

THE ESSENCE OF POLITICS

THE Christian political consciousness has been deeply stirred by the revolutionary events of our time and many to-day feel the need for its revival. Christians widely recognise in this country that they have to fulfil a necessary function in the political order, and this no matter whether the duty is based on the dogma of the sinfulness of man and his necessary imperfection or on the doctrine of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, according to which man as 'Zoon politikón' is essentially interwoven by his nature with Politics.¹ Christians are more or less inclined to accept to-day the fundamental thesis that Politics has its own natural right to exist and its own basis and independent sphere within the framework of the natural aims of a community.

This insight has in itself weighty implications, from the political-sociological point of view. For if Politics exists in its own right it cannot be considered a sham or an ideological cloak for the non-political forces of society. This does not mean that economics, or religion, or legal or racial motives, which play so great a part in society, cannot enter the sphere of Politics. On the contrary, they do so to a large extent. But the point is that by entering the political sphere an economic, religious, legal or racial question, from the very fact of its being regarded politically, changes its essential peculiarity. Its former nature remains no longer the same. Aristotle would call this change a 'metabasis eis genos.' The question acquires a distinctively political character.

This means, for instance, that a Christian cannot explain Politics by means of the social and economic existence of man. For him politics must be different from the particular social interests of the individuals of whom society consists, as well as from the different interests of the social classes, occupations and professions. Practical experience confirms this. If an economic class achieves political power, the new class-state is no less a political entity than the traditional national-state, and the reality of Politics can be seen here in the fact that all economic conceptions and ideas undergo a basic change in the direction of Politics. Or, for instance, if property reaches a certain degree of strength in society and enters the

¹ This is the view which also underlies Dr. N. Micklem's book *The Theology of Politics* (1941).

political sphere it becomes political power. Therefore W. Rathenau's dictum that to-day not Politics but Economics is the fate of man, merely says that economics has become a 'Politicum' and thereby the fate of man. From this it follows that a truly political system of government can be combined with different economic systems, unless the actual social divisions are so deep and fundamental that they themselves take on a political character and break up the political unity of the nation. If this be not the case, it is possible to distinguish within the political system of government various economic types and to differentiate within a political democracy, for instance, between capitalistic, peasant, nationally planned and socialist-communist democracies.

But it is not enough to accept the common view that Politics exists in its own right and has its independent sphere in human life. It is necessary to define this sphere more clearly :

There is a widespread tendency to identify Politics with the State and the State with Politics. This is, however, not altogether true. For there can be action by the State which is not necessarily political. The State can make use of the same forces and the same means as a private person. The State can conduct an industrial enterprise, a coal mine, electricity, gas or water works according to the principles of a private undertaking and carry on business according to the principles of civil law. Even in cases in which the State exercises its proper functions it need not necessarily be acting politically. The judge, the university-teacher, the civil servant in a Constitutional State act or ought at least to act non-politically in so far as they have to perform the functions allotted to them *sine ira et studio* and in an impartial manner.² Therefore, we must distinguish between the political and non-political activities of the State.

On the other hand, the sphere of Politics is wider than that of the State. There may be political activities outside the proper sphere of the State. Such institutions as the Church, the Courts, the universities, the professions can actually be engaged in politics, although they are in themselves non-political and are in their organisation only the expression of forces belonging to the pre-political sphere which should be respected by the State. These organisational forces act politically if they seek to influence the State in order to gain some power in it or—if the State defies itself and extends its authority over all human activities—to reduce its tota-

² In fact, however, as a result of the increasing power of the bureaucracy the Civil Servant of to-day wields considerable political influence; see A. Zimmermann, *Prospects of Democracy*, 1929, pp. 266 seq.

litarian claim so that they may exercise their natural functions within the community freely without interference from the State. From this point of view, even the individual can sometimes act politically, namely if in defence of his natural rights he refuses to be treated by the State as mere subject-matter and tries to wield influence by forcing the State to modify its totalitarian ideology and to recognise the true ends of a good society and the natural order of human values.

Therefore we may say : Politics presupposes a relation to the State. It is this relation that distinguishes Politics from Policy. By Policy we have simply to understand all kinds of guiding activities. We speak of the policy of an economic enterprise, of a trade union in a strike, of the school policy of a local community, the policy of a union, of a family, etc. A relationship to the State is not presupposed here. But we cannot speak of Politics without having the State (the modern form of the old *polis*) in mind. We cannot isolate it from the State, although it is not identical with the State.

