

by Bernard Bergonzi

This note is provoked by some recent discussions in *New Blackfriars* and elsewhere, which have been about making the presence of Christ effective in the world in terms of social justice. It is not enough, we are rightly told, to preach in a vacuum; a pointless activity if no-one is listening. Social action means, if it is to go beyond isolated individual benevolence, political action: the point is made both in the Editorial and in Mr Eagleton's article in the December 1965 number. In a general way, I agree with this position, but there seem to me several implications in it that need to be examined.

In the first place, should we not be careful to avoid the kind of implicitly totalitarian attitude that gives supreme importance to the political order at the expense of every other kind of human activity? One recalls Nkrumah's amiable motto: 'Seek ye first the political kingdom . . .' On the whole, one would have thought Christians would avoid this particular trap, but I can imagine some eager Christian radicals, so intoxicated with the discovery that in battling in the political arena they are doing Christ's work, that they exaggerate the importance of that particular way of doing it. On a basis of respect for persons, one needs to recognise that there are many admirable people in this world, who contribute a great deal to society, but to whom politics means nothing at all: many, but by no means all, of them are women. Now it is certainly true that they are cutting themselves off from a very important part of life; nevertheless, I feel one should regard them as people who have the misfortune to be tone-deaf rather than as dull reprobates who are wilfully rejecting the true path to salvation. And what of that small and difficult minority – some of them, perhaps, philosophical anarchists – who feel conscientiously unable to vote for any of the existing political parties? Are they to be condemned for irresponsibility, or is it that they have a far more acute political conscience than all those who unthinkingly put a cross against Black or White on the basis of unresisted habit and traditional allegiance?

Still, all these caveats are no more than warnings against leaning over backwards: Catholics, having descended from that lofty eminence where politics is discussed in the comforting generalities of a papal encyclical, had better not deceive themselves that they have found something more precious than it is. This brings me to my

second and more important point. Are all our politically conscious Catholic radicals quite sure what they understand by politics? Political behaviour in a democracy essentially involves compromise and the attainment of some kind of consensus. Individuals or groups may feel disappointed, but they should not feel that they have been treated with savage injustice. The process of compromise has always seemed suspect to reformers, but it has been ably defended by Professor Bernard Crick in his *In Defence of Politics*: compromise is clearly better than the brutal impositions of totalitarian rule, which in effect abolished political activity.

Nevertheless, there is a considerable element of *impurity* in political behaviour, and I wonder if Catholic radicals who advocate 'political action' are really prepared to accept this. We all know what *pure* activity is: marching and shouting slogans. This can be enormously impressive and very influential in changing public opinion; the Selma march is a memorable example, where the participants showed great physical and moral courage, and went in danger of their lives. There is something unassailable about this kind of purity; but what of the impure but more immediately effective activity of the committee room? Sometimes it is difficult to march; at other times it is rather easy, and would those who took part be equally prepared to participate in the harsh business behind the scenes of politics; to see, for instance, a bill that you passionately believe in trimmed of some of its most important clauses in order to be passed at all?

Again, political life seems to me to involve one in a good deal of lying; not necessarily or often by grossly contradicting what one knows to be true, but by prevarication, over-simplification, tactful silences, or deliberately giving a wrong emphasis to some part of the truth. One can find examples at every step on the political ladder. Sir Stafford Cripps, for instance, was one of the most morally upright statesmen that this country has ever seen; but in 1949 he was forced to deny that the Government was contemplating a devaluation of the pound when he knew full well that devaluation was in the offing. Of course he was forced into this position by the exigencies of the objective situation; if he had admitted prematurely that devaluation was coming then the nation would have been involved in financial catastrophe. No doubt the moral casuists would defend him; but the fact is that a Christian politician had to lie for the general good.

In a much more modest way the whole business of electioneering floods the country with half-truths and monstrous suppressions of the plain facts, as charges and counter-charges are hurled around. This provided the theme for an excellent recent television play, *Vote, Vote, Vote, for Nigel Barton!* which showed to what messy and childish depths an intelligent candidate had to sink in order to put himself and his convictions across. In a subsequent TV discussion, the author, Dennis Potter, revealed that he had been a Labour candidate in the

1964 election, and his play was a product of his disillusionment with everyday politics. The two M.P.'s taking part in the discussion hastened to point out that electioneering was not a politician's only or most important business, and that in any case Mr Potter had rather exaggerated. He may have done; but his play had an uncomfortable ring of truth about it.

