

# BLACKFRIARS

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## “RIGHT” AND “LEFT”

WE Christians of 1937 are the spectators of a terrible drama, a drama which confronts our consciences with agonizing problems. This drama is the disastrous struggle for power between two rival complex ideologies which have come to be known as “Right” and “Left.” Already this conflict is sapping the life-blood of Spain; already it is breeding rancour and hatred of brother for brother throughout the civilized world, and threatens the very foundations of civilization with irreparable disaster.

Elsewhere (in my *Lettre sur l'Indépendance*) I have sketched some of the characteristic traits which seem to me, as a student of philosophy and of current political trends, to be the distinguishing features of “Right” and “Left.”

To those observations one might add that in concrete experience, which is for the most part in actual fact an experience of misrepresentation (for misrepresentation pertains to man and leaves him only at the price of supreme intellectual discipline—*omnis homo mendax*), in concrete experience, I say, a particular and typical misrepresentation, closely bound up with the complex question which we are considering, makes its appearance.

For the “Right,” although it holds aloft the emblems of *Order*, by that very fact betrays *Principles*; it in fact betrays both Order and Principles by reason of its tendency towards what I have called “accumulative inertia.” In practice it does the very reverse of what it claims to do, for this inertia of its nature tends to produce a static condition of existence void of any internal justification.

In the same way, the “Left” betrays the very *aims* and *promises* for the future which it proclaims. While claiming to be the champion of *Movement*, it betrays itself in practice by reason of its tendency towards what I have called

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*"dissociation dépendive,"* doing the very reverse of what it claims to do and tending to make existence impossible. It is true that, when times are relatively easy and favourable, there is certain eclectic spirit of compromise which inclines to weigh one false tendency against the other; but in sterner days it is another moderating force that is called for, and that force is the force of Truth.

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It must not be thought that I do not appreciate the feelings and the motives that animate much partisanship both of Right and of Left.

I understand that it is very hard to be patient when one sees an age-old legacy, hallowed by the long toil of generation after generation, threatened with destruction by the demagogic bigotry and smugness of impassioned agitators. Only recently, Stalin himself was saying: "It took dozens of thousands of men to build the great dam of Dnieprostroi; a dozen or two would be enough to destroy it." Though perhaps Stalin did not realize it, this obvious truth is itself the condemnation of the spirit of violence in achieving revolution, of that very revolutionary violence which, since the advent of the "bourgeois Republic," the Comintern has done its utmost to inflame in Spain.

On the other hand, it is no less hard to be patient when one sees thwarted a people's aspirations for a form of social and political life more conformable to its dignity as human beings—its yearnings for deliverance from social misery, its aspirations for the elementary liberties that make human life on earth less intolerable. Especially is this so when this opposition to a people's rights is the result of the prejudices of a complacent and self-satisfied privileged class which is totally blind to the very elements of social justice, and which—to make things worse—invokes religion itself to sanction its defence of its material advantages. They do indeed carry a terrible responsibility who, in the words of the Pope, "abuse the rights of property to defraud the labourer of his just hire and of the social rights which belong to it."

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Nevertheless, to array hate against hate is to head for

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catastrophe and the utter destruction of all political life.

Neither impatience nor violence—no matter under what provocation—can ever work the good of society or of nation.

A popular tyranny can never effectually defend popular liberties; nor can a surly refusal to recognize the facts of life, movement and progress, ever be an effective means of defending public Order. The only policy which will benefit a nation or a society so deeply divided as those around us, is a policy which is at once patient and dynamic, which will enable the social organism at once to eject the toxins and to assimilate all that is good in the new elements and forces. It must pass on, indeed, to new phases of life and existence, and for that it must *transfigure* the legacy of the past. If men would only read the Gospels they would find therein unsuspected treasures of wisdom for the guidance of even mundane policy.

*“To whom much has been given, much shall be required.”* That is a hard saying which is nevertheless a universal law. It means, among other things, that those who claim to be the champions of Order and of the Spirit must serve Order and the Spirit even in the means they employ to defend them. A Christian has less option than has an atheist in the choice of means to advance his cause. When, in face of threatening revolt, responsible elements of society use words that harmonize with sound philosophy and religion and deeds that make a mockery of them; when, in effect, they behave with the same animal instincts as the mobs which they fear—then they do the revolution’s own work and aggravate its force and malice. Inevitably so; an inexorable law is here in play.