A relationship to the State in general, however, does not suffice, if there is a sphere within which the State can possibly act non-politically. Only if it is possible to define more clearly the specific political sphere of the State can we say whether any particular relationship to the State takes on a political character. A relationship to the State becomes political when, in one way or another, the fundamental ideological principles upon which the State rests and which determine its specific character are affected. Those questions are political which in some way or other touch upon the essential common interests and the supreme aims of the State. Those decisions are political which seek to preserve the existence of the State, to further its unity or aim at the integration of the social organism which we call the nation. As Cromwell said on September 7th, 1656 : 'The first lesson of nature is : Being and Preservation.' Indeed, the most important task of a statesman is to preserve 'our National Being' or, as Cromwell puts it in another passage, of 'our very Being.' A truly political spirit has, to use Gladstone's phrase, the 'faculty of nation-making.' If the attempt should be made to eliminate Politics from the State as the idealists and Marxians advocated in the last two centuries, we should destroy not only the essence of Politics but also the substance of the State and bring about its disintegration and final disappearance.

Within the political sphere it is possible to differentiate the political activities in various ways. For instance, it is possible to make the distinction between major and minor political issues and to speak of 'highly' political affairs and a 'high' policy as distinguished

from those day-to-day actions which are not so closely related to the basic principles and vital laws which unify State and nation. Or in accordance with a widespread practice we may distinguish between political affairs about which in a Constitutional State the opinions of the political parties differ (these questions are often wrongly called exclusively political) and those questions, principles and institutions whose political character is almost unanimously accepted by the nation.

The relation of Politics to that sphere of the State which we call here briefly the existential sphere explains why power plays an eminent part in Politics. It is true that the State does not always have to make use of power and force. It can also avail itself of the traditional means of co-operation and collaboration. No less is it true that power can be used outside the proper sphere of the State. If power is the ability to impose one's will, directly or indirectly, on human beings, power cannot be said to be a monopoly of the State. It can be exercised by other forces, be they economic, social, religious or otherwise spiritual in character. Economic power has even frequently been described by Politicians, Economists and Sociologists as the only true power which counts in the life of man and therefore precedes political power. The difference, however, between the power of the State and all other kinds of power, including the power of society, lies in the fact that the State has the monopoly of *supreme* physical power and that other organisations and individuals can exercise this only in so far as the State confers it upon them. It is this power without which the State (the tyrannical as well as the ethical State) is unable to preserve its very being and secure its existence against the evil instincts of fallen nature. Without the power of life and death in certain circumstances the State cannot perform its integrating functions, especially those of maintaining law and order and punishing vice. This is why power is a vital and constitutive element of the State and can be called its essential property. Consequently the element of over-ruling power is inseparable from Politics in so far as the State in its existential sphere cannot be thought of without at least the potential exercise of supreme physical power. Thus far there is truth in the statement that all problems of Politics are problems of Power. But this does not mean that power and Politics are identical and that in all political activities the power relationship must find its expression. We have seen that outside the sphere of the State there are institutions, yes, even individuals, who are able to act politically without making use of those coercive measures that are a feature of the State when acting in the 'existential' sphere.

As is now generally agreed in this country, power considered in itself is amoral and neutral—neither good nor bad. Its ethical value depends on how it is used by the will of man in order to influence human behaviour. Political power and force fulfil their true functions in so far as they are subservient to ethical purposes, fundamental beliefs and universal values, and are used (as we have said) to give moral forces time to take root. Power which is used as a guardian of right and as an instrument for securing justice on earth (justice which is based on love) is not feared by man and can be said—*from a Christian point of view*—to be a power put into the service of God to fulfil his purposes. (We read in St. Paul, Rom. xiii, that ‘rulers are not a terror to good works but to the Evil,’ and that the ruler ‘is the minister of God to thee for good.’) A power which is thus used as a means to the good, ethical ends of the community serves as an instrument for translating ideas and principles into institutional realities. It creates responsibilities, imposes restraints on those who are appointed to wield political power to make its abuse impossible. Such a limited power based on an accepted ethical or metaphysical principle may be called a constructive, creative or moral power. Such a power is a legitimate power which can claim to have genuine authority.

But such a possible use of power for the well-being of society must not lead us to deny that all established political power is liable to corruption. Power used for political purposes is a dangerous and demonic instrument. It is rooted in the dynamic and irrational sphere of life. In it lurk diabolic forces. We may conclude from historical experience that the demon of Politics lives with the God of Love in an inner tension—a tension which can find its expression at any time in an indissoluble conflict. This demonic character of Politics follows from the specific function which Politics has to fulfil for the ‘existence’ of State and nation.

