

NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT¹

'THE desire for order is a primary need of our nature, of our minds and bodies In the sphere of society man desires primarily a clear order, the deep satisfaction of knowing himself bound up with that which is moving to some defined end.'

There is nowadays no dearth of writers whose theme is the condemnation of our modern chaos. They fall, usually, into one of two distinct classes: there is the pure satirist, mildly mocking or disgustedly slashing but with no positive advice as to how our Humpty Dumpty should be put together again; there is the perhaps more placid person whose solution is ready to hand and whose only difficulty lies in the apparent hopelessness of getting the world to accept that solution. Miss Storm Jameson belongs to neither camp. She does not mock, and though she hits hard it is, one feels, in real sorrow and not in righteous anger; and, on the other hand, while she sees in what direction the solution must lie, it is by no means cut and dried for her. Our trouble is that 'there is no end solution, no Good, no value greater than all the others, to which we can relate and subordinate our separate lesser values'; we know the evil of that disruption, that 'division between man's outer and inner life, which starts with the Renaissance.' But the modern world cannot 'turn back to the medieval supremacy of the Church'; 'formal religion' has collapsed. And meanwhile, we bow the knee to the 'bitch-goddess, Success,' and at the same time seem all too likely to turn renegade even to that religion by suicidally plunging into another war.

Undoubtedly, if the world does stumble into another war it will be like the man who stumbled up to his bedroom so very drunk that he thrust the candle into bed and

¹ *No Time like the Present*. By Storm Jameson. (Cassell, 1933.) A fascinating autobiographical sketch; a sincere and deep discussion of our modern troubles.

blew himself out—the ‘candle of the Lord,’ as Locke called reason, stuffed out of sight, and civilization extinguished.

‘I have come to believe that men need gods’ is a text which, if taken perhaps a little too literally, will make a fertile pretext. For it is precisely not gods we need, but a God; not in the diversity of polytheism but in the unity of monotheism that our salvation lies. What is to prevent war, to prevent chaos, to prevent final and complete disintegration, but a consistency founded on principles that shall leave no loose ends, that shall embrace every aspect of our modern multiplicity and order it by putting, as Miss Jameson herself says, ‘the first things first’?

But what are the first things? Miss Jameson’s answer lies in the direction of humanism. We must ‘put the value-stress where it humanly belongs, on man and on his human needs and desires. With this human end in view the social order must be re-ordered and our values, social and spiritual, re-valued . . . The moral pressure exercised in the Middle Ages by the Church and now by the bitch-goddess must pass to man and to his intelligence and scarcely-realised powers.’

If this is to mean a purely natural humanism it must seem sadly incomplete. For the gravest of our ills it offers no remedy: ‘we have fallen out of the hands of the Absolute . . . There is thus frustrated in us our deepest need. We suffer, in our kind, from the feeling of disintegration, of the final futility of life.’ Without a supernatural faith to orientate and give ultimate meaning to our humanism we must continue necessarily to feel finally futile. And indeed, even in the compass of human life it is more than doubtful whether natural humanism can find the unity we need. The bitch-goddess may be largely discredited, but she is not yet beaten, and humanism will be in danger of becoming itself a *sauve qui peut*, a selfish disparate seeking, in each individual, after life. The unity must be of a higher plane, above human affairs and regulating them, co-ordinating the various aspects of human life in subor-

dination to the Absolute. Only in such a synthesis can the order we need be found, only in such a synthesis can humanism itself flourish.

Catholicism certainly does not mean a return to the 'medieval supremacy of the Church,' if that phrase be taken to mean the medieval polity of Pope and Emperor, the 'direct power.' It means merely the *primauté du spirituel*, which is a principle belonging to the Middle Ages no more than to any other era, except in so far as the Middle Ages may be said to have understood it better than we. For the Catholic Church continues to assert her belief in a supernatural, her possession of a message from the Absolute, her right to uphold the supremacy of the spiritual, her knowledge of the order and finality which alone can make human life livable. Unity of principle, even of supernatural principle, cannot prevent war, but at least it can prevent the preventives of peace.

That is why the author of this book found consolation during the war in the Papal encyclicals. That is why, now as (if one may be pardoned for saying so) once before, chaos comes from Geneva, construction from Rome. It is the Renaissance division of life which must be remedied, and the affirmations of Christian humanism re-affirmed, if chaos is to be cured; if peace and construction is to become possible it is only by way of an agreed acceptance of the primacy of the spirit in a faith which acknowledges God as the beginning and the end and which sees human life and the multiplicity of earthly affairs as in an ordered movement, returning, in the words of St. Thomas, 'to that from which, in the beginning, as from their principle, they sprang.'

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