy, and it is not surprising that in Holland, in such a stuffy and frustrating atmosphere, there should have been a small but determined effort on the part of Catholics to 'break through' into the Labour Party.

Although Christian Democracy has a long and honourable history, the development of large and powerful Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe is largely a post-war phenomenon. They were created in Germany and Italy through the collapse of dictatorship and in France through the temporary eclipse of the political Right, which in all three countries created a political vacuum, which the Christian Democrats found it their task to fill. Given the circumstances, it is surprising that they have succeeded so well. Almost overnight, the small handful of Christian Democratic pioneers, who for years had preached Christian Democracy to their indifferent, contemptuous and sometimes hostile co-religionists with no hope of success, suddenly found themselves carried by irresistible forces to the leadership of their respective countries. The problem of cadres was particularly acute. In Italy, for instance, one Christian Democratic leader admitted that apart from lawyers, it was almost impossible to find a man under fifty with any experience of public speaking!

It is almost certain that after the collapse of Hitler the emergence of Christian Democratic parties capable of commanding the loyalties of Catholics saved Europe from Communism at a critical moment of history. The question that now arises is this. Is the present political alignment of Catholics, largely due to a series of historical accidents, now a permanent feature of Western European politics? After having been a negative element in European politics for over a century, are Catholics now to form a permanent centre bloc, with all that it implies in the way of political immobility? These are large questions which are of crucial importance to the Church and to Europe, and they explain

the uneasiness which has caused the attempts to break-through in France and Holland, and which may sooner or later spread to other countries.

Christian Democracy is, strictly speaking, not a political movement at all, but a movement to reconcile Christians with the principles of political democracy. Once that aim has been achieved, it has no further reason for its existence, but like all successful movements, it tends to outlive its usefulness. On this account, Professor Fogarty's attempts to define the Christian Democratic ideal 'personalist, not individualist—pluralist, not collectivist' are particularly unconvincing. A common faith is not an adequate plank for a political platform and Christians should search for unity before the altar and not in the polling booth. Mr Hugh Delargy and Mr John Biggs-Davison are both deeply sincere Catholics with hardly a single political idea in common and it would not be easy to produce an effective political programme acceptable to both. It is for this reason that the programmes of the Christian Democratic parties largely lack dynamic force, and that the *Nouvelles Equipes Internationales* has no importance as an international body.

There is another and even more serious objection to the present set-up of the Christian Democratic parties, and that is the use by so many of them of the label 'Christian'. This is a novel departure dating from the war. Until then the Christian Democrats had always been careful to avoid such a label and had insisted that their parties were not confessional but open to all, irrespective of creed. There was great wisdom in that decision, because Christian Democrats have never claimed to have a monopoly of Catholic political thought, and did not wish to involve the Church in the success or failure of their political actions, remembering only too well the disastrous consequence of the close link between the Church and the Ancien Régime. Have the present-day Christian Democrats been wise in reversing the decision of their predecessors?