

Comment

It will not, I hope, be regarded as anti-ecumenical to congratulate the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster on having nothing to do with the recent statement by the Archbishop of Canterbury—except to announce that he was going to pray for Dr Coggan. According to Dr Coggan, he was unable to get the explicit support of Roman Catholics and the Free Churches in the drafting of his statement because the thing was too urgent for the ‘time-consuming consultations’ that would have been needed. We may fairly translate this as meaning that the other Churches wanted to stop and think a bit before sounding off about the state of Britain. No such necessity seems to have occurred to Dr Coggan. He was confident that he had behind him the good will of the other Churches and he was surely right to be confident of this good will (he has, for what it is worth, the good will of *New Blackfriars*) but wishing him well includes wishing he were a little less confident about some other matters.

So far as can be gathered from *The Times* report (October 15th) of the press conference at which the statement was launched, Dr Coggan did not tell us that we should all pull together and that nobody should rock the boat, but these seem to be almost his only omissions from the catalogue of clerical banalities. He did, after all, tell us that ‘enormous numbers of people want a Better Britain’ and that this enormous number had ‘no spokesman’ but that ‘extremists tend to receive the publicity’—he said this on the front page of *The Times* and announced that he would be making six television and radio appearances. He did not explain how an extremist is to be recognised—perhaps by his expressed desire for a Worse Britain? He said, moreover, that what was needed was something ‘positive and helpful’—this should take care of those who think that the great thing is to be unhelpful—and he really did say that ‘the truth is that we in Britain are without anchors’ and that ‘many thoughtful people feel we are drifting towards chaos’. He also said ‘a materialist answer is no answer at all’—a point he probably simply forgot to make when the Common Market lobby was telling us how prosperous Britain would become. He revealed that ‘Moral and Spiritual Values are at Stake’ and he actually said ‘An enemy is at the gates today, and too many of us keep silent’ (the rich man, we know, is in his castle but *who* is that at the gate?). ‘Your country needs you’ he remembered, and also we have to have ‘strong, happy and disciplined families’. He had no advice on how to keep your family like that when you are on the dole or you haven’t got a home or the troops come in and break it up at four in the morning. Sceptical readers abroad will simply have to take our word for it that he said ‘A good day’s work for a fair

day's pay is not a bad motto for worker and for management' and he did say 'But pay is not everything, "each for himself and the devil take the hindmost" makes for chaos', and he said 'Grabbing and getting is a poor creed. Envy is a cancer'. I swear he said 'Sacrifice is an unpopular word' and warned us that 'without sacrifice, without discipline and without a sense of responsibility at the heart of our society we are likely to perish. We are growing soft'. He thought that society 'is dangerously near the point at which money is all that matters', and, in a striking phrase, he opined that money, material and machines 'are useful servants but they are degrading masters'. At this point it is probably superfluous to add that he said he was 'above party politics'.

What is wrong with this kind of thing is not just that the string of weary clichés enhances the Church's reputation for irrelevance; the point is that you cannot issue a set of generalities like this in a concrete situation without an implicit wink and a suggestion that we all know where the cap fits. Earnestly and sincerely as the Archbishop may have sought to say nothing, his remarks do have a rather plain political application and it happens to be a dangerously mistaken one—and one that many of his own Church will instantly recognise as dangerous. We cannot reasonably complain if an Archbishop of Canterbury chooses to represent the Tory party at prayer, but he should be clearly conscious of the option he has taken; he should realise that his platitudes are those that would spring to the lips of Sir Keith Joseph had he not a better command of the English language—and which actually did spring to the lips of Lord Hailsham.

The ordinary British people have for years now endured a stream of insults and recrimination from the conservative press. (The Archbishop by the way, tells us we are 'like children in a classroom when the teacher is not there. We fight each other for the cream buns and we kick and scream when we do not get what we want. We see big strong children getting what they want and the weak ones helpless to look after themselves'.) This is usually called criticising the unions, but what it means is an attack on anyone who earns his money by working for it instead of by money-lending or gambling with shares. The re-iterated theme has been that British industry has been brought to its knees (a position that Dr Coggan seems to join in deploring) because the workers are childishly greedy and always demanding more and more pay. These workers, the story goes, are now organised in powerful unions and get what they grab for (guess who the big strong children are), so we should try to weaken these unions. Let there be less militant conflict between managers and men (less kicking and screaming), let the workers learn to subdue their cancerous envy of the wealth of others—or have it repressed for them. Let us have more Sacrifice from them, more Discipline and, of course, more Responsibility.

Naturally this fantasy has never been accepted by people on the Left, but even the majority of entrenched Conservatives appear to have dropped it rather hastily since the recent Report showing that despite all their alleged militancy the unions have been unable to keep real wages

continued on page 492

women to care for each other—in a manner summed up by the phrase we used to hear when the Labour Party in this country was something like a Socialist Party instead of a Conservative one : ‘from each according to his capacity, to each according to his need’.



COMMENT — *continued from page 483*

level with prices and that the British living standard is falling. The Archbishop of Canterbury seems left in almost sole possession of this worthless analysis.

It is sad to compare Dr Coggan's Public School moralisms with the magnificent preaching of the gospel by, say, the Latin American hierarchies or the World Council of Churches. They do not indulge in general exhortations. Instead of reproaching a population they identify the concrete causes of injustice and place the Church unequivocally on one side of a struggle. Of course it is true that *all* men are sinners and of course it is the Church's and a bishop's duty to point this out, but as an abstract general truth it is not relevant to our troubles. The current shoddy state of our society results from quite specific evils which we can seek to identify and correct. This will not produce a sinless society or a perfect society, any more than the elimination of malnutrition or cancer will produce perfectly healthy people, but it will be a step in the direction of justice and peace.

But to return to the point about ecumenism with which we began : a society seems to get the Church and the Church leaders it deserves, so perhaps we should not be surprised that our bishops should be of such low calibre (small bores, as Michael Henry remarked) by comparison with the great men who stand up to bureaucratic repression in the 'socialist' countries or struggle for human liberation in the third world. Perhaps it will not be until our society is radically changed that we shall have Churches that really matter to people and therefore Churches in which unity matters.

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