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SOCIOLOGICAL CHRISTIANITY

READERS of BLACKFRIARS must often have marvelled and protested at the naivety of its approach to the problems of the day. In the midst of all the complexities of present existence the review may often seem to make high generalisations and mighty implications which could be dangerous. So much needs to be weighed in the balance in judgments on world affairs. Experts are needed in politics, economics, the arts and literature; the shrewd eye of the specialist in history as well as in sociology is required to grasp even the fundamental elements in the situation. It is easy to say that what is needed is more charity, but that leaves the one who issues such injunctions remote from any practical judgments, not merely above politics but remote from politics and ineffective. Such naivety tends to condemn everything less than God himself and ignores all kinds of subtle and important distinctions. Culture and courtliness are easily sacrificed in favour of the precursor's methods in denouncing the brood of vipers.

Yet the need for insisting quite simply on the one and only End of all human activity remains the most urgent. The bookstalls are packed with books and journals dealing, in truth or speciously, with the detailed problems of society. There are now even many Catholic reviews and magazines which compete in the field of politics, economics and culture with the general periodical literature coming from the thousands of modern pagan pens writing with Christian ink. It is unfortunate that the *Weekly Review* with its long Chesterton-Belloc tradition has had recently to close down; but a suc-

cessor is already in preparation to continue the fight for what must always be fundamentally the Catholic solution to the problem of society, namely distributism without a capital D. The touch of the expert can be easily detected in the *Catholic Worker* which could well rival any 'worker' journal had it sufficient support. Magazines like *Youth*, the organ of the Y.C.G., and *The Grail* have secured specialists for editing as well as for production so that they have no rivals in their particular spheres. On the wider cultural and political field there are quarterlies like the *Dublin* and the *Downside*, both recently rejuvenated, monthlies such as the *New English Review*, and weeklies of such variety as the *Tablet* and the *Catholic Herald*. All these and many others are dealing with the acute problems of the day, and we are speaking only of Catholic journals while there is a vast host of excellent non-Catholic writers in these different spheres.

But the danger of losing sight of the wood on account of the great number and proximity of the trees is all the greater the more specialised and detailed the treatment becomes. The main subject is human life in its various aspects and activities and in so far as this concerns movements towards one or many ends it can only be seen in proportion, and indeed in reality, in relation to the end. The movement and the action receive their character, their form, from the goal at which they are aiming. And in human life that goal must be God objectively and the happiness of the beatific vision subjectively. Human life and action are ultimately good or bad in relation to this end, and so it depends upon that end whether they are truly human, truly social, truly cultural. The true wholeness of human nature and human life can only be realised in terms of the vision of God. Man is split in a hundred pieces by all these detailed analyses of modern problems; and he can only be put together again by referring them all to the higher supernatural reality of the Trinity and our share in the life of the Trinity. This is where integration must ultimately be sought. There used to exist a rather violent review which fought for integration—the name which it took for its title; and it might be said that BLACKFRIARS has placed that same ideal before itself. But the danger of calling one's self a champion of human integrity is that human integrity itself becomes the end of man instead of the effect of man's having achieved his end. In other words if we set out to solve our acute human problems precisely in order to become more human, to acquire more perfection for our natures in the arts as well as in religion, in society as well as in our private hobbies, then God himself and the Vision of him become a means, the balance of creation is lost, and the whole structure comes toppling down. We, in this review, have

always stood out against this very easy reversal of values, and it is for this reason that we are often misunderstood. We would not condemn all this detailed work of specialists and experts, which is not only admirable but also absolutely necessary; but we would wish to produce a vista in which it can all be seen in proportion under one final end. We are not therefore specifically theological because that is itself a special study which only indirectly can refer to cinemas and countries, crafts and conditions of labour. But neither are we specifically sociological.

Apart from Catholicism Christianity has lost its grip of dogma and the true, unsullied teaching about the nature of God and his perfections and operations. And because in this way the end of human life has become vague and uninteresting the various religions have declined into a post-Christian state in which the be-all and end-all of human endeavour have become the physical happiness of man on this earth, the development of his faculties and the avoidance of the pains which come his way. In other words the test of the modern Christian is whether he is a well developed specimen of the human race and whether he is assisting others to become so. In this way sociology—significantly a new science—has become a characteristic preoccupation of the Christian. He is only a true Christian if he has done something to better the lot of the working classes and has interested himself in social clubs and worker movements. The love of God in himself and his worship no longer specify the Christian life; it is the service of man for man which has taken the place of the divine aims which the Church sets before us.

It might be thought that in his recent book on this subject¹ the celebrated Anglican sociologist, Canon V. A. Demant, had begun to recall Christians to the higher and only truly Christian view. For he begins by affirming that the true nature of any creature is only sustained when it is held to its end by a supernatural power; or again that moral effort is only possible and fruitful to the soul after it is in grace. This would seem to be reaching out towards the supernatural end of human society with even too great an enthusiasm. The particular passage in question seems to have been inspired by a misunderstanding of St Thomas (*De Malo* 5, 1). But the implications are more serious, for taken as they stand these assertions are allied to the Protestant doctrine of the corruption of human nature and the need for the imputation of Christ's merits to the soul. The doctrine of itself extols grace at the expense of nature. And yet the rest of this book shows that the whole object of the author is to make life worth living on this earth, to extol human nature by means of

¹ *Theology of Society: More Essays in Christian Polity*. By V. A. Demant. (Faber; 10s. 6d.)

