

# The Secular World and the Church

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In recent times there has grown up a strong feeling that our tradition of sanctity is inadequate, and that this inadequacy is connected with its isolation from the secular world. In Fr Rabut's words,<sup>1</sup> 'La sainteté traditionnelle s'est coupé non seulement du péché mais souvent des espoirs et des travaux du monde'.

This period of comparative isolation from 'the hopes and labours' of the world has coincided with a period of strong establishment; so that the isolation has expressed itself in practice not in indifference but in active obstruction to most of the advances made in the post-reformation period. Is there a necessary connection between the obstruction and what we may call, for lack of a better phrase, the period of establishment of Christianity in Western society?

Certainly, one of the most curious aspects of the Church in its social dimension has been its almost total opposition to change: not to this or that particular change, but to change as such. This has taken the form of an implacable opposition to a succession of radical or revolutionary philosophies which have fomented change over the past five hundred years.<sup>2</sup> Nineteenth-century liberals met with the same treatment as their twentieth-century counterparts, those theorists and reformers who, at various positions left of centre, have learned not to count the Church as among their allies. They are tinged with 'secularism' and 'utopianism', are irreverent of precedent and tradition, and easily fit into that elastic ecclesiastical category of 'dangerous'.

Since history is, almost by definition, change, it will be seen that this puts a great strain on the relationship between the church and a section of the world which has particular claims on the church's sympathy. For those who desire change are usually those who are outraged by the present; and since the present, in a fallen world, is always outrageous,

<sup>1</sup>*Valeur Spirituelle du Profane*, by Olivier A. Rabut, o.p.; Editions du Cerf; 7.80 F.

<sup>2</sup>It is against this background that we must measure the importance and the impact of *Pacem in Terris*.

it is usually the most morally sensitive men who are dissatisfied with its institutions. In countries where an appreciable part of the establishment is clerical, these men develop a corresponding degree of anti-clericalism. The gap widens.

The strain is rendered more acute by the fact that the Church inevitably uses moral language to state and defend her positions. It is impossible for her to discuss anything in any other terms. This has the advantage that it puts right out of court the enormous lie that politics can be discussed in amoral terms. It has the corresponding disadvantage that all comment, from the most inspired truth to the most uninformed prejudice, is expressed in the same moral terms and backed up with the same moral armoury: the spiritual claims and authority of the church.

The person who is at the highest point of tension between the world and the Church is the layman, and there is no easily drawn line for him to observe. He need not take too seriously the 'views' of his parish priest. Or need he? How about those of the bishop? Of the pope? Does he only accept *ex cathedra* statements? This would clearly be an absurd truncation of the teaching character of the Church. Perhaps the churchman who seems to him utterly incompetent to judge on social matters has been given a special responsibility in just those matters by the hierarchy. Perhaps he is head of a catholic social guild. *What is the nature* of this authority, which in the things which touch him most deeply, his conscience as a human being, can seem so blind and insensitive; and which in its tendency to use an enormous though nebulous bludgeon, sometimes when least sure of itself, frustrates and destroys him?

It is now officially a mortal sin to belong to the Maltese Labour Party, or to attend its meetings. A pastoral letter of the archbishop, before the last election, proclaimed it so. Confessors were instructed to question penitents on their political activities, and to refuse them absolution if their answers were not satisfactory.

At what point does a practising Catholic decide to disobey his ecclesiastic superiors? Clearly at the present point in Malta, for this is what is happening. What we must surely enquire is how such a situation should come about, how Catholic laymen could find themselves in such a destructive dilemma. Malta is not typical, but neither is it an exception. Similar situations could be found all over the world. The Church exists by a divine and living guarantee; nevertheless it exists in the human world and suffers from the failings of all human institutions. In sociological matters her positions seem, over the past centuries, to have been particularly weak. I believe there are quite clear reasons why this should

be so. They spring from the absence of anything like a mature and responsible laity and will continue to exist until the laity in some sense comes of age.

