

REVIEWS

CATHOLIC POLITICAL THOUGHT, 1789–1848. Texts selected with an Introduction and Biographical Notes by Béla Menczer. (Burns Oates; 18s.)

Maritain warns us somewhere against the people who make a weak term precede a strong one: e.g., Liberty, *but* Authority; it is a sure sign that their sympathies are with the latter rather than with the former. One would not like to maintain that Dr Menczer is a positive enemy of political liberty, in fact he explicitly denies this in a number of passages; but someone who writes of 'the framework of real Liberty, that stability of consecrated Order' can legitimately be suspected of being wholeheartedly on the side of authoritarianism. This suspicion is confirmed when one peruses the list of the authors of the 'selected texts' in *Catholic Political Thought*: Joseph de Maistre, Vicomte de Bonald, Chateaubriand, Honoré de Balzac, Schlegel, Metternich, Donoso Cortés (late period), Balmes, and finally, that great champion of selective liberty, Louis Veuillot.

The first and most serious criticism one can make of this work is its title. One must emphatically protest against a publishing policy which presents as 'Catholic Political Thought' such a one-sided collection of texts, with the definite suggestion that the mind of the Church is unequivocally traditionalist and authoritarian. In such matters the Church leaves her children the very greatest freedom, and it is utterly misleading to suggest in the 'blurb' a kind of parallel between the authoritative teachings of the Encyclicals on the social question and the political musings of these early nineteenth-century writers. It is fairly clear from the book itself that Dr Menczer does not make any suggestion of the kind, though his own devotion to the school of de Maistre makes him belittle the great contribution to political thinking made by the Liberal Catholics of the period. In fact we learn practically nothing about them except that they existed. They are relegated to the 'hell' of footnotes, where we are informed that the Catholic Liberals were discredited by the apostasy of Lamennais, but were later strengthened by the prestige of Lacordaire, the attractive oratory of Montalembert, and the pure and zealous apostolate of Ozanam. Incidentally, Dominicans may be interested to learn that Lacordaire was 'a priest of holy zeal and ascetic spirituality, but at the same time a surprisingly conciliatory defender of the Faith'.

The contribution to political thought of the traditionalist Catholics of the post-revolutionary era—even though it may bear little relation

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to the problems of our time—is of some importance for the understanding of Catholic history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In more recent years their writings—particularly those of Joseph de Maistre—have suffered much undeserved neglect, and Dr Menzcer does his best to rescue them from oblivion. This neglect is to some extent understandable; as Romantics they have suffered from the decline of interest in Romanticism. Their nostalgia for Charlemagne and the Holy Roman Empire can have little appeal today, and though they may have cherished few illusions about the *Ancien Régime*, their reaction to the French Revolution was neo-Gothic, not thomistic, however much Dr Menzcer may claim them for the *philosophia perennis*.

The great Doctor of this traditionalist school is of course Bossuet, with his *Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle*. It is difficult to share Dr Menzcer's enthusiasm for Bossuet's 'mystical insight' into history, or to agree with him that Gallicanism was an 'ephemeral political symptom'. Bossuet's philosophy of history was in fact closely related to his Gallicanism, and was based on a dangerously close analogy between divine and human power amounting to confusion. It was therefore perfectly logical for men like de Maistre and Lamennais (in his pre-Liberal phase) to transfer their theocratic conception of political functions to the Papacy, and it is not without significance that all the leading conservative Catholics were ultramontanes to a man. Bossuet would indeed have been surprised at the evolution of his spiritual descendants. This may help to explain why Dr Menzcer is so unconvincing in his attempt to identify Gallicanism and Liberalism in the nineteenth century. Dupanloup, whose instincts were Gallican, was very much a Liberal *malgré lui*, and it is surely far-fetched to call Acton a 'neo-Gallican'. It is true that Jacques Maritain is called a 'champion of Voltaire' in the same breath with Alfred Noyes, because he is 'grateful to him for the idea of civic tolerance'. Let us hope that, because we share that gratitude, we do not run the risk of being labelled 'neo-Voltairians'.

One is a little embarrassed by the status that Dr Menzcer seems to accord to the authors included in this anthology. As far as one knows, the title of 'lay fathers of the Church', granted to some of them by Barbey d'Aurevilly, has no higher sanction than the exuberant imagination of the 'High Constable of French Literature'. Some of them are very strange 'lay fathers' indeed! Metternich, for instance, and Balzac, whose 'political realism', to judge from the extracts given, is hardly distinguishable from that of Charles Maurras (on whom Dr Menzcer is inexplicably severe). 'Christianity is a perfect system which combats the corrupt tendencies in man and Absolutism is a complete system which controls the divergent interests in society. Each is necessary to

the other.' Could anything be more Maurassian than that? One also wonders for what reasons (apart from superb journalism) it is possible to justify the inclusion of Louis Veuillot, whose 'political thought' was that of a weathercock. And it is surely unfair to the reputation of Donoso Cortés to publish his childish petulant speech in defence of dictatorship. The only excuse that can be made for this unfortunate outburst is the one that he offered himself: that he was not feeling well at the time.

Dr Menczer's work has indubitable merits if it is considered in itself, as a careful and scholarly study of the political thought of traditionalist Catholics in the fifty years that immediately followed the French Revolution. In reading through its pages, one cannot help being struck by the sterility of that thought. The Traditionalists were at their best in their searching criticism of the ideals and extravagant claims of the Revolution; but they were so categorical in their refusal to offer incense to the false gods of Liberty and Progress that they failed to see what was good and true in the aspirations of their age. They had nothing positive to offer; the philosophers among them retired into their ivory towers, the men of action became more or less willing instruments of all the reactionary forces of the period. One can hardly imagine, for instance, a document more myopic than Metternich's 'Political Profession of Faith' written in 1847, or Donoso Cortés' statement that the germ of revolution is to be found in envy and never in slavery and poverty. In the midst of a world in utter transformation through the Industrial Revolution, the 'Counter-Revolution' had become an obsession which blinded them to the emergence of all new factors in the political and social order. Veuillot's cynical remark (not quoted in this book) that 'a society always needs slaves', would perhaps have shocked Cortés, but it was implicit in his outlook. There is nowhere any sense of all the wicked injustices of the new industrial order, no concern with the sins crying to high heaven for vengeance; only a hankering after 'Order', 'Authority', the Holy Empire of Charlemagne and, for the time being, the maintenance by strong force of every tottering tyranny. One is tempted to think that if the people of the time mistook that sort of thing for 'Catholic Political Thought', it is no wonder that the Church's influence slumped so heavily during the nineteenth century.

The political rôle of Catholics in that momentous period is a fascinating field which remains at yet largely unexplored, at least by writers in English. We are afraid that this work, in spite of its qualities, is far too partisan to be of any use to the student who wishes to know the full story.

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