

MR. ELIOT'S IDEA OF A CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

It can hardly be necessary at this date to summarize the contents of a book¹ which, one notes with thankfulness, has been so widely described and discussed. It will be recalled that Mr. Eliot's purpose in writing it was to offer a 'contribution to a discussion which must occupy many minds for a long time to come'; and the most fitting way in which to salute his work would therefore seem to be to confine oneself to suggesting the main points at which further elucidation appears desirable. The urgency of such continued discussion should also need no stressing; the background against which these lectures are to be read is the realization, in September 1938, of a 'general plight,' the conscious 'doubt of the validity of a civilization'; and that doubt is not assuaged but intensified, the urgent need of following as best we may the lead here given us is not diminished but increased, by the constant iteration, from press and platform, that the conflict in which we are now engaged is quite simply one between the powers of darkness and the powers of light, between Satan and Christianity. 'The last thing we should like to do would be to examine that "Christianity" which, in such contexts as this, we say we keep.' We can make much emotional capital out of the use of labels that have lost all definite meaning; but the facts are quite plain. Ours is not a Christian society; and if it is not a pagan society either, since it lives so much on the remnants of its Christian heritage, it remains none the less true that a great deal of what is now taken for granted in our social structure is not merely non-Christian but anti-Christian. Further, as Mr. Eliot makes so clear, 'what is worst of all is to advocate Christianity, not because it is true, but because it is beneficial': if the greatest danger at the moment, as formerly, is that Christianity may be seduced into becoming the handmaid of

¹ *The Idea of a Christian Society*. By T. S. Eliot. Pp. 99. Faber; 5/-.).

politics, the greatest danger for the future is that we, as Christians, should attempt to sell our wares by affixing to them purely cultural, or sociological, or even ethical, labels. 'To justify Christianity because it provides a foundation of morality, instead of showing the necessity of Christian morality from the truth of Christianity, is a very dangerous inversion.'

Now this mention of morality, and the ambiguity of the word, brings one to the point which, more than any other, seems to demand further discussion and elucidation. A Christian society, writes Mr. Eliot, 'would be a society in which the natural end of man—virtue and well-being in community—is acknowledged for all, and the supernatural end—beatitude—for those who have eyes to see it.' Mr. Maurice B. Reckitt, in the *New English Weekly*, has recorded his uneasiness at this definition; it is true, as he there notes, agreeing with Mr. Eliot, that 'a wrong attitude towards nature implies, somewhere, a wrong attitude towards God'; for St. Thomas as for Aristotle wrong is wrong because it is *contra naturam*; but that agreement, when the *Ethics* as a whole is compared with the *Summa* as a whole, is seen to be no more than a partial, and indeed in a sense a material, agreement, against which must be set an essential difference. Both thinkers hold injustice or intemperance to be vices, and justice and temperance virtues; but these virtues are only materially the same; formally they are different. In other words, Christian morality is not, let us say, Aristotelean morality as held by one who also holds certain other sets of beliefs. Christian morality is specifically distinct from pagan morality even where there is material identity, because it is motivated, and therefore determined, by religion and charity. In the same way—and Mr. Eliot himself says this clearly when writing of Christian education—Christian humanism is not an autonomous humanism accompanied by belief in Christian dogmas; and a Christian society can surely not be one in which a natural end, acknowledged by all, is in some cases accompanied by belief in and striving after

a supernatural end: the natural end of the Christian is specifically different from, even though materially it may be largely identical with, that of the pagan.²

A second, and cognate, point which suggests itself is this: that perhaps a similar ambiguity is discernible in the use of the term 'thinking' in connection with the Christian Community, and that this seems to lead to a dangerous 'externalization' of religion—dangerous because it would surely mean an impoverishment of the life of the Church. That the Community of Christians is necessary to that life, as spiritual and intellectual leaven, is not to be denied; but it is only a leaven, a stimulus; and the 'mind of the Church' is not its exclusive domain—it is far from having the monopoly of thought, though it may have the monopoly of technical rational speculation.³ True, the present structure of society is such as to diminish or destroy the capacity

² Since this review was written, Mr. Eliot has replied to Mr. Reckitt's criticism (*New English Weekly*, December 14th, 1939), explaining that his definition was meant to allow for the presence, within the Christian Society, of a non-Christian minority. I must confess that his reply does not wholly set my doubts at rest, principally because the ambiguity in the use of the term 'virtue' seems to remain. Granted that the Christian Society cannot ask of its minority an acceptance of Christian revelation, yet it must surely ask acceptance of the Christian principles of behaviour; or, in other words, though the minority may be interested in a 'natural end' only, it must be prepared to conform with principles established by reference to a supernatural end—its life, though natural *in se*, must be supernatural derivatively and externally, *i.e.*, by reference to its extrinsic exemplary cause.

³ It should be explained that Mr. Eliot distinguishes, as elements in the Christian Society, the Christian State, the Christian Community, and the Community of Christians. The Community of Christians would comprise those of 'superior intellectual and/or spiritual gifts, whose function it would be to leaven the mass, the Christian Community; for the mass of the faithful, 'religious life' would be 'largely a matter of behaviour and conformity'; and the Community of Christians, therefore, would 'form the conscious mind and the conscience of the nation.'

for thought, even in the broader sense; but it would be a vicious circle to assume that that must be the case also in the hypothetical Christian society, since it must clearly be the first duty of the Christian state to remedy precisely that condition of things.

The above point in its turn leads on to a third. We have had to fight against individualism, in religion as well as in politics. Nowadays, we are confronted by the reaction to individualism; and we have been warned that we, too, in this country are drifting towards a state of 'totalitarian democracy' which will be our own particular version of that general trend. We are thus obliged to be on our guard against two opposite dangers simultaneously; and one could not help wondering at times whether Mr. Eliot, in his emphasis on communal religion and his reduction of the Christianity demanded of the masses to a question mainly of behaviour, is not in some degree departing from that synthesis of inward and outward, of personal and social, which Christian teaching achieves. The Christian society will be an organic society or it will not be Christian; and those who persist in interpreting Christianity in individualistic terms are only deferring the time when a Christian society will be, so far as Christians themselves are concerned, possible; but it remains true that society is ultimately for man, and not man for society; and that the very stuff of Christian society is that it be an organic union of *persons*: a union indeed, implying that the life of the society is directed by Christian principles towards a common Christian end; but a union of persons, and not of automata, implying that that common end is to be achieved only through the free, creative, and worshipful sacrifice of selfhood, by each individual, to God and therefore to man.

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