

Just for a Riband to stick in his Coat?

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by Louis Allen

Mr Roe's book¹ comes as something of a surprise; not because of its contents or its presentation, but simply because it has not been done before. Of all the comparative literature theses of the 'Jones in France'/'Dupont in England' variety, it is natural to expect that someone would have examined the role of Lamennais in this country. From any point of view, he is one of the greatest names in the history of ideas in the nineteenth century. He lived in England for a while (a crucial while: it led to his much controverted decision to take orders), and had many English connections and admirers. No matter: Mr Roe has done the job very well indeed, though, as he is careful to warn us himself, he has been more concerned with the effect of Lamennais upon England, as exemplar, than with the influence of English ideas upon Lamennais.

By the development of current religious and political ideas in his own person, Lamennais offered to English observers the essence of certain key notions in religion and politics which were otherwise diffused throughout the pages of books and periodicals and the actions of very different groups of men. He was one of the most articulate exponents of the renascent Bourbon legitimism with de Bonald and Chateaubriand in the days of the *Drapeau blanc* and the *Conservateur*. He was one of the first to advocate sweeping reforms in seminary education, and to show by the fervour and intellectual ferment of his own group at La Chesnaie and Juilly that there was still an appetite for the promotion of religious orders, usable both by the older orders in their revival by his friends (the Benedictines by Guéranger, the Dominicans by Lacordaire) and by a multiplicity of new teaching orders. His *Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion* provided a badly needed new apologetic (infinitely superior to the sloppy pseudo-historical appeal of Chateaubriand's romantic picture of the Christian past), an apologetic derived from the universal consent of mankind and the authority of the Church expressed through the Pope. As Mr Roe points out, this book was a watershed in Lamennais's development, since although he continued for some time to subscribe to the view that the monarchy was basic to right order, his ultramontanism increasingly cast the role of the monarchy into shadow: without the Pope, no Church; without the

¹*Lamennais and England. The Reception of Lamennais's religious ideas in the nineteenth century.* By W. G. Roe, Oxford U.P., 1966. viii+241. 38/-.

Church, no Christianity; without Christianity, no religion; without religion, no society.

Du progrès de la révolution et de la guerre contre l'église (1829) confirmed this interpretation of papal authority and acknowledged the sordid reality of much of nineteenth century royalty. Revolutionaries were right to resist tyranny and oppression, as the struggles of subject Catholic populations (Poland, Ireland) showed. Political liberalism, on the other hand, the fruit of private judgment, whose end products were inevitably anarchy and atheism, offered no solution; nor (now) did Gallicanism, which meant in effect not the fructification of State by Church, but the Church's bondage to the State.

The Church's severance from all political links with the State (including a state-salaried clergy) with particular stress on the Church's freedom to teach, went hand in hand with renewed emphasis on its unity, indivisibility (no more national churches) and complete submission to Papal authority. Lamennais could not welcome unreservedly the anti-religious revolutionaries of 1830, but he could now see that the muted strivings of the peoples of Europe under the anti-clerical outbursts derived from the eighteenth century ideologies imposed on them by their leaders. Nonetheless, his desire to renew society, reflected in the pages of *L'Avenir*, was just another version of the hated revolution, as far as Europe's reactionaries were concerned, and Gregory XVI was too bound up with the social hierarchies of the old order to risk offending them by espousing the doctrines, however pro-papal, of the French enthusiast and his young disciples, Montalembert and Lacordaire. Their futile pilgrimage to Rome to obtain the Pope's backing against the condemnation of the French episcopate was bound to end in failure, as all such endeavours must, as the abbé Bautain found to his cost some years later when he appealed to the Pope against what seemed to him the excessive rationalism – derogatory to the act of faith – of the Bishop of Strasbourg.

