

GEORGES BERNANOS AND THE  
CHRISTIAN APOSTOLATE

WHATEVER the significance of the Munich agreement, whether the pessimists are right in seeing it as a miserable political wangle, or the optimists are justified in their hope for a lasting peace for Europe and the World, one thing is clear, the Christian cannot afford to ignore it, when like the rest of the world he begins to take stock. Even if it was no more than a sign in the sky, not of the shape of things to come, but a taunting reminder of all that might have been, it was clearly a reminder, the meaning of which has not escaped general notice in spite of all the attempts to dilute it with talk of political honour and the flag.

Apart from its possible positive results, one of the main elements we cannot fail to appreciate is the sense of urgency it has imposed on the world, an urgency not to be totally side-tracked by the rush for renewed rearmament. By so substantially increasing the tempo of events it has imposed on the Christian issue in Europe a "now or never" condition in the struggle. It is this connection that M. Bernanos has a special significance.

The immediate instruments of that struggle are Catholics themselves, whose unity is one of dogma and worship, directed by one authority, but who in a larger sphere reflect every shade of opinion not ruled out by creed. It would be useless even if desirable to regret it. It is an expression of the elemental life of the Church. These differences of view, far from being held lightly and as of little importance are claimed as essentially Christian. M. Bernanos, like Léon Bloy before him, storms against a false god, but there are many at hand whose Christian outlook leads them to regard M. Bernanos as a false prophet. His views, right or wrong, cannot be treated as those of an isolated and very provocative Christian apostle. In *The Diary of A Country Priest* he presented a view of the living Church set in the quiet of the French countryside. In a more recent work, *Les Grands*

*Cimetières sous la Lune*, he applies those same principles, although on the surface appearing as a very new and unexpected Bernanos, and takes his stand in what has become a very real problem. And in this he is significant of the real struggle that is going on. Most people will find upon analysis that their sense of responsibility as Christians is tied up with some practical issue, and their energy is organised round that one point, be it the problems of social justice, or the Church as in an issue in the Spanish war, or the need for a stand against the immorality of war, and so on.

Without wishing to represent M. Bernanos as the champion of the undiluted gospel against all that is corrupt, nor on the other hand to suggest that these quarrels are storms in a tea-cup, we suggest that there should be a standpoint from which such differences can be viewed, not as dividing but as a process towards unity, and by reference to which standpoint the struggle can be robbed of its possible bitterness and be made productive instead of sterile.

Infallible teaching is given to the world for the benefit of mankind. It fulfils this work finally by its full growth in the mind of the individual, who, under the guidance of authority, plays his very important part in the life of the Church by transforming a creed into a way of living, thus fulfilling even in the sphere of truth that democratic quality that the very nature of grace requires in the life of the Church.

Grace itself, which should envelop and saturate the personality, cannot be identified with any one faculty or the functioning of any one faculty. Faith is, practically, directive, and the function of the Christian philosopher is directive. He can privately sit in judgement but is more fully employed in seeking alliances on a basis of what is true. Truth, wherever it is, is from God, and is not divided. Truth is not shut up in a book in one place or time from which the rest of the world is excluded. No one but the Church is infallible, and no one is the Church but Christ.

There can be no resting content in an assured and stable

## BLACKFRIARS

possession of the truth, for at every turn there is a new challenge, and it is no answer to a challenge to refuse it, to disregard it, or to solve it historically by rote, resting content with the victories of a past age. The pages of St. Thomas do not contain the explicit answers to the practical problems that we are concerned with. Solutions have to be lived. The Spanish war and social justice have come to mean everything, and the unity of the substantial form as an explicit issue has come to mean nothing. We must go further forward. In a famous phrase we must stand on the shoulders of the past. The vast increase in established scientific fact has to be absorbed. For example, the principles ruling the field of experimental psychology and psychotherapy are elementary to a student of the *Summa*, but what he needs to know are the established facts. The challenge has not been accepted until the facts have been absorbed, until they have given their just orientation to thought.

Hence the business of the Christian thinker is a ceaseless inquiry and a ceaseless vigilance over his own conclusions. For every vital modern problem involves the absorption of a wide range of facts, in some cases only arrived at by conjecture. The temptation at every step is to side-track the struggle into some placid backwater where the need for further thought is dispensed with. It is the temptation to identify what should be fluid and adaptable with a concrete cause. It would be infinitely easier if the cause of the Church could be made simple and plain, if our many allegiances could be paid into one account. Again, the problem of social justice, the principles of which have been made so clear, cannot be furthered on the assumption that the struggle is one between the Church as identified with the workers against the rich, or the Church as identified with rural life against city life.

Nor should it be thought that such an attitude is in effect the negative one of refusing to make up one's mind and take up a position. So to state it is only to emphasise the essentials of Christian prudence; principles become active

only when they are applied by the practical reason, which uses all the virtues of the mind but is, in the final moment, judging of a particular which no amount of theoretic knowledge can totally cover. The details of M. Bernanos' position we have every right to question, but surely his method, his approach is of a sort that cannot lightly be dismissed. If he appears to express an attitude that has in it little or nothing of the "theological" apostolate, need we fall back, in order to explain him, on his "prophetic" mission, as if to make him something necessarily unusual and individual, serving only an immediate and individual purpose? His method surely is the method of Christian prudence. And in any case he is not alone. In a larger field the same spirit is manifested in many different ways. Even the growth of the Oxford Group Movement is not without significance, and such as books M. Léon's *Ethics of Power* and Rheinhold Niebuhr's *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* are equally symptomatic. These signs, and many more of a like nature, seem to point to a re-awakening to the need of a Christian life, and while it is necessary, antecedently to detect here a veiled Jansenism, and there a misconception of the teaching authority of the Church, such challenges cannot be met without some attempt to supply the demand.

The possible lesson of M. Bernanos is that the terms of reference of a Christian synthesis cannot be too rigidly enclosed within a scientific scheme since its final expression in practice is a work of prudence. It is not a creed but a life. Some analogy with aesthetic creation is clearly justifiable. The artist cannot always give an account of his work. Often too rigid a use of reason alone misses what is valuable. Perhaps it is already clear that a restrained encouragement of such a *method* is the way to a Christian Europe.

MARK BROCKLEHURST, O.P.