

## RELIGION AND POLITICS IN AUSTRIA

A FEW weeks ago I heard an Austrian historian—a thinker and a practising Catholic—describe Austria as ‘perhaps the most corrupt country in Europe’. Similar judgments are made by Englishmen in Austria on the strength of the Black Market and the power of the cigarette as a means of getting things done. But in the mouth of an Austrian it has a very different value and significance. Not only does it embody the mood of searching self-criticism which is prevalent among thinking Catholics in Austria; it also recognizes and points to a sickness in the Austrian nation far deeper-seated than the Black Market—which will, here as elsewhere, disappear only when there is a sufficiency of food and cigarettes, but which is relatively a superficial ill. Objective love and inside knowledge are the pre-requisites of a true diagnosis, and these are hard to come by for a foreigner, who may be fascinated or repelled by irrelevant details—the peasant’s *Grüß Gott*, or the incurable unpunctuality of Austrians in keeping appointments. This article is therefore not a statement of personal opinion but a synthesis of the views of one or two Austrian Catholics, whose interpretation seems to fit the facts as they now appear and in whom self-criticism and an earnest truth-seeking guarantee a certain degree of objectivity.

That Austria was physically incapacitated by the collapse and dismemberment of the old Austrian empire is generally known, though Englishmen are apt to underrate the effects both of economic distress and of the psychological shock of becoming, suddenly, a small nation in turning the minds of Austrians towards union with Germany as a cure for their ills. What is less widely recognized is the spiritual starvation from which Austrians, especially in the towns and intellectual centres, had been suffering for years beforehand. In normal times Austrians are notoriously easy-going, and for generations before 1914 God had sent the Church in Austria no leaders of prophetic calibre. Religion was, for most people, a pleasant, unexact pursuit, honorably linked with culture and with the crowning achievements of music and Baroque architecture, and so much a part of the age-long and unbroken tradition of Austrian life that it was taken for granted. There was no need to discuss or analyse it, any more than to discuss or analyse the normal functions of life—breathing, eating, sleeping. A happy and healthy state, save in one vital respect: the element of challenge was lacking, the perpetual rediscovery of the urgency of the Gospel of Christ. Life made no demands on the capacity of the young for generosity and heroism, and in men’s lives there was a vacant place, a ‘house swept and garnished’.

In public life, the Catholic Church in Austria suffered from all the disadvantages which beset an established state church—undue security, a strong temptation to approve all acts of the civil authority and an identification, both in fact and in the minds of the people, with the ruling class. As in the course of the 19th century the 'ruling class' had ceased to be purely the landed aristocracy and had become infiltrated with an industrial and commercial plutocracy, this meant an identification with the rich as against the poor. This situation threw the door open to idealistic and ideological Socialism—that continental Socialism which is in itself a religion and which is so closely bound up with the Marxist materialist and anti-clerical outlook that it was 'impossible for a good Catholic to be a Social-Democrat'. Catholics were thus driven to the political Right, or out of politics altogether, for lack of a possible Left-wing alternative, and the identification of the Church with political 'reaction' was complete.

This was the situation when the end of the 1914-18 war brought about the collapse of the old Austrian empire and the advent of the Republic, facing the task of ruling a small, poor and economically unbalanced country. In the subsequent Socialist victories and achievements, and in the opposing struggle of the Catholic parties represented by Dollfuss and Schuschnigg, one fact emerged all too clearly—that the Catholic Church in Austria was still untouched with the prophetic and apostolic spirit. Its response to political attack was political defence, not spiritual attack; it retired within itself, and the phrase, *die katholische Ghetto*, current at the time, summed up its purely isolationist and defensive attitude. And so, by a strange irony, when the test of the *Anschluss* came, the gift that was withheld from it was political wisdom. Whatever may be said in extenuation of the attitude of Cardinal Innitzer and the Austrian bishops towards Hitler and the Nazi regime (and there is more to be said than most of us realise), it was an attitude lacking not only in heroism but in common *savoir-faire*. None of the promised benefits were gained by it, and the Church in Austria lost all the outside sympathy and support that an uncompromising stand would have won, as well as the chance of retrieving its own lost sheep.

For the real secret of the Nazi landslide in Austria in the early stages—more than economic distress, Pan-Germanism, or anything else—was that Nazism with its positive good points, its challenging demands and its appeal to heroism, filled the spiritual vacuum which the Church had failed to fill. That the good points were vitiated by their context, the demands unlawful and the appeal spurious and of the devil, is easy for us to see now; but Christ himself foretold that the false christs should do signs and wonders 'insomuch as to deceive (if possible) even the elect'. And the Austrians of 1938 were—save

for a few rare individuals—not 'the elect', but ordinary Catholics, suffering from an inner malnutrition as incapacitating to the spirit as physical malnutrition is to the body. I have seen the case histories of a number of young and ardent Nazis, collected by a Catholic scholar in an endeavour to reach some solution to the question, 'How was the Nazi victory possible in Austria?' By far the greater number of these were of good intelligence and high ideals and either professing members of the Catholic Church (or in a few cases of the Lutheran Church) or in active revolt against the religion of their upbringing. The investigator draws from his 'case-book' the terrible conclusion, not only that Nazism filled the void in men's hearts which the Catholic Church in Austria had failed to fill, but that Nazism (and with it other forms of totalitarianism) is a perversion of Catholicism, impossible without its prototype. Let those of us to whom this diagnosis seems fantastic, think of those cases in the spiritual life of the individual where virtue and vice grow together inextricably, so that it is almost impossible to distinguish, far less disentangle, their roots. Let us also remember—if our own purely empirical political life does not make it impossible for us—that all political movements on the Continent are religious and that—as a corollary—all falsely-based political movements are, at bottom, religious heresies.