Those who now read *Paroles d'un Croyant* may wonder why this apocalyptic, quasi-devotional outburst should have done more than raise mild eyebrows. Had Lamennais not made the fatal mistake of trying to win Gregory XVI over to his side, things might well have stopped there. His error – however accurately he diagnosed the future development of society towards democratic socialism – was to attempt to conscript the Church into an official approval of his views, when tolerance, carefully worked for, might have achieved his aim. He never understood the difference between success and victory, and since the latter could never, in the nature of things, be publicly granted to him by Rome, he never bothered to attempt the former by more politic means. It is tempting to see similarities in the case of the great apostates of the nineteenth century – Lamennais, Renan, Döllinger, and later Loisy and Tyrrell. It is true they were in some cases heretics by anticipation, in others the slow progress of the

Church, had it occurred earlier, might have left them inside rather than out. It could, though, also be argued that their presence in the Church merely created false problems for them and that their future development was inevitable. I think this is true in the case of Renan and Loisy at any rate, though we will need far more research into the documents of modernism before we can obtain anything like a sure judgment on Tyrrell; and for this the Vatican Archives will have to be consultable well past the period now permitted (still very conservative even by the cautious standards of many State archives) and those of the Holy Office, which are not, I think, consultable at all, will have to be opened. But no document will prevent us regretting that in many cases it was the most learned and the most zealous for the Church who ended up outside her. We can never know enough, either about the obtuseness and self-regard of those in authority, or the sudden blindness which deep involvement in one's own views can produce, to do anything more than pray for those who have left us, since they may have been led to a despairing decision for motives we ourselves have grown to honour and admire.

Some of those in England who had followed Lamennais's career with interest saw him as a dire warning against the surrender to unlimited authority, or as a proof that the Church in France was as tightly held in erastian bondage as the Church of England. Newman's essay on Lamennais in *The British Critic* (1837) dwelt gleefully on this. To the English Catholics, Lamennais was not so much a scarecrow as a defector whose early ideas could still be used fruitfully: W. G. Ward's appetite for authoritative decisions on every conceivable topic – a Bull a day for breakfast – echoed the views of Lamennais's middle period. Acton dismissed Lamennais's *sensus communis* as an apologetic method, but approved of his writings on liberty.

Most of the comment later developed into variations on the theme of Christian socialism, i.e. the later Lamennais. But the role of Biblical Criticism as a solvent of Christian belief – raised only in the cases of Renan and Loisy – was relevant to that of Dr Rowland Williams, one of the contributors to *Essays and Reviews* (1860), whose mind turned to the example of Lamennais in a meditation on a problem which confronted many Anglican Churchmen both in the days of the Tractarians and during the later debates on science and religion: whether a man who exercises a sacred function should resign it when he comes to realize that he is out of sympathy with the Church, or whether he should continue to adhere to the Church in a state of inward inconsistency.

Of the Christian socialists, few seem to have had more than a passing acquaintance with Lamennais, in spite of G. D. H. Cole's view that he was the direct progenitor of much Christian socialist doctrine. In fact, Christian socialism was evoked more by reaction to appalling social conditions in Victorian England than by the

impact of continental ideas, though the socialism of the later Lamennais was certainly an inspiration, later in the century, to the writers of the *Economic Review* and the *Church Reformer*; and the Anglican W. J. Linton apparently became a Chartist as a result of reading *Paroles d'un Croyant*. There are, in fact, on the radical fringe of Christian thought and among the less extreme socialist and communist thinkers of the late nineteenth century, many echoes, sometimes accurate, often misunderstood, of the Lamennais who wrote the *Livre du Peuple*. In our own century, in the purely religious field, Charles Gore, who was a founder member of the Christian Socialist Union, undertook a lengthy correspondence with Wilfrid Ward on Lamennais and Newman, and Mr Roe finds in even more recent times a possible comparison with Lamennais in Fr John Courtney Murray's argument that the kind of state envisaged by the American Constitution is the one most likely to offer to the Church, as the Christian people, a means, through its free political institutions, of achieving harmony between law and social organization and the demands of the Christian conscience. The fact that Fr Murray was largely responsible for the draft on religious liberty at Vatican II is an indication that we have at least caught up with Lamennais's views and also that the issues which were alive for him are alive for us too. English writers, Mr Roe concludes, Christian or otherwise, seem to have sensed that Lamennais 'in some way epitomized the century; that in his life was the century's struggle between scepticism and faith . . . In the last century this tension was still felt to be revolutionary. Now it has sunk deep into common belief, and is accepted by many Christians as part of the nature of religious belief' (p. 194). Or, in the words of Harold Laski with which Mr Roe ends, 'He dare not be forgotten as long as men are willing to examine the principles upon which their life is founded.'