It is this existential function of Politics that explains why the specific activities of those, who have necessarily to do with Politics, are shaped by principles which are quite different from those of other people. To grasp this we may look, for example, at Parliament’s or its members’ activities in supervising a parliamentary democracy. The members of the Government are above all closely connected with Politics. The relationship of Government to Politics is so intimate that the Government has been called the exponent of specific political action in the State (in a totalitarian State as well as in a democracy) and Politics has been simply defined as ‘the science and art of government.’ A government cannot foresee what the maintenance of the State and nation may at any time require. Con-

siderations of expediency and not rules intended to make life as fixed and settled as possible determine the distinctive qualities of the political act which has to be made to suit a particular situation arising from concrete, definite circumstances. The politician must, therefore, possess an easy grasp of the situation, will power and the ability to make quick decisions of possibly far-reaching consequences. Above all, he needs freedom. Then he is in a position to make the readjustments which are necessary under the pressure of life and to make his decisions conform to the ever changing requirements of the day.

Further, the 'existential' function of Politics begets a special responsibility on the part of those who deal with Politics. This responsibility is quite different from that of man in his personal sphere. In the personal sphere man can act as he thinks is right before God—no matter what the result of the action may be. The political leader, however, has to bear the responsibility for the existence of the community and for the proper use of power which is necessary to secure this aim. This special responsibility resulting from the use of political power in the interest of the 'existence' of State and nation explains why even the Christian must admit that the personal sphere and the 'existential' sphere in which State and society act has each its own morality, and why the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount cannot be applied in the same way in the political sphere as in the personal sphere of man.

But this differentiation between a personal and political ethics does not lead to a dualistic separation of the personal sphere of life from the political one. Such a split is unavoidable only if State or nation or any other collective entity provide the supreme standards for the political life and the use of political power. If this is the case we should have to conclude that different regulative principles apply to the political and the personal spheres and that Politics is independent of Christian moral principles and rests upon its own foundations.

From the Christian point of view, however, there is an interconnection between morality and Politics. There is a special Christian political ethics. It is not the task of this article to analyse the right conception and natural ends of a Christian political order which respects man's supernatural destiny, or to outline the actual tasks which, under present circumstances, a Christian political ethics sets to a statesman. The Middle Ages have shown that such a political order need not be utopian. We know that the medieval rule of the Emperor and King was legitimate and its authority genuine. For it was subservient to the divine order of Justice and limited by the

fundamental principles of Christian morality and Natural Law. Therefore, the necessary differentiation between a personal and political morality has only relative significance. The common spiritual ethos and behind that the faith in a living God bind these two ethics in the long run together and explain why certain Christian moral principles must claim to guide the political relationships no less than the personal ones.³

On the other hand, history and experience have demonstrated that a Christian political ethics does not exclude the fact that Politics can fail truly to co-ordinate human activities and can ignore the supernatural purposes which a political order has to fulfil within the framework of a community. The demonic and irrational character of Politics has produced in very varied forms a pagan politics which refuses to recognise the natural community as the basis of a political order. Modern secular totalitarianism in its various forms provides us with the latest example proving how an all-inclusive political order can usurp the functions of a natural order, claim the absolute allegiance of man, and embrace all political activities whatsoever. We may disqualify such a political order, but we cannot assert, as Christians often do, that a false and evil Politics brings about its own disappearance.

In these cases in which political power is divorced from its natural ends power is not used in a moral and constructive sense to a higher end, but as an end in itself. Such a political power cannot provide a permanent basis for a functioning society. It makes its institutional organisation impossible. Such a political power becomes by its nature an irresponsible, uncontrolled and unlimited power. It is no longer a legitimate power that can claim to possess genuine authority. Such a political power is a nihilistic and demonic power embodying the evil spirit of selfishness which worships power for its own sake and is interested alone in its self-preservation. It is a power which must lead in the end to self-destruction, to tyranny and slavery, to war and revolution.

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³ It may be worth while noticing that in the former liberal Germany some eminent Christian politicians who, on the whole, maintained that the political sphere is subjected to special ethical principles which cannot be deduced from religion came to the conclusion too that political situations might arise which leave the individual no other choice but to follow also in the political sphere those maxims which the Christian personal 'Gesinnungsethik' demands. Cf. e.g. Max Weber, *Politik als Beruf*, 1919.