If Catholic radicals are not going to remain content with the comforts of perpetual opposition, these are issues they will have to face. The freedom of politicians in office to do anything worth while is very much less than it seems in opposition. The contrast between the large promises and claims the Labour Party made before the election, and the painfully modest achievements of the present Government surely makes this clear. (And realising this limitation means, that one should not despise those achievements, inadequate though they are; nothing is easier than the arrogant idealism of those who secretly long for a return to opposition; this is pseudo-politics rather than the real thing.)

There are, admittedly, certain political questions where all Christians seem agreed; here, one could say, is an absolutely clear moral issue where only one stance is possible. Opposition to Apartheid is an obvious example; it certainly seems so to me. Nevertheless, there is *not* total agreement on this question. Our brothers in Christ of the Dutch Reformed Church firmly believe that Apartheid is defensible in Christian terms (and so, for that matter, does at least one South African Catholic bishop). One can easily say that they are blinded by their history and social and cultural situation; but they could and do say the same thing about us (some very fluent voices have been coming out of Rhodesia and South Africa lately about the way in which the west is 'worm-eaten with liberalism'). The resulting dilemma seems to me this: if we treat the question non-politically it would involve (if the circumstances permitted it) a silencing of these views as pernicious, and this would be a totalitarian solution. Or, one could attempt a dialogue, a debate, an argument; and this would be an attempt at a democratic solution, which is surely preferable. But it would certainly involve Christians quoting scripture at each other in a political argument, which would hardly be edifying. This, again, is something I think one will have to accept if there is to be a full Christian commitment to political life. Moral issues lose some of their sharpness once they are translated into political terms.

Again, if we stress the equality of the priest and the layman in social action, then the equation works both ways. If the priest is not superior to the layman, he is not inferior either; if the layman should involve himself in political activity, why not the priest? And if he did it wholeheartedly, he would have to commit himself to the lying and manoeuvring which, it seems to me, is an integral part of political life. There would be nothing new about this spectacle,

disedifying though it would be; for this is what went on in the actively committed clerical parties of Continental Europe in the recent past. Consider for instance the figures of Mgr Seipel, Chancellor of the Austrian republic in the 1920's, or Mgr Tiso, President of Slovakia in the '40's. The readers of *New Blackfriars* will no doubt, recoil in horror from such examples. But the fact remains that 'priests in politics' will look disedifying to very many outside the church as well as inside it; the crucial distinction that *these* would be in to do Christ's work, whereas *those* were in to further the interests of the institutional Church, would not, I think, be readily grasped.

It may be objected that I have taken a needlessly low view of politics; nevertheless, the evidence lies all around us, in every issue of the daily paper, that this is what politics means for those involved in it. And yet it is both a necessary and, at times a noble activity. (It might be said that a Christian commitment to politics would purify the means as well as the ends, but this would in effect abolish politics in its essence of reconciling opposed views; one would then have either the Millenium or a terribly efficient totalitarian state.) I am trying not to sound Manichean, since I believe improvement can and does happen; and I would rely on those much-despised worthies, the traditional moral theologians to exculpate the well-meaning politician from the malice of necessary lying. What I am, I think, saying is that a real commitment to politics means assuming a large part of the imperfection and impurity of the world in order to achieve anything. I realise that I have asked far more questions than I have answered in this article; advisedly for it is more important, first of all, to realise that these questions are implicit in recent Catholic radical discourse, than to try to find answers for them. We often hear that we need a theology of sex; and perhaps there are some signs of the emergence of one. Might I suggest that an even more urgent, and less generally realised, need is for a theology of politics, and even, perhaps, a theology of power?

(In the next issue we shall publish a contribution to this debate from Brian Wicker, together with a reply to Mr Bergonzi by Terry Eagleton – *Editor*.)