The information upon which Mr Roe has drawn for his book is contained not merely in voluminous Victorian biographies and correspondence, but also in a vast range of obscure periodicals which he has searched with a commendable thoroughness. He seems on rather less sure ground where the literature of the subject in French is concerned. In a list of 'archives and unpublished documents' he refers, for example, to letters in the British Museum from Montalembert to Gladstone which, far from being unpublished, have been in print for over a decade in the *Revue de littérature comparée*. And the crucial relationship with Charles McCarthy has been illuminated by the publication of his letters from Rome to Lamennais in the *Annales de Bretagne* (September, 1964); though Mr Roe's text may have been completed before these were in print. Mr Roe also falls too readily into the assumption – made before him by Fr Henry Tristram, who should have known better – that the men of the Oxford Movement were insular. Many of them kept up to date with French theology, some with German, and most of them travelled

widely on the continent and took copious notes on liturgy, the state of religious education, and many other aspects of Catholic life across the Channel. Perhaps they didn't quote Strauss and Schleiermacher as often as they should have done – but then, what did Schleiermacher know of Lancelot Andrewes?

It is high time, incidentally, that someone undertook the biography of McCarthy, one of the most paradoxical figures in a century which had more than its fair share of them. A cousin of Wiseman, he studied for the priesthood at the English College in Rome, and was always on hand to entertain visiting Englishmen, Anglicans included, in the eighteen thirties. It was at this period he met Lamennais, and became his chief source of rumours about Rome's intentions. Later still, he turned Protestant, and ended up, under the patronage of Richard Monckton Milnes, by becoming Governor of Ceylon. He was finally knighted by Queen Victoria, thus rounding off a career structure rarely paralleled by other students of the Venerable. The Milnes papers and the Grey papers in Durham contain bundles of his letters, and he would be worth, at the very least, the passing tribute of a Ph.D.

The name of Lamennais figures nowhere in Professor Roy Pierce's book on contemporary French political thinkers,² though he adumbrated many of the issues with which the book deals, and though one of Professor Pierce's major figures, Emmanuel Mounier, thought about the relations between politics and religion in much the same terms as the middle Lamennais did. The consistent attempt by Mounier and his review *Esprit* to separate the Church's spiritual welfare from that of French political conservatism was absolutely in the line of Lamennais's thinking, and it is a task that needs to be taken up again and again in most societies where the Church's presence is considerable. Though it is not enough, as Professor Pierce points out, to require a regime to permit spiritual liberty; and it was a weakness in Mounier that he never investigated whether certain forms of political or social organization might constitute greater threats to spiritual freedom than others. Nor did he adequately distinguish how much alteration in its 'incarnation' a value could stand, before it ceased to be continuous with the generosity of its origins.

Like Camus, Mounier desired a socialism which did not crush three generations of men to save those who followed. Although he was better prepared than most of his Catholic contemporaries to recognize the social evils against which communism fought, and acknowledged as a matter of fact that the transformation of industrial society could not be effective without the working class, that the most dynamic element in that class trusted the Communist Party implicitly, and that any measure aimed against the French Communist Party wounded in its very flesh, to use his own terms, the 'hope of

²*Contemporary French Political Thought*. By Roy Pierce. Oxford U.P. 1966, 276pp. £2/5/0.

the hopeless', he also felt that Marxism was condemnable, as liberalism was, insofar as they were both extensions of the rationalism and utilitarianism underlying the bourgeois democratic society which communism presumably opposed. No Christian could possibly adhere to a philosophy which denied, or belittled, transcendence, devalued the inner being, and confused a just criticism of idealist escapism with a fundamental assault on religion. Not all opposition to communism, as he saw it, was based on mystification of class or interest, but on the support of the authentic realities which communism opposed, the Christian sense of man, and the habits of liberty.

It is an indication of the value and absorbing interest of Professor Pierce's book that he is prepared to devote a good deal of space to a thinker like Mounier whom some would regard as the apostle of an articulate but politically ineffective coterie on the fringes of real French political life. But it is precisely this type of thinker who interests Professor Pierce, and it is the absorption with ideas and the refreshing lack of statistics, psephological or otherwise, which is bound to strike the reader after the arid desert of much that passes for the history of French political thought. The other figures he considers are Simone Weil, Camus, Sartre, Bertrand de Jouvenel and Raymond Aron, none of them, except for Sartre, effective in the field of political action, but all functioning as prophets, interpreting the needs of the age to the French community. Simone Weil was perhaps the most remote from real political action, and her living protest against inequality and injustice approximates to the self-immolation of the Buddhist priests in Viet-Nam or the Hindu fasting to death: in war-time England, she refused a diet better than that available to her fellow-countrymen in occupied France, and in the 'thirties gave up what would have been a brilliant academic career to work in the Renault factory and immerse herself in industrial reality without the interposing screen of bourgeois comfort. This personal asceticism seems to have counted for more than the sharpness of her written analyses of politics.