So too, those who hold the reins of government have more weighty responsibilities than those who do not. It is of the very essence of the temporal social organism that it be a complexus of *disciplined liberties*, and this can be created only by civic virtue and civic fellowship (*amitié*). Where these are lacking, force and fear must take their place and overawe all.

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But, if force there is to be, to whom does it belong to

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wield it? Inevitably at such times the *de facto* public authority tends to become, from this point of view at least, the only source from which peace and order in the community may be expected. It tends to concentrate power and the means of wielding force more and more into its own hands, a lamentable state of affairs but one which is necessary under the circumstances for civil peace. Hence, any attack on that authority, even though it be thought a tyrannical one, runs a particularly serious risk of provoking still greater evils. This risk will be all the greater if, as in the case of most modern governments, that authority has, or claims to have, its roots in the will of the masses. On the other hand, this situation lays the very heaviest responsibilities on the public authority itself; more than ever will it be called upon under such abnormal conditions to exercise the highest degree of justice and courage in maintaining public order and in mastering the anarchy of factions. When (as in Spain since the fall of the monarchy) a country has entered upon a phase of revolutionary unrest, impartiality and courage on the part of the government is particularly essential. Especially will this be so if the government is, or claims to be, a "Popular one which represents and incorporates the aspirations and hopes of the people. If such a Government shows weakness towards either enemies or friends, it will betray both the good of the nation and the confidence of the people, and will jeopardise its own work and aims. Strong and just measures, coming from the hands of the public authority, may cause passing pain; but better this than disorder and disruption. *Incompetent revolutions beget Dictatorships.*

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Already we have seen too many incompetent revolutions and the ruinous reactions they bring in their train.

Already the very word *Revolution* is losing its glamour and is wearing thin. Perhaps another word will come to take its place of honour in the political vocabulary of poor humans; a word that has fallen into ill-repute because it has been dishonoured by many who bear it. I mean the word *Conservative*, taken in its true philosophical sense.

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Perhaps there will arise in the world some true *Conservatives*.

Taken in its truest sense, to *conserve* means to *keep* all that is good in what has been acquired and achieved by human industry throughout the ages. To keep it, but to keep it *alive*; “conserve” it as God “conserves” His creation in being. In this sense, the word “conservative” is a noble word, and to be a “conservative” is a noble thing.

A true conservative, then, is a man who is reverent towards the past, and yet is keenly aware of changing times and of the needs of the future. The true conservative is the greatest of innovators. He is prepared for the most radical of revolutions, for his task is to preserve the heritage of the past, a heritage which is not dead but alive. He will not try to juggle with history, piously invoking the past as a pretext for ignoring the present; he will not betray realities by a policy of sham, opportunism and alliances with elements and interests with which he should have nothing to do. He will not boast of being the champion of principles which he betrays in practice, nor will he sacrifice essential ideals to immediate success.

There are already too many men whose good-will and intentions and lofty ideals are unquestionable, but whose discreet machiavellianism in the methods they employ threatens civilization with ruin.

The true conservative will not be unaware of the rôle which the powers of darkness play in human history and progress, nor of that diabolic tendency to inertia which prevents good seed from bearing fruit. But he will know also that a good God is the sovereign Master of history, and that He will at the end put to nought the evil designs of the wicked.

The true conservative, then, will not hesitate to co-operate openly and fearlessly with everything that promises, under divine Providence, real growth in the historic processes and changes of his time. In this he will not compromise with the illusions of any dialectical philosophy of history, but he will know that herein, humanly speaking, lies the only chance of directing aright the course of history. To this end

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he will focus all his energies to the attainment of true wisdom, unswerving justice, genuine impartiality, deep understanding of the exigencies of law and of the *bonum commune*. So equipped, he will be able to withstand all the enticements of demagogy and dissolution on the one hand, and of error and hypocrisy on the other. He will decline neither to the Left hand, nor to the Right.

But all this will presuppose, as an indispensable condition, a firm grasp not only of sound metaphysics, but also a sound social philosophy and a sound philosophy of history.

Above all it will presuppose a realism, a sense of realities, which will be something very different from the superficial cynicism of a *Realpolitik*. It will be a realism firmly rooted in, and impregnated by, the spirit of Faith in God.

JACQUES MARITAIN.