One of the many blessings for which we have partly to thank our modern secular society has been the shift of interest in religious thinking to the long-neglected role of the layman.<sup>3</sup> Born as a lay religion in revolt against the legalism and crimes against the spirit of the Old Testament priesthood, Christianity soon itself turned into a hierarchic body in which the privileges which had early pertained to every Christian, became increasingly the sole prerogative of the clergy. Lay preaching, lay administration of church estates, the election of bishops and clergy by the laity, all were in turn suppressed. This may have been historically necessary; indeed it becomes clear in this book that clericalisation proceeded fastest in periods of reform of the Church such as the pontificate of Gregory the Great. Nevertheless its evils have been at least two-fold, as the modern attempt to restore the early concept of the priesthood of all baptised Christians is showing. For apart from the theological loss, it has tended to produce on the one hand a laity that is irresponsible, frivolous and often grossly anti-clerical; on the other a clergy that at its best is inadequate to carry the whole weight of the Church, and at its worst enshrines those very crimes against which Christ warned the Pharisees. No Catholic can ignore that the strongest anti-clerical writing in literature is in the pages of the New Testament, and that this has been a major factor in the period of heresy and revolt against the Church that is now perhaps drawing to its close. It is no accident that the ecumenical movement is largely based on a re-appraisal of the role of the laity.

In *The Layman in Christian History* we have an interdenominational attempt to unravel some of the strands of this history. There are sixteen essays, including one from a Catholic, Dr Jan Grootaers, of Brussels, who quotes Cardinal Saliège: 'The wretched theologians! They have forgotten two things, the layman and the Holy Spirit.' The book gives a rough coverage to the whole of Christian history. It provides a quarry from which one may extract tentative answers to many questions and is, we may hope, the start of much further research on the subject. Here is outlined the sad process of division in the Church of Christ, the loss of equality and then of contact between clergy and laity that led quite naturally to the explosion and fragmentation of the sixteenth century. Laymen throughout the centuries have pondered the beautiful adult

<sup>3</sup>*The Layman in Christian History*, edited by Stephen and H.-R. Weber; S.M.C. Press; 40s.

solemnity of the early Church, questioning sometimes wistfully, sometimes bitterly like Erasmus, where it went; contrasting it most recently with the officers-and-other-ranks mystique of the nineteenth century, in the ruins of which we still live. With this book we can begin to take a more informed interest.

The absorbing thing about this history, and one that it is fundamentally important to understand, is the intimate relation it bears to the development of society as a whole. It is for this reason, and for this reason alone, that its closer study breeds not polemic against the Church but a deeper understanding of the whole nature of man's moral life; and particularly of the banal fact that the character of the choice open to him is dictated by the physical position in which he finds himself. His freedom to choose, to act in a way which makes him worthy of praise or blame, exists only in the context of a physical world of which he is himself a part. It is his nature as a human being to be in a dual relation to history: at once part of it, part of the fabric, the warp and the woof; and at the same time outside it, capable of reacting against it, of being a victim of it, of changing it. In this way too, the Church is both of history and apart from it: exercising a choice that is endlessly presented to it by a history of which it is itself an integral part. In this sense tragedy is innate in the Church, for the Church is of the fabric of fallen man.

It becomes clear in this book that the primary form tragedy has taken, the shape that sin has taken, has been the failure of the Church to solve, in her institutional forms, this central conflict in her nature: that she is of the world and yet not of it. 'My kingdom is not of this world': and in attempted obedience of this precept her organisation shows a clear distinction between sacred and profane; it is sacrilege to strike a priest. Yet she is also immersed in the world: her clergy, who it is sacrilege to strike, are subject, in periods of prosperity, to attacks of worldliness which are gross in exact proportion to the privilege of their sacred office.