Albert Camus, very acute when faced with the problems of the resistance of Frenchmen to Germans and with the use of terror as a political instrument by revolutionaries unable to prevent their ends becoming corrupted by their means, stumbled and hesitated when confronted by an option for justice which would have destroyed the 'pied noir' society in Algeria from which he sprang. It was a choice, as he put it himself, between 'justice and my mother – and if you make me choose, I will choose my mother.' In fact, he chose silence, and retreated into the world of fiction.

The extremes of violence to which revolutionary theory was led, in the past of mankind as interpreted by Camus, made him wary of prescriptive utopias. And Professor Pierce shows that this mistrust links him with de Jouvenel, who declares the concrete definition of

an ideal society to be dangerous. 'The attraction exercised by pictures of this kind', he writes in *Sovereignty*, 'lures men into importing them into reality and leads them on to tyrannical actions to achieve their ideals: there is a tyranny in the womb of every Utopia.' Raymond Aron's theme is not dissimilar when he views with distaste the notion of 'a minority imposing a conception of a social order in conformity with the law of History and Reason' which inevitably ends with the sacrifice of mankind to an order supposed to serve it.

The only revolutions to which Camus paid little or no attention in *L'Homme révolté* (*The Rebel*) are the English Civil Wars and the American War of Independence – no doubt both socially imperfect revolutions in the ambiguity of their social ideals and the society they did in fact produce. But they might at least serve to counter-balance the theme of prudence, an Oakeshottian sense-versus-reasoning idea of politics, which all Professor Pierce's subjects save Simone Weil and Sartre ultimately believe in, and which explains the respect Camus felt for the advances achieved by trade unionism and moderate Labour policies in the British society of the nineteen fifties. (Perhaps Oakeshottian is not a comprehensive enough term, since it can be found to left as well as to right: Attlee's most cutting criticism of an ambitious colleague was that 'he was too clever by half.')

This is not reject the important notion of 'limits' dear to both Simone Weil and Camus, which is intended to humanise the abstractions of political theorists; but it makes little sense to refuse reasoning on the scale of national or international polity and accept it – or its fruits – on the level of industrial arbitration, a procedure which is not entirely devoid of the presentation of rational cases.

In a way, Professor Pierce's brilliantly readable book is more historical than he has perhaps realized, at least as far as any lessons to be derived from it for our state or his own in the U.S.A. are concerned. Ideals of freedom and self-determination and the liberation of man from the economic imperatives of the past, all these things provide the subject-matter of the various French debates on the relations of man to his society. But – again with the exception of Sartre – they do not deal with the monster from the nineteenth century which may, in a matter of decades, do more to destroy our society than any other single factor: race. If – and it is not an impossible if – the situation in Rhodesia develops like that in Algeria, the most grievous impact will not necessarily be in Africa but here in England, just as the growth of racial contempt as a political factor in metropolitan France, and a degeneration of political issues into militarist and colonialist revolts against national authority – or rather the vacuum that stood in its place – were among the most horrifying aspects of the war in Algeria. The materials for a similar tinder-box are there: a powerful white minority defending its own high standard of living (in the name of the 'West', of Christian

civilisation, in both cases), at the expense of a coloured majority. with, in the metropolis, large numbers belonging to the same racial-community as that majority who are economically and socially the most vulnerable members of society; and a vociferous right-wing ready to be inflamed by the disorganised economy or a rise in racialist temperature which the outbreak of guerrilla warfare in Rhodesia will surely bring . . .

Perhaps because most of the thinkers discussed by Professor Pierce regarded the racial problem as too unsubtle and unsophisticated, an issue to which the answer was obvious, they do not seem to have given us much of a lead upon it. But it is not the option for this or that economic structure which will be crucial for the rest of this century, and perhaps beyond, but the politics of race. The Church must guide us in this, if she is to guide us on earth at all.

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