Turning to the present, the outward situation is not encouraging. Owing to the ideological and religious character of political life, it is still regarded by most people as impossible for a good Catholic to belong to the Social-Democratic Party. This wall is being gradually breached by the cooperation worked out in the field of social welfare between the more courageous and unconventional Catholics and the more fair-minded Social-Democrats; hatred of Communism, since the Russian occupation, has proved a strong, though negative, influence towards this *rapprochement*. But the restriction, under Allied occupation, to three parties, works deadeningly against political revival. Many Catholics, eager to fulfil their responsibilities as citizens, dislike the Social-Democratic Party and yet equally dislike the Austrian People's Party (the Catholic Right Wing party) because they feel that it lacks vigour and a real policy and that it has become a negative party, the refuge of all those who merely oppose Communism. They are astonished and deeply interested to hear that Catholics are members of both the Conservative and Labour Parties in England and, believing that such freedom from ideologies is a pre-requisite for a successful democracy, ask themselves whether Austria has, or ever will have, the capacity to make democracy work. They are incredulous when an Englishman in reply suggests that our apparent inability to bring abstract principles into politics has its disadvantages also.

It is too early to prophesy what line Austria's return to health will take. But as her sickness is radical, so also must be her cure; and no cure can be radical which does not take place in the hearts and in the souls of her individual citizens. Here, precisely, there are hopeful signs. It is not merely that churches are well attended—that it is almost impossible to find a seat at Sunday Masses from seven o'clock onwards, or at a particularly vigorous and trenchant series of Advent sermons. Nor is it even that parish life, and the active training of the laity for participation in all aspects of it, received a quickening impulse from the repression and prohibition of other Church activities under the *Anschluss*. Far more significant than these facts, heartening though they are, is the number of former Nazis who have become Catholics once more—some even before the outbreak of war, rapidly disillusioned by the practical sight of National Socialism at work, others, under the pressure of the dangers and horrors of front-line service. Such re-conversions were not only dangerous at the time—and many were brave enough to make them extremely public—but are now quite unprofitable. Under present laws 'former Nazis' are forbidden to teach, practise medicine, or hold a variety of other responsible posts, and the fact that the individual concerned ceased to be a Nazi in 1939 or 1942 is not regarded. Thus many of these converts, most of them intellectuals or professionally trained, are eking out a miserable living (often with families to support) by doing unskilled work and giving private tuition, and it is most moving to find such men accepting their present helplessness, hardships and humiliations in a spirit of penance.

Another encouraging sign is the vigorous endeavour of intellectual and professional Catholics to relate their religion to their work in the world and to deepen their spiritual life. To attend a discussion group in the bare and unheated club-room of the Vienna Catholic Students Union, and then to join these same students at their weekly Mass in the tiny and ancient Ruprechtskirche, is to realize that here is a group of young people bent on making Christianity in its most complete and uncompromising form, a reality for their studies and for their lives. In other groups the stresses are differently placed, but the same honesty, self-criticism and strength of purpose are there.

For the majority of Austrians, however, life is not concerned with major issues, but with a constant, grinding struggle for the most ordinary necessities. Rations are inadequate, there is a grave shortage of housing (now aggravated by Allied requisitioning) and of fuel; clothing, medicines, furniture, mending materials, soap, household utensils, are almost non-existent. So inseparable is this struggle now from normal life that the outside observer only gradually realizes that its elements are nothing more or less than the classical mortifications

of Christian asceticism—fasting, insufficient and uncomfortable sleep, poverty, cold. There are thousands of ordinary families in Vienna today who are suffering no less from the cold than Ste Thérèse of Lisieux did. Can these people not only endure courageously (and many do) but also grasp these great involuntary mortifications and, by a conscious, thankful and voluntary acceptance of them, turn them into the spiritual and redemptive force which they potentially are? It is beyond doubt that among the uncompromisingly sincere Catholic intellectuals, among the teachers and doctors and social workers, among the hard-pressed mothers of families, and among the patient old women who come to daily Mass in threadbare coats and leaking shoes, there are many who do precisely that. And the greatest contribution that Austria's friends abroad can make to her regeneration is to unite their prayers to the prayers and sufferings of her children.

ROSEMARY HUGHES.

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THE UNIVERSE OF SIR EDMUND  
WHITTAKER<sup>1</sup>

**A**S in the lecture room, so in writing, Sir Edmund Whittaker's presentation of his material is made attractive by a certain elegance. It is apt to fill his hearers and readers with at least a temporary sense that new realms of thought have been rendered thoroughly intelligible to them. His Donellan Lectures (1946) were no exception, if we may judge by this book which holds the substance of them. But elegance is the least important quality of an enquiry so serious in its import as to be concerned with the capability of man's reason to demonstrate that God exists. Hereafter we shall give evidence for what we can only call the scientific levity with which this grave subject is here treated. Let us first express our immense disappointment that the author should handle with such evident lack of understanding, not to say lack of knowledge of what is being talked about, matters that do not pertain to his own science. This is particularly regrettable on the part of one who is so hot against the misdemeanours of philosophers and theologians in their approach to technicalities of physics in which they may be without expert competence. He specifies grounds of serious complaint against the Aristotelians of the seventeenth century. Today it clearly appears that there are equally serious ones on the other side.

It is deplorable that the prestige of great attainments should be lent to 140 pages of misunderstanding that results in continual verbal equivocation. The 'analogy' here defined and depreciated is not the

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<sup>1</sup> *Space and Spirit*, by Sir Edmund Whittaker, F.R.S. (Nelson; 6s.)