In the question of privilege the Church has been particularly at the mercy of secular history, for privilege is a secular matter: fundamentally it can only be conferred by the world. For though the Church's organisation will always reflect the secular power-patterns of the day, this happens in widely varying degrees. In a theocracy, ecclesiastical and secular power-structures are identical: the same people wield political and religious authority. Israel was such a state, and the idea has been prominent at all periods of Christian history down to the present, when

the idea that England is a 'Christian country', still peddled by JPs and Women's Institutes in sharp defiance of the facts, represents its pathetic remnant. It was strikingly irrelevant to the early Church, which in this respect was at the other end of the scale, had burst out of the womb-like theocracy of the Old Testament. They were a minority in an unbelieving world, and there was very little scope inside their organisation for secular concepts of authority. Their clergy did not administer estates, did not command social prestige, were not therefore subject even to the temptations of the Pharisees. It was only with the conversion of Constantine and the proclaiming of Christianity as the official religion of the empire, that the Church was trapped and smothered by an avalanche of patronage from which it has taken all the succeeding centuries partially to extricate it; palaces and estates that needed to be administered, social position that needed to be kept up, political duties that needed to be discharged. More than this, from now until our own time, the vast majority of the Church were Christians primarily because they were good citizens; with whom in mind it was just reasonable to say that the magnificence of an archbishop contributed to the spiritual health of his flock, in that it enhanced the 'respect' in which they held his office.

But history can work in the other way too. If Constantine in a sense appropriated the Church to the empire, so that the 'clericalism' of the Constantinian Church soon became a matter of scandal to, among others, the hermits of the desert, the drift of western history since the Renaissance has been broadly the increasing independence of the secular world from all claims of religious authority. This, reversing the act of Constantine, has been in effect to purify the Church. The loss of the papal states is symbolic of the process: bitterly contested at the time, it now stands out quite clearly as the liberating factor in the history of the modern papacy. Moreover, as the separation of Church and state becomes more absolute, the laity inevitably return into the centre of the Church, are flung, willy-nilly, into their original position of responsibility.

'Un camarade m'a dit,' remarks Fr Rabut in *Valeur Spirituelle du Profane*, 'le chrétien n'est jamais un séculier sincère.' Fr Rabut's answer was 'Tu songe à un faux christianisme.' But he adds to himself, 'Qui de nous, a cet égard, atteint au christianisme vrai?'

The crisis facing religion is in one sense very simple. The first truly secular civilisation in history has established itself. It is successful and confident and has no more apparent need of the priest than of the witch-doctor.

This leaves us confused. Most Catholics, for example, will feel only a sense of outrage that the priest could be compared to the witch-doctor; for we have not come to terms with the extent to which the faith has been upheld by methods not radically different to the witch-doctor's. This is one aspect of our crisis. The world has apostatised around us, and we are left in vague attitudes of archaic reverence, nervous of every scientific advance, prone to the defense of indefensible positions, deeply suspicious of the achievements of a world which has 'rejected Christ'; and lacking any deep insight into that rejection. If the achievements are good, why have we been historically such a bar to progress; if bad, why do we observe that our atheist friends are no less moral than our catholic friends, and that the spread of social justice among men has made more progress in fifty years of secular civilisation than in a thousand years of so-called Christianity. There is reason for our confusion.

Fr Desqueyrat, in *Le Civilisé peut-il croire*,<sup>4</sup> offers an analysis of the last thousand years in which the apostasy of the modern world becomes vastly less obscure. He shows how the Christianity of the medieval can be analysed in terms which are primarily sociological and psychological, not as such Christian. He shows to what extent medieval Christianity had more in common with medieval Mohammedanism than had either with any earlier or later period. He shows what it means to live in a 'religious age', and that to be a Christian in a religious age is to share a very large common denominator both with the 'natural religions' and with a vast human substratum of superstition and ignorance. He shows that to move from a religious into a technical age such as our own, is to change the character of belief. 'Le Dieu du moderne est moins en moins créateur d'objets scientifiques, mais de plus en plus créateur de valeurs, et de valeurs divines.' In the absence of so many natural reasons for faith, two things happen. The first is that faith becomes less a statement of fact, more a statement of values. The second is that we are more and more dependent for it on the naked action of divine grace.