a culture of reason spiced with revelation. Many of his essays are sound and excellent and should be read by those interested in the modern problems of work and culture. We would not have condemned it except for these errors in relating nature with grace. But the book stands as a good example of the best type of sociological Christianity which is the best that religion seems to be able to offer in these days. And to bring grace so violently into the picture is merely to use God and his gifts for economic and cultural aims. It is the self-conscious expression of religion seeking to justify itself in the eyes of the world. For 'the world' today can only recognise as good that which brings individual men material benefits, i.e. benefits which give comfort and ease to the man be it tobacco, Tolstoi, or Travel. It does seek to justify and propagate a human attitude to work (e.g. the essay on 'Vocation in work') but even so this type of social thought has been occasioned outside Christianity by the pagan forces of rationalism and materialism.

There is in fact some truth in the opponents to Christianity who say that there would be none of this insistence on justice to the workers, and the right of each to a fully human existence had not the non-Christian revolutionaries started the fashion. The Church left to herself seems inclined to overlook these things, or at least she does not organise vast schemes for humanising the masses, which are so often left 'in the mass' to live a rather dirty and drudged existence.

Now the answers which the specialists in these fields are giving are, as we have said, good and necessary. The answers to the problems of work, of inequality of wealth and possessions, of human freedom and culture among the crowd, all these must be tackled by the specialists on the spot in their own spheres. But the Catholic *as such* must beware of identifying the teaching of the Church with the solutions offered. The Kingdom of Heaven is not of this world. and until we seek *first* and *completely* the Kingdom of Heaven these other benefits will not be added unto us. The Catholic too is apt to take his standards from the Christians and pagans around him and to forget the heinous crime of sin in his desire to give more bread and butter to the miner. He is inclined to judge the progress of Catholic life by the number of social clubs and youth organisations. He instinctively begins to regard Christianity from this declared form of it in which the supreme end has at least partially been lost to view.

Inevitably when the Catholic adopts standards lower than those he professes every Sunday in the *Confiteor* as well as in the Creed he falls short of the results of those whose lower standard is the highest they know. There has been a constant insistence upon the

social teaching of the Church for many years and the Catholic worker movements have not only received themselves encouragement from every level of the Church's ecclesiastical life, but have spread widely throughout the world. They have achieved great successes in every place. It was generally regarded as the effect of *Jocist* movements that the first French crisis after the war was met by the M.R.P.; and there are millions of occasions in which the young Catholic worker has bettered the lot of his class through such institutions. No one could deny these benefits nor the good—yes the *apostolic* good in winning souls to Christ—which these movements have performed. Yet there are parallels in other Christian communities, and when such non-Christian movements as Communism or Fascism really set their hand to this kind of thing they seem to achieve even more dramatic results.

There is one test as to whether the Christian apostolate of the worker is too much caught up in the modern sociological Christianity, a test as to the truly Christian idea of vocation in work. On this point Canon Demant has some wise remarks with which we should all concur. He thus concludes his essay on this topic, describing the two indispensable conditions for a society in which men can work with a sense of vocation:

The first condition is that, whatever their place in the economic process, men must not be too far removed from the biological bond of their existence in the land. . . . The second condition is that vocation in work requires a set of social relations in which a job looks for the man and not a man for the job (p. 184).

With such conclusions and conditions we would heartily concur; they are the words of an expert, the result of much reading as well as of experience and of thought. But he complains faintly that until very recently the Church had given little reliable guidance on what vocation in work means. We might protest now that the Catholic Church recently in the Pope's encyclicals has made it abundantly clear; but we should reflect also that since the earliest ages the Church without any high flown phrases has always set before men the truly Christian vocation in work in the ranks of her religious Orders. In those Orders the lay brothers and the lay sisters have always played an essential and powerful part. And only in those ranks will the Christian find a complete outline of holy work which is saintly in emptying slops, saintly in scrubbing floors with the same sanctity as the 'work' of the subdeacon in placing the chalice upon the altar.

Now it is in this very point that the Catholic social apostolate fails. Despite the vast worker movements, or perhaps even because of them, the numbers of lay brothers and lay sisters has declined

rapidly. Some Orders today have even abandoned the idea of having them and have had to reorganise the whole structure of their religious life. The number and fervour of these members of religious orders, men and women who reach the heights of sanctity more simply and more frequently than their more sophisticated 'choir' brethren and sisters, should be the thermometer of the healthiness of our social teaching.

So far this teaching has tended to be lost in the means so that the end has disappeared. It becomes 'this-worldly' and man-centred with the rest of present day Christianity. The final end which is revealed to us through the Cross will alone *sanctify* labour, and it is that which Christ has commissioned his apostles to preach. If the Kingdom of God is honestly sought first then the social conditions and international problems will tend to be resolved. They obviously can never be wholly resolved because of the continued presence of sin. But until we seek the one and only remedy for sin, namely, the grace of God which is the share in the intimate life of the blessed Trinity there can be no improvement at all. Along this way only lies integrity. Any other way leads to dissipation.

St Thomas when he was faced with any problem solved it finally at the foot of the crucifix; and when he came to die he came to see his vast and superhuman synthesis of truth worked out in such intricate and coherent detail, all of it as mere straw. He did not deny its truth or validity but he saw it in perspective. This was not naivety but wisdom. This was Christian life moving towards its life.

THE EDITOR