

BLACKFRIARS

VOL. XXIII

JUNE 1942

No. 267

A CATHOLIC SCIENCE MEETING

THE present issue of BLACKFRIARS contains the substance of the papers read at the Annual General Meeting of the University Catholic Federation of Great Britain held at Birmingham from April 10th to 12th, 1942, on the general theme of 'Science and Society.' We are particularly grateful to the Federation and the speakers for permission to print the collected papers in this special number. We make no apology to our readers for occupying nearly every page with this subject, for there are few now who do not recognise the supreme importance with which modern science is—justly or unjustly—invested. In view of this unique position, the meeting at Birmingham was of special significance for the future.

Until recently there were only two views expressed on science that counted. First there was the handful of philosophers who sought to prevent the flood of experimental knowledge and description from bursting into other fields of knowledge. Jacques Maritain stands head and shoulders above all others here, in his constant effort to mark out the boundaries of the sciences. But there have been others with less insight who have tried to effect this result by a radical attack on science itself. Many of them speak in the name of philosophy or religion, but few attain the balanced judgment of the French philosopher. At a time of scientific warfare it is easy to throw unintelligent bricks at a carefully constructed glasshouse of science.

On the other hand, the whole weight of modern civilisation supports the authority of the modern scientist who sets himself up as the minister of life and the judge of all truth. Since the beginning of the war, science has increased enormously in its social significance, for people deprived of all other intellectual and moral support look to it to extricate them from their present trials and set the world in order. The meeting of the British Association in September of last year to discuss 'Science and World Order'¹ shows what a degree of importance the scientist has achieved. It may even be said that Europe has largely forsaken the Christian standard for that

¹ The Report is published in full by the British Association, Burlington House,

of science so that the experts have become the priests through whose ministrations progress, life and happiness are to be expected. Dr. Negrin said that the scientist was the *chief* collaborator with the statesman; 'In order to create a new and better world . . . it will be necessary to promote and infuse new moral values, to which the scientist will give form and content, in a supernatural and humanist sense' (p. 24).

At the Conference there were other more enlightened speakers, as Viscount Samuel, who pointed out that Science, Philosophy and Religion could not be antagonistic to one another and must share the duty of remedying the disorder of human affairs. But the general tenour of the meetings summed up in seven scientific principles at the end of the Conference is that life and power are achieved through independence, freedom and knowledge, and that science is responsible for these. Science has universal applications, for truth is its object; and so 'all scientific workers are united in the fellowship of the Commonwealth of Science.' This not unnaturally goes with a great deal of loose talk about Communism as some sort of natural child of science.

The great significance of the U.C.F. meeting is that the writers of these papers were speaking not as philosophers but as scientists, and yet respect the limitations of their discipline. They do not claim infallibility or universality for their specialised part of human knowledge; they realise that the truth it seeks is not identical with all truth or the highest truth; above all, in admiring the delicate regularity of the measurements and description of nature they are led beyond the walls of their laboratories to the Creator of nature. The scientist becomes a worshipper. No one at the British Association conference thought it necessary to refer to the Author of all the orderliness that they had discovered, for they were, as a rule, unwilling to recognise anything beyond the sphere of scientific investigation. Consequently the meeting of the U.C.F. in Birmingham has a significance denied to that of the British Association in London.

The reader should therefore bear in mind that these papers are written mostly by specialised scientists and not by trained Thomist philosophers or theologians. The Thomist view of Science and Society will be found more clearly stated in the works of M. Maritain; here there is some slight confusion between 'spiritual' and 'supernatural,' a feeling that the deeper truths of metaphysics are vague and ill-defined, and that the 'scientific method' is the principal means of reaching truth. But, as we have said, the importance of these papers lies in the recognition by true scientists of the limitations of their science. These Catholic scientists may indeed be the salt of the

earth—for all the world is 'scientifically minded.' Knowing that it is not by science alone that man lives, they can yet secure a hearing because of their genuine achievements in their own branches of science.

The unrestricted application of modern physics to society leads inevitably to state despotism and materialism. The whole of the B.A. conference is inspired by the one idea of 'planning' for the future. But modern science as such deals with statements of fact and statistics, with measurements and configuration, so that it is essentially mathematical; and in applying these mathematical principles to the physical material of the world it uses hypotheses in the place of physical certainties. This method is right and proper within the scope of modern physics and has achieved the cataclysmic results we see to-day, but applied to society it tends to mechanism. There is a strong desire so to plan society that it shall 'work' like a vast machine, smoothly and regularly. It has broken down so completely that it needs a thorough overhaul and all the human cogs put back in such a way that they cannot fall out or get stuck—even if they wanted to. M. Maisky pointed out to the B.A. that he came from a country where, after a stern struggle of twenty years, planning had reached a degree of perfection which was only possible 'in a single country with a strong and unified central administration'; world-planning would be more difficult. Such machines work from the central unit of power, which *drives* the whole unified contrivance. A fool-proof peace built by science would leave no free will.

The scientist as a rule sees the same social evils that stirred Leo XIII, and is genuinely moved to destroy them, but by the scientific method and mechanical contrivance alone. One of his chief remedies is to educate all into this scientific frame of mind; in fact, all will 'go' or 'work'—though the plea is that the scientific method will teach men to think for themselves 'as against implicit acceptance of traditional myths and orthodox morals.' In education, natural science is to take the place of religion, history, classics and literature as the chief formative influence.

The fundamental difficulty is one of *ends*. Natural, experimental science is a great human achievement—it would be absurd to cavil at it—but it is the *use* or *purpose* to which it is put that has upset society so profoundly. Many scientists, having identified science with knowledge, proceed to make it all utilitarian. 'Pure science is merely science whose application to practice has a long time-lag. That was the standpoint of the fathers of British science like Robert Boyle, who valued no knowledge "but as it hath a tendency to use."' Before Professor Haldane had made that clear, Professor Bernal had

said: 'From the more general scientific point of view there is no such thing as separating means from ends. There is one common end—the maximum utilisation of inherent social and individual capacities . . .' And for what are these human capacities utilised? We are not told; but it appears to be for the establishment of the Communist state. The means *becomes* the end.

This is the point at issue, because philosophy and religion are concerned with *ends*, the human goal of activity and desire, the destiny of society and individual alike. Social ethics and the Sermon on the Mount tell man where he is going and how to get there—including the best use of the things that science puts into his hands. But natural science describes the construction of the things man uses, discovers new powers latent in nature, harnesses them to the human will; it cannot dictate the human purpose for which they are to be used. This is the significance of M. Maritain's distinction showing 'how the concept of finality has to be removed, as an extraneous one, from experimental, particularly from physico-mathematical science, and at the same time to be maintained, as a legitimate and indispensable one, in philosophical and metaphysical knowledge.'² If science is being practised 'for the sake of social life, for the sake of life based upon the high principles of humanitarian belief,' as Dr. Benes said at the Conference, it must be content to be directed by these higher but not 'scientific' principles.

Science is, then, the handmaid and not the mistress. Hers may be the sudden and brilliant appearance of Cinderella, but she still remains the youngest daughter in the family of Wisdom. She has an enormous part to play in the future, but in execution not in planning, in practical craftsmanship not in education. And these pages from the pen of Catholic scientists will help to save science for society and society from the scientist.

² 'The conflict of methods at the end of the Middle Ages': *The Thomist*, October, 1941. The whole article is of the greatest importance.