The chief merit of both these books, published in French but well worth the extra effort for an English reader, is that they deal unequivocally in terms of the future. They are not merely gestures, attempts to be 'with it', the sort of sorry uncomprehending apologies to the modern world with which we are so familiar in this country. They are not in the least worldly, neither is there anything split in their response. They see in the secularisation of the world the possibility of a great advance towards pure religion. They see also that the whole rela-

<sup>4</sup>Desclée de Brouwer, 1963.

tionship of man towards the physical world is changing, shifting us into a situation which, since it will make vastly extended moral demands, requires also a radical renewal of the church, of its spiritual life, and of its theology. 'Depuis que l'humanité existe, les progrès matériels exigent un progrès spirituel correspondant'. Both accept the secular assumption that mankind is advancing into a world in which Providence, throughout the realm of 'secondary causes', will give way to man as the maker of his own history; that the character of his moral life is therefore changing. 'Il y avait hier', observes Fr Desqueyrat, 'les enfants que le Providence envoyait. Il y a aujourd'hui les enfants que les parents ont acceptés. Il y aura demain les enfants que les parents ont voulus. L'homme devient de plus en plus l'artisan de sa propre destinée'. Fr Rabut echoes him: 'L'histoire humaine, prolongeant l'évolution des espèces, se dirige vers un humanité en possession de tous ses pouvoirs'.

In this country, where the C.T.S. case against birth control is still largely the medieval one of Providence as opposed to the overweening presumption of man, the concept of man as the artisan of his own destiny seems faintly blasphemous. This is the way we fear the world is going, and we watch each new extension of the power of man with a deep unease and apprehension. The merit of these French-speaking Christians (Fr Desqueyrat is, I think, a Belgian) is that they see history in an unanxious light. The Holy Ghost, the Comforter, is at work in secular history as in the Church. The Creator and the Saviour, as we already knew from the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, are one God.

Fr Rabut is best known in England for his *Dialogue with Teilhard de Chardin*. Parts of *Valeur Spirituelle du Profane* are similar in atmosphere: optimistic, with a sometimes intoxicating sense that at last the spiritual will take possession of the profane, and that this, as in the visions of Isaias, is what history is about. In the main body of the book, however, he wrestles manfully with the problem of providing, in the context of Aquinas, Hegel and existentialism represented chiefly by Heidegger, some framework within which a new concept of the spiritual life might grow. He has deep springs in the ascetic tradition of French Catholicism: 'Un vertu évangélique fondamentale est une pauvreté ou nudité intérieure: l'aptitude à être profondément transformé', but also a strongly Hegelian sense of history: 'Un véritable connaissance de Dieu s'obtient en participant à l'histoire et à ses travaux'. Opponents of Fr Teilhard may resent some of his assumptions. Both he and Fr Desqueyrat are historicists; both have finally accepted the thesis of evolution; both believe that history has a 'purpose', and that this is broadly the

growth of the principle of intelligence in the world, a principle they variously evoke: 'Depuis que l'humanité existe, le psychisme n'a cessé de croître', and we may believe, writes Fr Desqueyrat, that 'cette croissance n'est pas achevée'. Material progress has always made necessary a corresponding progress of the spirit, in fact it may already have gone so far that mankind will have no choice but to believe or go out of existence. Life appeared on the void of the earth at a point in time; life will one day disappear, but 'nous pouvons pas concéder que la finalité, la liberté, le sens de l'histoire disparaîtront un jour'. Life will pass; the 'significance' of our life here, wrested from the mediocrity of our days by a sanctification which uses death like an instrument, is eternal.

As with all books of this sort we ask ourselves: are these among the grass roots of that theology which will in time put us, conceptually, in a new and more satisfactory 'rapport' with God and the world.

This is no mere academic enquiry. Such a theology is an existential need, far deeper than the intellectual curiosity that sustains most of our studies. A good theology, that will put us in a right conceptual relation with God, is hardly to be distinguished from the living of that 'whole' life, in true relation, morally and spiritually, with eternity, that is the basic Christian concept of holiness. Fr Rabut and Fr Desqueyrat, combining orthodoxy with the best sort of imagination and scholarship, make contributions that are serious and relevant.